THE ROLE OF THE COMIC HEROINE: A STUDY OF THE RELATIONSHIP BETWEEN SUBJECT MATTER AND THE COMIC FORM IN THE NOVELS OF JANE AUSTEN

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ABSTRACT

Throughout her novels, Jane Austen exhibits an acute awareness of the problems facing the sensitive, intelligent women of her day in a society which effectively keeps them in a position of inferiority. She exposes their faulty moral training, their inadequate education, their lack of opportunity for independence or any gainful employment, their social and economic dependence on the male and the resulting, inevitable and often defective preparation for marriage around which their youth is centered. Despite her concern for the individual woman, from which tragic implications occasionally emerge, her focus remains on society as a whole, and especially on the problems of male egoism and sentimentalism which block, by the subjugation of women, the evolution of a freer and possibly more creative society.

All these social manifestations seem to be manifestations of the comic form as defined by such critics as George Meredith, Henri Bergson, Susanne Langer and particularly Northrop Frye, who specifically outlines the archetypal pattern of comic action. The subjection of women can be seen as the "absurd or irrational law" which Frye contends the action of comedy moves toward breaking; in Bergson's terms, it is an example of something mechanical, automatic and rigid superimposed on living society, which only laughter can remove; in Meredith's, the cause of "the basic insincerity of the relations between the sexes," and a demonstration of the vanity, self-deception and lack of consideration for others, which he considers legitimate targets for the Comic Spirit; in Langer's, a grave threat to "the continuous balance of sheer vitality that belongs to society" and which it is the function of comedy to maintain. Parents and all other

members of the society, whether young or old, male or female, who consciously or unconsciously endorse the concept of female inferiority, are identifiable as the obstructing, usurping characters who, in Frye's terms, are in control at the beginning of a comedy. The comic heroine's struggle for self-realization against the obstacles they place in her path--particularly her defective and misdirected education and the traditional pattern of courtship to which they try to force her to conform--constitutes the comic action. The comic resolution is, of course, her eventual victory which enables her to find self-fulfilment in the marriage of her choice.

Ever since its emergence as a form from the ancient Greek death-and-resurrection rites, comedy has been a celebration of life, of the absolute value of the group and of the forces through which society is perpetually regenerated. As the comic form has evolved, however, its social and moral implications have widened. Bergson and Meredith believe that comedy, because it works toward removing the anti-social, is "a premise to civilization." Jane Austen's novels reflect this view and demonstrate Frye's parallel contention that the movement of comedy is toward a more ideal society which forms around the redemptive marriage of the hero and heroine and which tends to include rather than reject the obstructing characters. Based on the potential equality of men and women, the new society envisioned at the conclusion of Jane Austen's novels replaces the old, anti-social isolation with a new and vital communication among the members, and thus provides a framework within which men and women can work together, each contributing his special talents toward the public interest. Since this new, ideal society is not only the goal of the comic action but

also the only area in which the heroine can find self-realization, it represents the ultimate conjunction of the comic form and the role of the comic heroine to be found in Jane Austen's work.

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CHAPTER I

THE SOCIAL BASIS OF COMEDY

> What justifies the term "Comedy" is not that the ancient ritual procession, the Comus, . . . was the source of this great art form . . . but that the Comus was a fertility rite, and the god it celebrated a fertility god, a symbol of perpetual rebirth, eternal life.
>
> --S. K. Langer, <u>Feeling and Form: A Theory of Art Developed from "Philosophy in a New Key"</u>

Any attempt to discuss the origin of comedy as a form must take into consideration the generally accepted hypothesis that both tragedy and comedy are rooted in the ancient Greek death-and-resurrection rites. As F. M. Cornford points out:

> All the varieties [of the rudimentary drama of the fertility ritual] symbolise the same natural fact, which, in their primitive magical intention, they were designed to bring about and further by the familiar means of sympathetic or mimetic representation--the death of the old year and the birth or accession of the new, the decay and suspension of life in the frosts of winter and its release and <u>renouveau</u> in the spring. Hence, in their essential core, they involve the twin factors of the expulsion of death and the induction of life.[1]

"The expulsion of death" involved the sacrifice of the old king, which symbolically released both him and his people from old age and sterility, and the discharging from the community of a scapegoat on whom were symbolically loaded all the evils of the past year.[2] "The induction of life," on the other hand, was characterized by a festival to celebrate the tribe's redemption, symbolized by the resurrection of the slain king.[3] Other elements of the festival--which, significantly, involved riotous merry-making and much sexual licence--were an <u>agon</u>

or contest between the old and new kings, a marriage in commemoration of the resurrection of the dead king and, finally, the Comus, or triumphal procession.[4] The sacrifice and the festival, then, can be seen as two distinct but mutually inclusive parts of the same ritual. And, depending on where the stress was allowed to fall, the major incidents of the ceremony could be either sad or happy.[5] The placing of this stress was the first indication of the emergence of comedy and tragedy as separate forms, for

> if the death, instead of dominating the story, had dwindled, as it has in the Thracian folk-drama and the Mummers' Play, to a piece of frivolous pantomime, while the marriage and the triumphal Komos . . . had become the prominent feature, we should then have the basis for Comedy of the Aristophanic type, with its strongly marked sexual element and its riotous conclusion, drowning any serious note that is still to be heard in the Agon.[6]

But, whereas comedy was to retain--in the humility and self-awareness which precede the happy ending--at least a trace of the sacrificial ritual, tragedy came to exclude any element whatever of the final festival: " . . . the dramatic form known as tragedy eventually suppressed the sexual magic in this canonical plot, leaving only the portrayal of the suffering and death of the hero, king or god."[7] (At this point, we are concerned with the ending of the drama which does, to a great extent, determine its form. Comedy and tragedy are by no means mutually exclusive--the comic grave-digging scene in Hamlet and the tragic implications of Shylock's plight in The Merchant of Venice immediately spring to mind: we must remember that "the matrix of the work is always either tragic or comic, but within its frame the two often interplay."[8]) Tragedy, then, "performs the sacrificial rite without the festival," whereas comedy retains "its double action of penance and revel."[9] And so, although both forms

spring from the same ancient ritual, the movement of tragedy stops short of that of comedy: " . . . for the entire ceremonial cycle is birth: struggle: death: resurrection. The tragic arc is only birth: struggle: death."[10] Tragedy has, therefore, come to be a closed form, a one-way movement toward death, while comedy has remained an open form, the cyclical movement of life itself:

> The pure sense of life is the underlying feeling of comedy . . . . it expresses the continuous balance of sheer vitality that belongs to society and is exemplified briefly in each individual; tragedy is a fulfillment, and its form therefore is closed, final and passional.[11]

And, as each form comes into focus, its social implications begin to emerge:

> . . . while the curve of tragedy is spun, like the spider's thread, from within the tragic protagonist, produced out of his own passions and frailties, the curve of comedy is spun socially and gregariously, as the common product of men in society.[12]

In tragedy, the emphasis is on the isolated individual, the protagonist whose "entire being is concentrated in one aim, one passion, one conflict and ultimate defeat" in what is, in effect, "a tremendous foreshortening of life."[13] In comedy, the emphasis is on the social group whose common aim is successful survival as a unit and in which the individual is important only insofar as he contributes to the vital continuity. It is not surprising, therefore, that "comedy is an art form that arises naturally whenever people are gathered to celebrate life, in spring festivals, triumphs, birthdays, weddings, or initiations."[14] For whereas "the tragic writer has generally been concerned with last things, with death, with the meaning of life as a whole.. . . comedy on the other hand has dealt more with the social,

the historical, the temporal."[15] While tragedy, then, is a celebration of death and of the absolute value of the individual who refuses to compromise with the group, comedy is a celebration of life, of the absolute value of the group, and of the forces through which it is perpetually regenerated.

While we are attempting to establish the social basis of comedy, however, we must not overlook its implicit social aim. For comedy is concerned not only with the survival of society as a biological organism but also with the progress toward a more ideal society:

> There is a comic road to wisdom, as well as a tragic road. There is a comic as well as a tragic control of life. And the comic control may be more usable, more relevant to the human condition in all its normalcy and confusion, its many unreconciled directions. Comedy as well as tragedy can tell us that the vanity of the world is foolishness before the gods.[16]

By definition, comedy is not hilariously irresponsible: its true test is that "it shall awaken thoughtful laughter"[17] and its subjects may be as serious as those of tragedy. Furthermore, although Susanne Langer deplores the attaching of moral connotations to comedy,[18] it would seem virtually impossible to separate the social from the moral--the moral, that is, in its most comprehensive sense. (Northrop Frye suggests the converse when he contends that the moral judgment implicit in the happy ending of comedy "is not moral in the restricted sense, but social.")[19] For how can morality be defined, if not in terms of the welfare of the group? And, since comedy consistently attacks the forces which threaten this welfare, it cannot be free from moral implications. As George Meredith brilliantly affirms:

If you believe that our civilization is founded in common sense . . . you will, when contemplating men, discern a Spirit overhead . . . . Men's future upon earth does not attract it; their honesty and shapeliness in the present does; and whenever they wax out of proportion, overblown, affected, pretentious, bombastical, hypocritical, pedantic, fantastically delicate; whenever it sees them self-deceived or hoodwinked, given to run riot in idolatries, drifting into vanities, congregating in absurdities, planning short-sightedly, plotting dementedly; whenever they . . . violate the unwritten but perceptible laws binding them in consideration one to another; whenever they offend sound reason, fair justice; are false in humility or mined with conceit, individually or in the bulk; the Spirit overhead will look humanely malign, and cast an oblique light on them, followed by volleys of silvery laughter. That is the Comic Spirit.[20]

The social (or moral) aim of comedy is no less apparent to Henri Bergson, who believes that any mechanical, repetitive pattern which is superimposed on society and thus impedes the natural rhythm and flexibility of life belongs to the realm of the comic, and that the more closely a person or a society resembles a machine, the greater the comic potential.[21] To him, one of the gravest dangers confronting society is that, in its preoccupation with those essentials which enable men not only to live but to live well, it is inclined to overlook the other areas of life, relegating them to the control of automatic habits.[22] And yet, since this tendency toward carelessness does not constitute a crime,

. . . society cannot intervene at this stage by material repression . . . . A gesture, therefore, will be its reply. Laughter must be something of this kind, a sort of <u>social gesture</u>. . . . Laughter, then, does not belong to the province of esthetics alone, since unconsciously . . . it pursues a utilitarian aim of general improvement.[23]

While Meredith, then, believes that comedy can prevent our becoming victims of pride and complacency, Bergson believes that comedy works toward preserving the all-important natural and human element in societies which tend to become mechanized: "both, in sum, believe that

comedy is a premise to civilization."[24]

Since the concept of comedy is inextricably intertwined with the concept of a better society, it is not surprising that most comedies tend to follow an archetypal pattern: whenever "the continuous balance of sheer vitality that belongs to society"[25] is threatened, the comic action is set in motion and does not cease until the equilibrium has been restored. At the beginning of a comedy, the society is controlled by obstructing, usurping characters[26] who are usually members of the older generation with enough power to frustrate the desires of the young hero. (As in the ancient ritual drama, the clash is between the old and the young.) During the course of the action, the hero is able to overcome these blocking characters who, in turn, are often forced to undergo a humiliating experience (suggesting the scapegoat ritual) which strips them of their anti-social attitudes. Since, however, "the tendency of comedy is to include as many people as possible in its final society," the obstructing characters are more likely to be admitted than excluded.[27] The comic resolution culminates in the wedding of the hero and the heroine and also, since comedy implies "a social judgment against the absurd,"[28] in the movement from one society to another: the old, sterile society dominated by the obstructing characters is superseded by the new, vital society which forms around the newly-married pair,[29] and which constitutes the ultimate goal of the comic action.

It is highly significant that the emergence of this new society is coincident with a marriage. By providing a socially acceptable framework within which the group can be perpetuated through sexual love, marriage is, of course, the cornerstone of any society. (Even in the ancient ritual drama, a wedding was the central symbolic

act of the festival which celebrated the revitalized community.) It would seem to follow, then, that the role of women in marriage, or in society generally, is almost of necessity a comic theme. But a qualification must be made: we must return to our earlier distinction--in tragedy, the emphasis is on the individual; in comedy, on the group. When, therefore, the emphasis is on the individual woman in conflict with her society, as in Clarissa and, to a lesser extent, in Moll Flanders, the theme is certainly tragic; when the emphasis is on the group and its joyful perpetuation, as in Tom Jones, the theme is essentially comic. And so, depending on the emphasis, a woman's struggle for survival and a measure of equality may be seen as either tragic or comic. An interesting corollary, however, is that the implications of this very struggle are closely allied with the development of comedy as a form:

> There has been fun in Bagdad. But there never will be civilization where comedy is not possible; and that comes of some degree of social equality between the sexes. . . . where they [women] have no social freedom, comedy is absent; where they are household drudges, the form of comedy is primitive; where they are tolerably independent, but uncultivated, exciting melodrama takes its place, and a sentimental version of them. . . . But where women are on the road to an equal footing with men, in attainments and in liberty . . . there, and only waiting to be transplanted from life to the stage, or the novel, or the poem, pure comedy flourishes . . . .[30]

Tragedy, on the other hand, is neither dependent upon the presence of women nor adversely affected by their occupying a subordinate position. Indeed, the tendency of the tragic hero to alienate himself from women would seem to be, to some extent at least, a factor in the precipitation of the tragic sequence, for "where the sexes are separated, men and women grow, as the Portuguese call it, afaimados of one another, famine-stricken; and all the tragic elements are on

the stage."[31] And so the distinction between the individual basis of tragedy and the social basis of comedy is again evident: in order to fulfil his tragic destiny, the tragic hero does not need women either biologically or socially; in order to fulfil his comic destiny, however, the comic hero needs women on both levels:

> There it is in a nutshell: the contest of men and women--the most universal contest, humanized, in fact civilized, yet still the primitive joyful challenge, the self-preservation and self-assertion whose progress is the comic rhythm.[32]

But we must not be misled into the assumption that, even in a civilized society, the contest is waged on equal footing: it is fought on a man's terms, within a man's value system and in a man's world, in which women are still, to a greater extent than is generally realized, "society's hard-drilled soldiery, Prussians that must both march and think in step."[33] Throughout recorded history this conscription, based on nothing less tenuous than the *a priori* assumption that superior physical strength presupposes superior mental strength, has been enforced. Mary Wollstonecraft indicates the origin of this assumption and, at the same time, points out both its fallacy and the reason for its continued acceptance:

> Probably the prevailing opinion, that woman was created for man, may have taken its rise from Moses's poetical story; yet, as very few, it is presumed, who have bestowed any serious thought on the subject, ever supposed that Eve was, literally speaking, one of Adam's ribs, the deduction must be allowed to fall to the ground; or, only be so far admitted as it proves that man, from the remotest antiquity, found it convenient to exert his strength to subjugate his companion . . . .[34]

The myth has, of course, been constantly reinforced by the Church, which, viewing the subordination of women to men as part of the Christian hierarchy as ordained by God, provides a most effective and

comfortable guarantee for the preservation of the status quo. Despite the Church's sanction, however, there is no evidence that the inferior status relegated to women stems from any regard for the common good:

> . . . the adoption of this system of inequality never was the result of deliberation, or forethought, or any social ideas, or any notion whatever of what conduced to the benefit of humanity or the good order of society. It arose simply from the fact that from the very earliest twilight of human society, every woman . . . was found in a state of bondage to some man.[35] (My italics)

Plato, always concerned with the welfare of the group, insisted that in all but physical strength women were equal to men, and saw no reason why they should not qualify as guardians of his ideal republic. But few voices agreed and fewer took up the cry. We know of the difficulties which confronted Mary Wollstonecraft and her practical suggestions for the full integration of women into her society; we know of the scorn and derision which surrounded the nineteenth-century suffragettes, and we also know of the prejudice which, even in our own society, still faces the single woman or the woman who tries to live a life of her own apart from that of her family. Here, then, lies one of those serious threats to "the continuous balance of sheer vitality that belongs to society"[36]--the subjection of women and the resulting tacit decree which categorically condemns all of them to the same role. Here indeed is the disproportionate society which exists whenever men "violate the unwritten but perceptible laws binding them in consideration one to another; whenever they offend sound reason, fair justice."[37] Here is an example of the "absurd or irrational law" which the comic action moves toward breaking.[38] And here is the rigidity resulting from "something mechanical encrusted on the living," which it is the function of laughter to remove.[39]

It is not coincidence, then, that the great majority of comedies deal with the relationship between the sexes; on the contrary, it is an implicit admission that this relationship, which lies at the heart of any civilized society, is more in need of improvement than any other. For "the high comic vision of life is humane, an achievement of man as a social being,"[40] and the vision cannot be realized if one-half of the members of a society are forbidden independent status as individuals. A reciprocal relationship, therefore, exists between the position of women and the operation of comedy. For not only does comedy require, as its premise, a good measure of social equality for women; once established, it can counteract those forces which still resist their liberation and thus work toward the achievement of an even more satisfying role for them. Meredith suggests this vital connection and, in fact, goes far beyond Langer's notion of the fairly simple, elemental contest between the sexes when he maintains:

> Comedy is an exhibition of their [women's] battle with men, and that of men with them; and as the two, however divergent, both look on one object, namely, life, the gradual similarity of their impressions must bring them to some resemblance. The comic poet dares to show us men and women coming to this mutual likeness; he is for saying that when they draw together in social life their minds grow liker . . . .[41]

As Meredith indicates, the comic poet takes a risk. By definition, of course, he is prepared to attack private interest whenever it interferes with public good. But the private interest vested in the concept of female inferiority is so powerful and so well-established that any attempt to release the trapped woman must be, in effect, an attack on the <u>status quo</u>. It becomes obvious, then, that "by temperament, the comedian is often a fifth columnist in social

life."[42]

"A fifth columnist in social life." In spite of, or perhaps because of, her apparent preoccupation with social events, the description perfectly fits Jane Austen. It is a commonplace, of course, that there is a direct relation between an author's experience and the kind of fiction he writes. Like all other women novelists of the nineteenth century, Jane Austen "lived almost solely in her home and her emotions"; she simply was not exposed to and, indeed, was literally excluded from "all experience save that which could be met with in a middle-class drawing room."[43] And yet, in spite of these obvious limitations,

> in her own quiet way [she] devastates our compromises and complacencies--especially male complacency. . . . [she] placidly undermines the bastions of middle-class propriety. . . . She is not the less dangerous because she operates inconspicuously.[44]

It is this inconspicuous operation which is deceptive and which leads the uninitiated to criticize Jane Austen's novels as trivial. For, although the incidents of which she writes may be in themselves trivial, their implications are highly significant. The crux of the problem lies in the essential difference between the values of a man and those of a woman:

> Thus, when a woman comes to write a novel, she will find that she is perpetually wishing to alter the established values--to make serious what appears insignificant to a man, and trivial what is to him important. And for that, of course, she will be criticized; for the critic of the opposite sex will be genuinely puzzled and surprised by an attempt to alter the current scale of values, and will see in it not merely a difference of view, but a view that is weak, or trivial, or sentimental, because it differs from his own.[45]

And so Jane Austen blithely ignored such contemporary events as the Napoleonic Wars and chose instead to write about "all those little

matters on which the daily happiness of private life depends,"[46] and which seem insignificant enough but in fact provide the framework within which the relationships of men and women in society can be microscopically examined and questioned. Like most comic writers, she "sets up an arbitrary law and then organizes the action to break or evade it."[47] The arbitrary law in her case is, of course, that which decrees the subjugation of women in her society. By subtly revealing its operation, she delineates the difficulties confronting the sensitive, intelligent women of the day. (It should be pointed out that, because of the interdependence of these difficulties--lack of education, for instance, cannot be completely separated from any of the other problems which must be faced--the chapter divisions in this thesis have been made not on a chronological basis, but on a basis convenient for discussion.) And, by tracing the progress of her comic heroines' struggle for self-realization, which constitutes the comic action, she relentlessly exposes all the forces which, consciously or unconsciously, by endorsing the subordination of women, obstruct the evolution of a freer and more creative society. "What more natural, then, with this insight into their profundity, than that [she] should have chosen to write of the trivialities of day to day existence, of parties, picnics and country dances?"[48]

In dealing with the role of women in society, the woman novelist has a peculiar advantage. She can see the problem from the inside. Indeed, ". . . the essential difference [between men and women writers] lies in the fact not that men describe battles and women the birth of children, but that each sex describes itself."[49] G. K. Chesterton goes even further by maintaining that women's experience is essentially

the field of the novel, and suggests that this genre, in turn, lends itself particularly well to the comic form; for the novel, he claims,

> . . . is a hearty and exhaustive overhauling of that part of human existence which has always been the woman's province, or rather kingdom; the play of personalities in private, the real difference between Tommy and Joe. . . . What the novel deals with is what women have to deal with; the differentiations, the twists and turns of this eternal river [human nature]. The key . . . is sympathy. And sympathy does not mean so much feeling with all who feel, but rather suffering with all who suffer. And it was inevitable, under such an inspiration, that more attention should be given to the awkward corners of life than to its even flow.[50]

"The awkward corners of life" are the very stuff of comedy. They are the corners in which arbitrary laws obstruct the happiness which should be forthcoming from all the small events which make up daily living; those which, because of the great and painstaking effort necessary to smooth them out, society tends to ignore, but which Jane Austen carefully illuminates in the "oblique light" of the comic spirit.

It is all very well to speak of the sheltered atmosphere in which Jane Austen grew up, lived and wrote, but we must remember that she inherited none of the illusions common to such an existence. As we examine her treatment, within the comic form, of the problems of women in her society, we realize that, although she "may have been protected from truth . . . it was precious little of truth that was protected from her."[51] And so, although at first it may seem that any connection between Jane Austen's comedies and the fertility rites of Ancient Greece is extremely tenuous if not downright absurd, the relationship is by no means remote. For, within both value systems,

> . . . the movement from . . . a society controlled by habit, ritual bondage, arbitrary law and the older characters to a society controlled by youth and pragmatic freedom is, fundamentally . . . a movement from illusion to reality.[52]

NOTES

[1]*The Origin of Attic Comedy* (New York: Doubleday, 1961), p. 9.

[2]Wylie Sypher, "Appendix" to *Comedy: An Essay on Comedy by George Meredith* and *Laughter by Henry Bergson*, Introduction and Appendix: "The Meanings of Comedy" by Wylie Sypher (New York: Doubleday, 1956), p. 216.

[3]Ibid., p. 217.

[4]Ibid.

[5]Cornford, *Attic Comedy*, p. 185.

[6]Ibid.

[7]Sypher, "Appendix" to *Comedy*, p. 218.

[8]S. K. Langer, *Feeling and Form: A Theory of Art Developed from "Philosophy in a New Key"* (London: Routledge & Kegan Paul, 1953), p. 334.

[9]Sypher, "Appendix" to *Comedy*, p. 219.

[10]Ibid., p. 220.

[11]Langer, pp. 327, 333.

[12]Dorothy Van Ghent, *The English Novel: Form and Function* (New York: Rinehart, 1953), p. 67.

[13]Langer, p. 357.

[14]Ibid., p. 331.

[15]Eric Bentley, *The Playwright as Thinker: A Study of Drama in Modern Times* (Cleveland & New York: World Publishing Co., 1955), p. 128.

[16]Sypher, "Appendix" to *Comedy*, p. 254.

[17]George Meredith, "*An Essay on Comedy*," in *Comedy: An Essay on Comedy by George Meredith* and *Laughter by Henri Bergson*, Introduction and Appendix: "The Meanings of Comedy" by Wylie Sypher (New York: Doubleday, 1956), p. 47.

[18]*Feeling and Form*, p. 345.

[19]*Anatomy of Criticism* (Princeton: Princeton Univ. Press, 1957), p. 167.

[20]"An Essay on Comedy," pp. 47-48.

[21]"Laughter," in Comedy: An Essay on Comedy by George Meredith and Laughter by Henri Bergson, Introduction and Appendix: "The Meanings of Comedy" by Wylie Sypher (New York: Doubleday, 1956), pp. 80-81.

[22]Ibid., p. 72.

[23]Ibid., p. 73.

[24]Wylie Sypher, "Introduction" to Comedy: An Essay on Comedy by George Meredith and Laughter by Henri Bergson, Introduction and Appendix: "The Meanings of Comedy" by Wylie Sypher (New York: Doubleday, 1956), p. xvi.

[25]Langer, Feeling and Form, p. 333.

[26]Frye, Anatomy of Criticism, p. 163.

[27]Ibid., p. 165.

[28]Ibid., p. 168.

[29]Ibid., p. 163.

[30]Meredith, "An Essay on Comedy," p. 32.

[31]Ibid., p. 30.

[32]Langer, p. 345.

[33]George Meredith, The Egoist: A Comedy in Narrative (Boston: Houghton Mifflin, 1958), p. 66.

[34]A Vindication of the Rights of Woman, new ed. (London: T. Fisher Unwin, 1891), p. 59.

[35]John Stuart Mill, The Subjection of Women, new ed. (London: Longmans, Green & Co., 1909), p. 33.

[36]Langer, p. 333.

[37]Meredith, "An Essay on Comedy," p. 48.

[38]Frye, p. 169.

[39]Bergson, "Laughter," pp. 74, 84.

[40]Sypher, "Appendix" to Comedy, p. 252.

[41]"An Essay on Comedy," p. 15.

[42]Sypher, "Appendix" to Comedy, p. 247.

[43]Virginia Woolf, Granite and Rainbow (London: Hogarth Press, 1958), p. 79.

[44]Sypher, "Appendix" to Comedy, p. 247.

[45]Woolf, Granite and Rainbow, p. 81.

[46]Jane Austen, Emma, in The Complete Novels of Jane Austen, The Modern Library Edition (New York: Random House, [n.d. given]), pp. 833-834. All subsequent references in my text to the novels of Jane Austen, with the exception of those to "Love and Freindship," are to this edition, and have been checked against Works, ed. R. W. Chapman, 6 vols. (London: Oxford Univ. Press, 1958).

[47]Frye, p. 212.

[48]Virginia Woolf, The Common Reader, 2nd ed. (London: L. & V. Woolf, 1925), p. 178.

[49]Virginia Woolf, Contemporary Writers (London: Hogarth Press, 1965), p. 26.

[50]The Victorian Age in Literature (London: Williams & Norgate, 1913), pp. 93-94.

[51]Ibid., p. 109.

[52]Frye, p. 169.

CHAPTER II

PARENTS AS OBSTRUCTING INFLUENCES: MORAL EDUCATION OF WOMEN

> The humor [the blocking character] in comedy is usually someone with a good deal of social prestige and power, who is able to force much of the play's society into line with his obsession. Thus the humor is intimately connected with the theme of the absurd or irrational law that the action of comedy moves toward breaking.
> --Northrop Frye, Anatomy of Criticism

Because of their vested interest in the preservation of the status quo, members of the older generation are very often the blocking characters who obstruct the movement toward the freer and more creative society which is the ultimate goal of comedy. Nevertheless, any members of a society, whether young or old, male or female, who consciously or unconsciously uphold without question the inflexible, arbitrary laws of that society are, by definition, also blocking characters. For it is in the "absurd or irrational" laws themselves that the real danger, the real obstructive power, lies. Since the members of the older generation, however, usually have enough power and prestige virtually to control the society in question, their influence as obstructing agents is inevitably the strongest and most far-reaching--particularly if they happen to be parents. For parents, as the first and probably most decisive single influence on children, are to a great extent responsible for the direction which the younger generation takes.

The parental figures whom Jane Austen attacks in her novels are those who frustrate the evolution of a more ideal society by

reinforcing their society's concept of female inferiority, particularly as it is manifested in the view of women as objects. With the possible exception of Colonel Tilney, however, these parents do not overtly regard their daughters with a materialistic eye. They would never consider the imposition of the physical restrictions deemed fit, for instance, by the tyrannical Squire Western on his unfortunate Sophia in <u>Tom Jones</u>. In fact, their sins--except, perhaps, those of Lady Russell--are of omission rather than commission. They are simply negligent. And yet their negligence stems from the same arbitrary convention that lies at the root of outright tyranny. Both the tyrannical parent, by his anti-social actions, and the negligent parent, by his anti-social lack of action, are equally guilty in their tacit endorsement of society's subjugation of women. That this attitude is bound to be reflected in the moral training of children is self-evident. And, although it might be possible to forgive parents for a certain remissness in the <u>formal</u> education of their children, they must--insofar as the two may be separated--accept full responsibility for their <u>moral</u> education. Their failure to do so prevents them from seeing they are "drifting into vanities, congregating in absurdities, planning short-sightedly, plotting dementedly,"[1] and thus exposes them to the "oblique light" of the comic spirit and the "thoughtful laughter" it awakens.

Predicting that Edmund as a curate will never merely "'do the duty of Thornton'" on Sundays (<u>MP</u>, 619), Sir Thomas Bertram declares:

"He knows that human nature needs more lessons than a weekly sermon can convey, and that if he does not live among his parishioners, and prove himself, <u>by constant attention, their well-wisher and friend</u>, he does very little either for their good or his own." (<u>MP</u>, 619. My italics)

It is ironic that Sir Thomas, who understands parental obligation so well in theory, should in practice contribute so little toward the moral training of his daughters. No doubt he is their well-wisher, but he gives them only passing attention; and, as a stern and remote figure of authority he is never, in any real sense, their friend. Indeed, because of his neglect, the parental influences in Mansfield Park are more obstructive than in any other of Jane Austen's novels. How unfortunate for Maria and Julia that Sir Thomas undertakes nothing beyond "'the duty'" of a parent!

Sir Thomas leaves his daughters almost entirely to the passive indulgence of Lady Bertram and the active indulgence of Mrs. Norris. Although the two women could not be more different in disposition, their values are the same: " . . . beauty and wealth were all that excited her respect" (MP, 670). The pronoun reference ("her") could be to Mrs. Norris just as well as to Lady Bertram. Their sole concern for Maria and Julia is that, like two beautiful objects, they be trained in the accomplishments and groomed to the elegance which will guarantee a high price in the marriage market.

Lady Bertram, the female counterpart of Mr. Woodhouse in her stupidity and her all-consuming concern for her own comfort, comes under fire of Jane Austen's comic irony as the epitome of the indifferent parent:

> To the education of her daughters, Lady Bertram paid not the smallest attention. She had not time for such cares. She was a woman who spent her days in sitting nicely dressed on a sofa, doing some long piece of needlework, of little use and no beauty, thinking more of her pug than her children, but very indulgent to the latter, when it did not put herself to inconvenience . . . . Had she possessed greater leisure for the service of her girls, she would probably have supposed it unnecessary, for they were under the care of a governess, with proper masters, *and could want nothing more*. (MP, 479. My italics)

To her, any moral direction seems unnecessary, if not irrelevant; the outward gloss is all-important. Impressed by Henry Crawford's proposal of marriage to Fanny, she offers her advice: "'. . . you must be aware, Fanny, that it is every young woman's duty to accept such a very unexceptionable offer as this'" (MP, 671). Her words, although strictly in accordance with her values, must indeed surprise Fanny, for "this was almost the only rule of conduct, the only piece of advice, which Fanny had ever received from her aunt in the course of eight years and a half" (MP, 671). And, since Fanny is closer to and spends much more time with her aunt than either Maria or Julia, it seems hardly likely that they have received more extensive or better counsel.

Mrs. Norris, of course, is only too willing to step into the role of mother, advisor and friend tacitly abdicated by Lady Bertram. Unduly impressed by the girls' beauty and social position, she continually reinforces with her excessive flattery their high opinion of themselves. And, although "there was no positive ill-nature in Maria or Julia . . . ." (MP, 479) she teaches them, by praising their achievements and belittling Fanny's, to be contemptuous of their less fortunate cousin and to treat her with that lack of consideration which is to characterize all their adult relationships. She deplores Fanny's apparent stupidity--her slowness to learn, her lack of memory, her disinterest in music and drawing, her over-all ignorance--at the same time conceding that, because of her inferior social status, it is just as well that her cousins' accomplishments are so much superior (MP, 478-479).

> Such were the counsels by which Mrs. Norris assisted to form her nieces' minds; and it is not very wonderful that, with all their

promising talents and early information, they should be entirely deficient in the less common acquirements of self-knowledge, generosity and humility. (MP, 479)

With a shrewd eye on Mr. Rushworth's twelve thousand a year, Mrs. Norris is, of course, "most zealous in promoting the match" (MP, 491) between him and Maria; and it is highly ironic that this alliance, of which she is so proud, has such a catastrophic result for her favourite niece. In fact, the ultimate happiness of all three girls varies in inverse proportion to the extent of Mrs. Norris' affection for them:

That Julia escaped better than Maria was owing, in some measure, to a favourable difference of disposition and circumstance, but in a greater to her having been less the darling of that very aunt, less flattered and less spoilt. Her beauty and acquirements had held but a second place . . . . and education had not given her so very hurtful a degree of self-consequence. (MP, 755)

Fanny, of course, whom Mrs. Norris consistently treats with contempt, fares by far the best of the three.

Although Sir Thomas may feel he is counteracting his wife's and Mrs. Norris' indulgence of his daughters by some measure of severity, he does little to discourage their vanity, or to encourage in them any real consideration for others. Even before Fanny arrives, he makes clear to Mrs. Norris what her relationship with his daughters should be:

"I should wish to see them very good friends, and would, on no account, authorise in my girls the smallest degree of arrogance toward their relation; but still they cannot be equals. Their rank, fortune, rights, and expectations will always be different." (MP, 474)

It would seem that "'rank, fortune, rights, and expectations'" are as important to him as to Mrs. Norris and his wife. If so, and his emphasis is also on material assets at the expense of inner qualities,

his daughters are unlikely to escape the arrogance he claims to deplore. As long as they treat Fanny reasonably well in his presence, it does not occur to him to question their actual feelings about her. He, too, is concerned with the facade of all objects--and the Bertram girls clearly give the appearance of politeness, amiability and modesty: they are trained to do so, for these are valuable assets in the business of attracting a wealthy suitor. The limitations of such training are evident, however, in Julia's reaction on being left alone with Mrs. Rushworth at Sotherton while Henry Crawford devotes his attention to Maria:

> The politeness which she had been brought up to practise as a duty made it impossible for her to escape; while the want of that higher species of self-command, that just consideration of others, that knowledge of her own heart, that principle of right, which had not formed any essential part of her education, made her miserable under it. (MP, 524)

Although Sir Thomas does not subscribe to the idea that a woman should marry for wealth alone, his dominating concern for his daughters is, like that of his wife and Mrs. Norris, that they make a prosperous marriage. Nevertheless, noticing Maria's obvious indifference to Rushworth, whom he considers "an inferior young man, as ignorant in business as in books, with opinions in general unfixed, and without seeming much aware of it himself" (MP, 589), he makes a tentative offer to arrange her release from the engagement if she so desires. Easily deceived by her statement to the contrary, however, and considering the obvious advantages of the match--not the least of which would be the "addition of respectability and influence" to himself (MP, 590)--he rationalizes his doubts and does not press her further.

The importance he attaches to wealth and status is again underlined by the force with which he attacks Fanny on her refusal to accept Henry Crawford as a suitor:

". . . you have disappointed every expectation I had formed, and proved yourself of a character the very reverse of what I had supposed. . . . I had thought you peculiarly free from the wilfulness of temper, self-conceit, and every tendency to that independence of spirit which prevails so much in modern days . . . . But you have now shown me that you can be wilful and perverse . . . . throwing away from you such an opportunity of being settled in life, eligibly, honourably, nobly settled, as will, probably, never occur to you again." (MP, 661-662)

He disregards Fanny's plea that she has not and never could have any affection for Crawford: he stresses the eligibility of the alliance, her duty to him and the advantages to her own family. But Fanny, less under the influence of Mrs. Norris and more dependent upon Edmund "to direct her thoughts" and "fix her principles" (MP, 712), has not the same values as Maria and Julia: she has not been "brought up to the trade of coming out" (MP, 631). She is only distressed at the reaction of the man she has thought "so discerning, so honourable, so good" (MP, 661).

Honourable and good Sir Thomas may be, but certainly not discerning. Not discerning enough to see the irony in his proud statement that '"Maria is nobly married . . . .'" (MP, 662); to perceive that the '"wilfulness of temper'" and '"self-conceit'" of which he accuses Fanny are operating not in her but in his own daughters, precipitating them into unhappy marriages; or to see that only Fanny's '"independence of spirit'" is saving her from a similar fate. Sir Thomas is unable to make an accurate assessment of Maria's chance for happiness with Rushworth or of Fanny's with Crawford; to realize that the mutual affection which Fanny considers essential for marriage is certainly

not "'what a young heated fancy imagines to be necessary for happiness'" (MP, 662), and that such "'a young heated fancy'" almost undoubtedly produced the illusory emotion which motivated his own far-from-satisfactory marriage to a handsome but stupid woman. In fact, in these interchanges with Fanny, Jane Austen most clearly illuminates with her comic irony Sir Thomas' mistaken attitudes as to the moral qualities of the women with whom he comes in contact.

> . . . a comic character is generally comic in proportion to his ignorance of himself. The comic person is unconscious. As though wearing the ring of Gyges with reverse effect, he becomes invisible to himself while remaining visible to all the world.[2]

Unlike Mrs. Norris and Lady Bertram who belong with those essentially comic characters who remain invisible to themselves, who never lose that "perpetual possession of being well-deceived in which their comic essence consists" and "whose sufficient destiny is simply to go on revealing themselves to us,"[3] Sir Thomas does come to see himself with a certain degree of clarity--a much greater degree, in fact, than is reached by any of the other parents Jane Austen presents. And, in tracing the progress of his self-awareness, she also indicates the kind of moral training she feels is central to any concept of parental responsibility in an ideal society. It takes the disastrous consequences of Maria's marriage, of course, to trigger Sir Thomas' reformation:

> Bitterly did he deplore a deficiency which now he could scarcely comprehend to have been possible. . . . with all the cost and care of an anxious and expensive education, he had brought up his daughters, without their understanding their first duties, or his being acquainted with their character and temper. (MP, 753)

As he reproaches himself for acting against his better judgment, realizing that "he had sacrificed the right to the expedient, and been governed by motives of selfishness and worldly wisdom" (MP, 752), he is forced to investigate his own position. He has to admit that, by counteracting Mrs. Norris' indulgence with his own severity, he only made himself more unapproachable and thus encouraged his daughters "to repress their spirits in his presence, as to make their real disposition unknown to him" (MP, 753). Indeed, Maria and Julia have always been caught between two extremes. But finally Sir Thomas perceives that the fundamental mistake in his plan of education lies far deeper:

> Something must have been wanting within . . . . He feared that principle, active principle, had been wanting, that they had never been properly taught to govern their inclinations and tempers, by that sense of duty which can alone suffice. 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 authorized object of their youth*--could have had no useful influence that way, no moral effect on the mind. (MP, 753. My italics)

Something wanting within. Elegance and accomplishments valued more than moral virtue. The outward appearance stressed and the inner reality ignored. All this Sir Thomas eventually realizes and, to do him justice, he never does completely recover from "the anguish arising from the conviction of his own errors in the education of his daughters" (MP, 753). On the other hand, he does not penetrate deeply enough to discover the reason for his neglect: it does not occur to him that he has simply upheld society's view of women and has, therefore, treated both his daughters and Fanny primarily as exploitable possessions and not as unique human beings.

Difficult as it may be to separate the social from the moral implications of comedy, we must remember that " . . . whether a character is good or bad is of little moment; granted he is unsociable, he is capable of becoming comic."[4] As a parent whose lack of social awareness makes him regard his daughters and Fanny as objects of value to be put up for auction in the marriage market, Sir Thomas is clearly identifiable as the blocking character in an essentially comic situation: he is able temporarily to frustrate the desires of Fanny, the comic heroine; in the end, however, he is defeated as, "sick of ambitious and mercenary connections, prizing more and more the sterling good of principle and temper" (MP, 758), he joyfully gives his consent to her marriage with Edmund and thus clears the way for her self-realization. The partial self-awareness reached by Sir Thomas is, of course, in no way inconsistent with a certain species of comic character; indeed, it is experienced by no less an archetypal comic figure than Tom Jones himself, who shares with Sir Thomas (and particularly with Emma Woodhouse) that humiliating exposure of the old and inadequate self which precedes reformation and the ultimate assertion of a new because more socially aware self. (This discovery of social self-awareness is, of course, different in kind from the complete self-discovery of the tragic hero.) While some of Jane Austen's obstructing parents eventually achieve a measure of self-awareness, at the outset they all exhibit that lack of concern for effective social relationships which is essential not only to the comic character but to the comic situation. We laugh at them because

comedy can only begin at the point where our neighbor's personality ceases to affect us. It begins, in fact, with what might be called a growing callousness to social life. Any individual is comic who

automatically goes his own way without troubling himself about getting into touch with the rest of his fellow-beings.[5]

In Pride and Prejudice, as in Mansfield Park, a great discrepancy exists between the respective treatment of the daughters by their mother and by their father. The tension between the parents, however, is more obvious in Pride and Prejudice. "A woman of mean understanding, little information, and uncertain temper" (PP, 232), Mrs. Bennet is very much like Mrs. Norris, except that her disposition is slightly better and her ideas much more frivolous. One of the most obstructive parents Jane Austen presents, she entertains very simple and completely materialistic values: "the business of her life was to get her daughters married . . . ." (PP, 232); she has no regard for the circumstances except, of course, that the richer the husband, the greater her own gratification. Her utter lack of moral sense is evident in her characteristic reaction to Lydia's elopement--she blames "everybody but the person [herself] to whose ill-judging indulgence the errors of her daughter must be principally owing" (PP, 402)--and in the unmitigated joy with which she receives the news of Lydia's rather tardy and most unpropitious marriage: '"This is delightful indeed! . . . She will be married at sixteen! . . . How I long to see her! and to see dear Wickham too!"' (PP, 413) That Jane is to be the mistress of Netherfield and thus share with Bingley an income of "four or five thousand a-year, and very likely more" (PP, 440), constitutes her chief satisfaction in her eldest daughter's marriage. And on hearing that Elizabeth, never a favourite with her and for whom she once thought Mr. Collins quite good enough (PP, 294), is to become the mistress of Pemberley, she is ecstatic to the point of speechlessness, but finally exclaims:

> "Oh, my sweetest Lizzy! How rich and how great you will be! What pin-money, what jewels, what carriages you will have! Jane's is nothing to it--nothing at all. . . . A house in town! . . . Ten thousand a year!" (PP, 459)

Obviously, Mrs. Bennet has no concern whatever for the moral welfare and little more, except in the most incidental way, for the happiness of her daughters.

Mr. Bennet has nothing but contempt for the cheap values of his wife to whom, it would seem, he is diametrically opposed in every way. With his intelligence and perspicacity, he could provide an effective antidote to his wife's deleterious influence on his daughters; yet he chooses to evade his responsibility by an escape into cynicism and mockery. Because he is so much closer to the lives of his daughters and, therefore, so much more keenly aware of what is happening to them, he is in one sense more guilty of obstruction than Sir Thomas. In another sense, however, because he is less concerned with their financial prospects than with their happiness--particularly that of Elizabeth and Jane--he is more to be commended. Indeed, he feels great affection for his two elder daughters who, for some unaccountable reason, are blessed with good sense--perhaps the only women so endowed he has ever come in contact with! For the three younger girls he shows nothing but active dislike. Jane and Elizabeth show real concern for "the wild giddiness" (PP, 359) of Lydia and Catherine, but their attempts at correction are frustrated as much by their father's neglect as their mother's indulgence. Obviously Mr. Bennet does not consider Lydia and Catherine perfectible even to the slightest degree. In reply to Elizabeth's plea that he forbid Lydia's trip to Brighton, for instance, he argues, "'Lydia will never be easy till she has exposed herself in some public place or

other . . . .'" (PP, 369), and he does nothing to prevent her going. At this point, Elizabeth tries to point out to her father the far-reaching effects of her sisters' inadequate moral training:

> "It is not of peculiar, but of general evils, which I am now complaining. . . . If you, my dear father, will not take the trouble of checking her exuberant spirits, and of teaching her that her present pursuits are not to be the business of her life, she will soon be beyond the reach of amendment. Her character will be fixed, and she will, at sixteen, be the most determined flirt that ever made herself and her family ridiculous . . . . In this danger Kitty is also comprehended. She will follow wherever Lydia leads. Vain, ignorant, idle, and absolutely uncontrolled!" (PP, 369-370)

Although he fails to comprehend the seriousness of Elizabeth's warning, Mr. Bennet does accept the blame for Lydia's downfall: "It has been my own doing, and I ought to feel it" (PP, 409). He does not, however, experience the same self-searching as Sir Thomas, and is quite aware that his contrition will not last: "I am not afraid of being overpowered by the impression. It will pass away soon enough" (PP, 409). To his credit, his delight in the marriages of Jane and Elizabeth is rooted in his concern for and conviction of their happiness: to Jane, he says, "' . . . I have great pleasure in thinking you will be so happily settled. I have not a doubt of your doing very well together'" (PP, 440); and to Elizabeth, his favourite, after she has convinced him of Darcy's good qualities, "If this be the case, he deserves you. I could not have parted with you, my Lizzy, to any one less worthy" (PP, 458). Not one word, to either girl, about the annual income of her future husband! It is obvious that his attitude to his family is remarkably ambivalent: Jane and Elizabeth he treats like rational human beings; Lydia and Catherine, who closely resemble his wife (for he, like Sir Thomas, married a pretty, stupid woman) he treats as objects incapable of responding to training and worthy only

of ridicule. And so, although he is infinitely superior to his wife in both intelligence and discernment, he is almost as guilty as she of upholding the values condoned by society and thus impeding the moral development of his daughters.

The parental influences in Persuasion are more ambiguous than those in either Mansfield Park or Pride and Prejudice. Sir Walter Elliot's attitudes are, of course, entirely materialistic: "he considered the blessing of beauty as inferior only to the blessing of a baronetcy . . . ." (P, 1212) He is not, however, preoccupied with marrying his daughters to the highest bidder; he is more concerned with the lustre they may add to his own image. Elizabeth, the eldest, "being very handsome, and very much like himself" (P, 1212), he loves as he would love a mirror. Although he fully expects that she will "one day or other, marry suitably" (P, 1213), he is in no hurry to lose her for " . . . they had gone on together most happily" (P, 1212). The two younger girls, because they can add nothing to his own self-concept, he discounts almost completely. By marrying Charles Musgrove, of a wealthy old country family, Mary "had acquired a little artificial importance" (P, 1212), but Anne he has never admired, even in her youthful bloom, "so totally different were her delicate features and mild dark eyes from his own" (P, 1213). Now, her bloom faded, but "with an elegance of mind and sweetness of character which must have placed her high with any people of real understanding, she was nobody to either father or sister; . . . she was only Anne" (P, 1212-13). Never, Sir Walter is quite sure, will he be able to enter her name, as partner to an unexceptionable alliance, in his favourite book, the Baronetage.

Sir Walter's neglect and indifference are, of course the reason for Anne's turning for guidance, on her mother's death, to Lady Russell. And it is ironic that this woman, to whom Anne is "a most dear and highly valued god-daughter, favourite, and friend" (P, 1213), is the direct cause of her unhappiness. For although Anne at nineteen could have withstood her father's disapproval of Frederick Wentworth--aware, as she was, of his mercenary values--she could not but follow Lady Russell's advice against marrying "a young man who had nothing but himself to recommend him, and no hopes of attaining affluence, but in the chances of a most uncertain profession" (P, 1225). That the counsel was wrong is clear from its immediate effect on Anne: "her attachment and regrets had, for a long time, clouded every enjoyment of youth, and an early loss of bloom and spirits had been their lasting effect" (P, 1226). Although she does not blame Lady Russell for her unhappiness, she knows she would herself never give the same counsel, based as it was on "that over-anxious caution which seems to insult exertion and distrust Providence" (P, 1227). And the absolute necessity that parental advice should be sound is emphasized in Anne's admission that, since she was so young and inexperienced at the time, it would have been wrong for her not to heed Lady Russell who, after all, "'was in the place of a parent'" (P, 1361). Unfortunately, however, in spite of her genuine devotion to Anne, Lady Russell's values are highly questionable: material advantages, though not so all-important to her as to Sir Walter, do in the last analysis outweigh all others. She does, for instance, have "a value for rank and consequence, which blinded her a little to the faults of those who possessed them" (P, 1216). With not enough real concern for Anne's own feelings, she would have liked to see her marry

Charles Musgrove because she would have then been "so respectably removed from the partialities and injustice of her father's house, and settled so permanently near herself" (P, 1226). Furthermore, she is no wiser in her recommendation of Mr. Elliot as a suitor than in her denunciation of Frederick Wentworth; although she feels Anne would be happy with Mr. Elliot, her emphasis is clearly on the "'most suitable connection [which] everybody must consider it,'" and on Anne's prospects of being "'the future mistress of Kellynch, the future Lady Elliot'" (P, 1306)--the same powerful arguments that some well-meaning friend or relative could once conceivably have put forth to Anne's misguided mother. It must not be forgotten, however, that Lady Russell "was a very good woman, and if her second object was to be sensible and well-judging, her first was to see Anne happy" (P, 1362)--her error lies in her assumption that Anne's happiness depends on wealth and status. And so we begin to be aware of the insidiousness with which the materialistic view of women distorts the concepts of even the most discerning individuals. For, in the last analysis, Sir Walter, motivated by vanity and acting through ignorance, and Lady Russell, motivated by love and acting through intelligence, both reflect the view of a society which considers women as marketable merchandise.

Free from the misdirected parental pressures operating in Mansfield Park, Pride and Prejudice and Persuasion, the parent-child relationships in Emma would seem to be a complete reversal. After all, Emma, economically independent and universally admired, fully enjoying her status as the acknowledged mistress of Hartfield, seems to possess all the prerequisites for a happy life. No one is trying to force her into marriage; Mr. Woodhouse, in fact, is very opposed to

people, especially women, relinquishing their single state because "matrimony, as the origin of change, was always disagreeable . . . . (E, 764) The truth is, of course, that "the kind-hearted, polite old man" (E, 942) sees women, not as individuals in their own right, but only in their relationship to him. Because of "his habits of gentle selfishness, and of being never able to suppose that other people could feel differently from himself" (E, 765), he cannot conceive, for instance, that Miss Taylor might be happier married to the excellent Mr. Weston in a home of her own than remaining at Hartfield where the house is "'three times as large'" (E, 765) and laments, "'Poor Miss Taylor! I wish she were here again. What a pity it is that Mr. Weston ever thought of her!'" (E, 765) Whenever he thinks of his elder daughter, Isabella, who is happily married in London, he is just as miserable: '"Poor Isabella! she is sadly taken away from us all . . . .'" (E, 810) And, of course, when Emma and Mr. Knightley approach him in an effort to fix a date for their own wedding, " . . . he was so miserable that they were almost hopeless" (E, 1059). Indeed, his unhappiness is so acute that, until the pilfering episode indicates the advantages to him of a protective son-in-law, Emma feels she cannot proceed with her plans. Mr. Woodhouse is, of course, reflecting society's view that if a woman does not marry, her duty is to take care of her parents. Gentle and good-natured though he may be, he too values women as objects--not for their beauty or their wealth, but because they are comfortable and useful to have around. It is no wonder that Emma, in turn, tends to regard the people of Highbury not as individuals with lives of their own to live, but as puppets whom she can manoeuvre as her fancy dictates.

In contrast to the parents already discussed, it would seem that Mrs. Dashwood in Sense and Sensibility, far from seeing her daughters as a kind of material investment, the interest on which will inevitably accrue to herself, does nothing whatever to impede the moral development of her daughters. Happily married before the untimely death of her husband with whom she shared an unqualified "goodness of heart" (SS, 1), she entertains a "tender love for all her three children" (SS, 3). By no means possessive--she permits Elinor and Marianne, for instance, to go to London for a holiday of unspecified duration--she is primarily concerned with her daughters' welfare and seems to do everything she can to promote their happiness. Edward Ferrars' unpredictable financial future does not influence her in the least: "it was contrary to every doctrine of hers, that difference of fortune should keep any couple asunder who were attracted by resemblance of disposition . . . ." (SS, 8) Almost immediately, however, as she is compared to her eldest daughter, Elinor, her weakness becomes apparent: Elinor, we are told, knows how to govern her strong feelings, but this is "a knowledge which her mother had yet to learn" (SS, 3). For Mrs. Dashwood's fault lies in the excessive sensibility she shares with Marianne; and, instead of trying to curb her daughter's emotionalism, she values and cherishes it (SS, 3). After Mr. Dashwood's death, for instance, she and Marianne "gave themselves up wholly to their sorrow, seeking increase of wretchedness in every reflection that could afford it, and resolved against ever admitting consolation in future" (SS, 3). As easily as Marianne, she is deluded by Willoughby's apparent faultlessness: she does not see in him what is clear to Elinor--"a propensity . . . of saying too much what he thought on every occasion, without attention to persons or

circumstances" (SS, 29). When Willoughby suddenly and mysteriously leaves Barton, Elinor realizes that, if Marianne is to be helped, the actual status of her relationship with him must be known; on her suggestion that her mother simply ask Marianne whether an engagement exists, however, Mrs. Dashwood replies, "'I would not ask such a question for the world. Supposing it possible that they are not engaged, what distress would not such an enquiry inflict!'" (SS, 50) Any tendency we may have to commend this apparent thoughtfulness is deflected by Elinor who

> . . . thought this generosity overstrained, considering her sister's youth, and urged the matter farther, but in vain; common sense, common care, common prudence were all sunk in Mrs. Dashwood's romantic delicacy. (SS, 51)

For "common sense, common care, common prudence"--the lack of which is just as obvious in the considerate Mrs. Dashwood as in the well-meaning Sir Thomas Bertram and in the cynical Mr. Bennet--could prevent much of Marianne's subsequent distress. With her "romantic delicacy" Mrs. Dashwood reinforces society's view of women as weak, irrational, dependent creatures governed by uncontrollable emotion--which is, in effect, only another facet of the view of women as objects. This sentimental concept of women is investigated more fully in a subsequent chapter; let it suffice at this point, therefore, to say that Mrs. Dashwood, as a girl, was no doubt very much like Marianne; she married a good man who almost certainly idealized her as a delicate, sensitive creature; she was never forced to face facts, to grow up enough to attain any real moral strength. And she does not actually mature until she sees the havoc her illusions have wrought in another's life; for when Marianne has acquired the wisdom

to regret her own folly, her mother corrects her: "'Rather say your mother's imprudence, my child . . . _she_ must be answerable'" (_SS_, 210). By bringing up Marianne in her own romantic and sentimental image, by refusing to appeal to her on rational grounds, she is indeed responsible for strengthening the concept of the inferiority of women held by her society.

To offset all these parents who, because of their adherence to society's faulty concept of women, impede the progress of the comic rhythm, Jane Austen does present a few parents whom she considers unobstructive. In _Northanger Abbey_, for instance, Mrs. Morland is "a woman of useful plain sense, with a good temper" who "did not insist on her daughters being accomplished in spite of incapacity or distaste" (_NA_, 1063). She and her husband send Catherine off to Bath "with a degree of moderation and composure, which seemed rather consistent with the common feelings of common life, than with the refined susceptibilities" (_NA_, 1066). They make no attempt to engender vanity in her, nor do they suggest that she be on the alert for a wealthy suitor: they have not, in effect, prepared her for the marriage market. Since most of the story takes place at Bath and at Northanger, we do not see much of the Morlands in action; we do, however, perceive the effects of their moral training on Catherine: ". . . her heart was affectionate, her disposition cheerful and open, without conceit or affectation of any kind . . . ." (_NA_, 1066) Because of her inexperience with people, she is naïve at first: a little blinded by her affection for Isabella, she does not quite know how to take the older girl's exaggerated compliments, such as, "'. . . _you_ are just the kind of girl to be a great favourite with the men!'" (NA, 1080). But, when Isabella offends her sense of moral

propriety by demanding that she break an engagement with the Tilneys merely to please her, she is surprisingly quick to see through Isabella's machinations: "Isabella appeared to her ungenerous and selfish, regardless of everything but her own gratification" (NA, 1116). Indeed, Isabella's vanity, pride and ambition are contrasted throughout with Catherine's simple goodness and belief in right conduct. But then, Isabella has "a very indulgent mother" (NA, 1076), whose first words to Mrs. Allen and Catherine about her daughters indicate the kind of training they have received: "Here come my dear girls . . . . the tallest is Isabella, my eldest; is not she a fine young woman? The others are very much admired too, but I believe Isabella is the handsomest" (NA, 1074-75). When Catherine returns home from Northanger, Mrs. Morland ignores her melancholy for two days but then, unlike Mrs. Dashwood, determines "to lose no time in attacking so dreadful a malady" (NA, 1201), reproves her for not being more useful, and goes in search of some instructive literature. Moreover, on Henry Tilney's applying for their consent to marry Catherine, the Morlands are not impressed by his background or his expectations, but by "his pleasing manners and good sense" (NA, 1205). To the extent that Catherine indulges in romantic fantasies, she is unconsciously a victim of her society's view of women as objects--but this indulgence is a defect of her formal, not her moral education. And the success with which she is eventually able to overcome this defect is no doubt due to the excellent moral training she has received from her parents.

The Musgroves in Persuasion are also presented as parents who do not constitute an obstacle to the moral development of their children. People of considerable wealth, they might be expected to regard their daughters as investments to aggrandize the family estate.

On the contrary, however, they exhibit a genuine and sensible concern for the girls' happiness. Indeed, their treatment of their children would seem to indicate that simple moral goodness, with its implicit sense of responsibility and propriety, is a much more valuable parental asset than either intelligence or the education of the day. Lady Russell and Mr. Bennet, for instance, are Jane Austen's best educated and most intelligent parent figures, yet they fail dismally in comparison with the Musgroves who are "friendly and hospitable, not much educated, and not at all elegant" (P, 1233), but whose daughters "Anne always contemplated . . . as some of the happiest creatures of her acquaintance . . . ." (P, 1234) For the relationship between Henrietta and Louisa Musgrove is based on "that seemingly perfect good understanding and agreement together, that good-humoured mutual affection, of which she [Anne] had known so little herself with either of her sisters" (P, 1234). And how different is their relationship from that of Maria and Julia Bertram (the daughters of materialistically-minded parents) who regard each other with envy and even hatred as each strives to be the more attractive object of the two. Part of the key to the Musgroves' success as parents is to be found in Anne's praise of them to their son Charles--which could, incidentally, apply with equal accuracy to the Morlands:

"Such excellent parents . . . should be happy in their children's marriages. They do everything to confer happiness, I am sure. What a blessing to young people to be in such hands! Your father and mother seem totally free from all those ambitious feelings which have led to so much misconduct and misery, both in young and old." (P, 1342-43)

It may be argued, of course, that parental influence is not all-important; and Jane Austen is not so naïve as to imply that environment is the sole determining factor. Many of her comic heroines

escape relatively unscathed. Jane and Elizabeth Bennet transcend the imperfections of both their foolish mother and irresponsible father. Elinor Dashwood is singularly unaffected by her mother's romanticism. Fanny Price, many of whose formative years were spent with a mother who was "a partial, ill-judging parent, a dawdle, a slattern, who neither taught nor restrained her children" (MP, 707), does not capitulate to the false values surrounding her at Mansfield Park. But Jane Austen's real concern would seem to be that these admirable girls, so wise, so free in spirit, so eager to realize themselves as unique individuals, are forced to live in and--if they are not fortunate enough to marry a man who encourages their self-realization--perhaps compromise with the society the false, mercenary values of which are tacitly endorsed by their parents.

Furthermore, if parents, as spokesmen for the older, the controlling generation, do nothing to counteract the attitude of a sterile society which regards women as objects--accomplished and elegant, but objects nevertheless--the error is likely to be perpetuated and social progress impeded, as generation follows generation. For the conditioning process begins the moment a child is born, and the values of the parent almost inevitably become the values of the child. Indeed, despite the greatest independence of mind--which, incidentally, is extremely rare in a rigidly controlled society--it is only with the utmost difficulty that a child can ever free himself completely from the effects of a parental attitude, even when he comes to realize that the attitude itself is totally wrong. And so, if daughters are treated as objects, no matter how kind or how disguised the treatment, and if sons are taught to accept this materialistic view of their sisters, they will both tend not only to conform to it for the rest of

their lives--the sons treating their wives as objects as well--but also, following the example set by their parents, transmit it in turn to their own children. And so, obstructing parents who block the self-realization of their daughters by their unquestioning acceptance of the "absurd or irrational law" which decrees the subjugation of women, become part of a continuing, almost automatic process. Consciously or unconsciously, they are refusing to accept "the fundamental law of life, which is the complete negation of repetition."[6] By so doing, they expose themselves to the relentless attack of the comic spirit, for

> the comic is . . . that aspect of human events which, through its peculiar inelasticity, conveys the impression of pure mechanism, of automatism, of movement without life. Consequently, it expresses an individual or collective imperfection which calls for an immediate corrective. *This corrective is laughter*, a social gesture that singles out and represses a special kind of absentmindedness in men and in events.[7] (My italics)

NOTES

[1]Meredith, "*An Essay on Comedy*," p. 48.

[2]Bergson, "*Laughter*," p. 71.

[3]Maynard Mack, "Introduction to *Joseph Andrews*," *The History of the Adventures of Joseph Andrews and of His Friend Mr. Abraham Adams* by Henry Fielding (New York and Toronto: Rinehart, 1948) p. xiv.

[4]Bergson, p. 154.

[5]Ibid., p. 147.

[6]Ibid., p. 81.

[7]Ibid., p. 117.

CHAPTER III

FORMAL EDUCATION: A FURTHER COMPLICATION

> . . . though, to the larger and more trifling part of the [male] sex, imbecility in females is a great enhancement of their personal charms, there is a portion of them too reasonable, and too well-informed themselves, to desire anything more in woman than ignorance.
> --Jane Austen, Northanger Abbey

As indicated in the previous chapter, it is difficult to separate moral from formal education; the same forces in Jane Austen's society which relegated a woman to the status of an object, also decreed that she must be an uninformed object, and for the same reason. Preparation for the marriage-market, then, not only inhibited her moral development but also prohibited her intellectual growth. And so again we see the rigid ideas of the older generation at work: a woman's education must bear no relation to her intellectual potential (the existence of such a potential was, of course, denied by the greater part of society) but must be automatically restricted to making her more desirable to the male. And what is less desirable to the average male than the threat to his vanity constituted by an educated woman? Society demanded, therefore, that a woman direct her abilities toward the acquisition of the so-called "feminine" accomplishments--penmanship, needlework, drawing, music, dancing and language--all of which enhanced her attractiveness as an object. Reading was an acceptable occupation up to a point: an acquaintance with the popular novels and poems of the day could be quite charming, but any attempt by a woman to extend her knowledge beyond these to, say, a

specialized field like science or mathematics was bound to be censured, because

> to come with a well-informed mind, is to come with an inability of administering to the vanity of others, which a sensible person would always wish to avoid. A woman, especially, if she have the misfortune of knowing anything, should conceal it as well as she can. (NA, 1124)

For this clear-sighted comprehension of the prevailing attitude toward female enlightenment and of the quality of the male intellect which endorsed it, Jane Austen is partly indebted to Fanny Burney, one of her predecessors; in Evelina, Miss Burney presents a discussion of women by three utterly stupid men, together with the astute comment of a brilliant woman:

> " . . . I have an insuperable aversion to strength, either of body or mind, in a female." [Mr. Lovel]
>
> "'Faith, and so have I," said Mr. Coverley; "for egad I'd as soon see a woman chop wood, as hear her chop logic."
>
> "So would every man in his senses," said Lord Merton; "for *a woman wants nothing to recommend her but beauty and good nature*; in every thing else she is either impertinent or unnatural. For my part, deuce take me if ever I wish to hear a word of sense from a woman as long as I live!"
>
> "It has always been agreed," said Mrs. Selwyn, looking round her with the utmost contempt, "that no man ought to be connected with a woman whose understanding is superior to his own. Now I very much fear, that to accommodate all this good company, according to such a rule, would be utterly impracticable, unless we should chuse subjects from Swift's hospital of idiots."[1] (My italics)

Society's discriminatory attitude is, of course, based on the *ad hoc* argument that women do not deserve an education because they are naturally stupid and incompetent. (That this type of argument is an effective weapon against any minority group is evident in the success with which it is still being used to prohibit the education of

the negro in the southern United States.) Although the fallacy has not gone unperceived--Plato, for instance, maintained that boys and girls have the same natural aptitudes--the attitude has persisted: it constitutes an integral part of the whole concept of women's inferiority and has just as long a history. Indeed, in Jane Austen's society, the education of girls was not much different from that in Anciant Greece (or in any intervening society, for that matter). In both societies--although Jane Austen gives us a few instances in her work of girls who attend boarding-schools (which never claim a status corresponding to that of a boy's "prep" school)--boys are sent away to school while girls remain at home with their mothers, to be instructed in household duties, the bare essentials of literacy and the fine art of capturing a husband. In fact, we may infer from H. D. F. Kitto that a more liberal attitude toward the educated woman existed in Ancient Greece than in Jane Austen's society: not only books but a completely uncensored theatre were open to her; furthermore, the <u>hetaerae</u>, a class of highly-educated Ionian women who did not want the responsibilities of marriage, were not only permitted to exist but were given a great deal of freedom.[2] Despite the assumptions any historian may make about the position or education of women in a given society, however--and these assumptions are based mainly on the lack of positive evidence to the contrary--we cannot ignore the phenomenon, carefully noted by Virginia Woolf, that virtually nothing whatever is known about women before the eighteenth century: we do not know how many children they had, how they spent their time, whether they could read or write, or whether they had any privacy; all we know is that they had no money, no legal status and no choice as to a husband.[3] That they certainly were not educated can be inferred from this very paucity of information which in itself

is evidence that, throughout most of recorded history, one-half of the population has been mute. It is curious that, in both her first and her last novel, Jane Austen refers to this strange fact which, even today, evokes little surprise: in Northanger Abbey, Catherine Morland complains, "'. . . it [history] tells me nothing that does not either vex or weary me. . . . the men all so good for nothing, and hardly any women at all . . . .'" (NA, 1122-23); in Persuasion, Anne Elliot refuses to accept much of what Captain Harville claims to be evidence of women's fickleness:

". . . if you please, no reference to examples in books. Men have had every advantage of us in telling their own story. Education has been theirs in so much higher a degree; *the pen has been in their hands*. I will not allow books to prove anything." (P, 1353. My italics)

Jane Austen, it would seem, is fully aware of the implications of a further and closely-related point made by Virginia Woolf:

. . . all the great women of fiction were, until Jane Austen's day, not only seen by the other sex, but seen only in relation to the other sex.[4] And how small a part of a woman's life is that; and how little can a man know even of that when he observes it through the black or rosy spectacles which sex puts upon his nose.[5]

It is little wonder that the circular argument has persisted.

In the previous chapter it was mentioned that a certain inattention in parents to the formal education of their daughters is more forgiveable than a corresponding inattention to their moral education. The reason for this charity (which Jane Austen would seem to condone) is that the obstructing forces which lie behind both branches of training operate, with regard to formal education, in a much more subtle and insidious manner. For, while the imposition of false, materialistic moral values on girls shows fairly rapid and quite obvious results in loss of happiness and peace of mind to nearly all

concerned--the Bertram family, for instance--the consequences of educational restrictions accumulate much more slowly and are far more difficult to assess. Rarely do such limitations result in disastrous marriages, disgrace, or outright despair; if they do, there is little evidence of a connection between cause and effect. The results are less likely to be positive than negative; less likely to be active unhappiness than an indefinable sense of dissatisfaction, of which the parent may never become aware and the reason for which the girl herself may, if anything, only vaguely suspect, for

> they [young women] are trained to please man's taste, for which purpose they soon learn to live out of themselves, and look on themselves as he looks, <u>almost as little disturbed as he by the undiscovered</u>.[6] (My italics)

And so it is understandable why parents such as the Morlands and the Musgroves, who give their daughters excellent moral training and who live to see them happily settled, tend to accept without question society's arbitrary law that girls must not be educated beyond the well-defined limits it has set.

For, after all, if a woman is moderately happy and content, if she is given freedom (and a good deal of luck!) in the choice of a husband, if "the continuous balance of sheer vitality that belongs to society"[7] is not threatened, why should the society which endorses her lack of education be a target for the comic spirit? Simply because the goal of comedy is a free, creative society which can never be realized if the arbitrary laws of the older generation are allowed to keep one-half of the population in ignorance. Once again, we must remember that the purpose of comedy is not merely to provide unqualified mirth, but that its real test is to "awaken thoughtful laughter."[8]

Jane Austen does not single out specific people in her novels as targets for her attack on the quality and quantity of women's education; she does not even reproach such parents as the Bertrams and the Bennets, much less the Musgroves and the Morlands, who unknowingly condone the evil. She is content to set forth the facts which, in themselves, are an indictment of society's attitude. And the facts indicate that, whether a girl is educated by her parents, by masters or governesses or both, or whether she is sent away to school, her education--despite the competence of those who instruct her and despite her own abilities--is deplorably inadequate and constitutes a major obstacle to her self-realization. While the obvious and immediate implications to be drawn from these facts will be indicated here, their full ramifications will be reserved for discussion in subsequent chapters.

It is ironical, and perhaps intentionally so, that Northanger Abbey, which contains the best example of an ideal moral education for a girl, provides an equally good example of a lamentable neglect of her formal education. Catherine Morland is taught writing and accounts by her father, French (and presumably reading) by her mother, neither of whom seems concerned by her lack of proficiency (NA, 1064). And since, with the exception of her abortive attempt to learn music, no other source of instruction is mentioned, we may infer that these bare fundamentals of literacy are the extent of her formal education. (Later in the novel, Henry Tilney makes an astute comment on the quality of this kind of basic training: women's letters, he says, show "'a general deficiency of subject, a total inattention to stops, and a very frequent ignorance of grammar'" [NA, 1072]). She has no natural inclination for books of instruction, and no one takes the trouble to provide her with any guidance as to the kind of reading

to which she should devote at least part of her time. And so, at fifteen, having outgrown the physical activities she has shared with her brothers--and simply because her occupations have no supervision whatever--we find her

> in training for a heroine; she read all such works as heroines must read to supply their memories with those quotations which are so serviceable and so soothing in the vicissitudes of their eventful lives. (NA, 1064)

It is, therefore, not at all strange that when, at seventeen, she is about to leave for her adventures in Bath, her mind is "about as ignorant and uninformed as the female mind at seventeen usually is" (NA, 1066). Although Northanger Abbey is a parody and Jane Austen is, at least part of the time, writing tongue-in-cheek, her description of the desultory kind of education a girl is likely to receive is not exaggerated. Catherine Morland, as we shall see later, is not naturally stupid but, like all the other girls in Jane Austen's novels who suffer in varying degrees from the same discrimination, she is doomed to a high degree of ignorance by her society.

The voice of this society can be clearly heard in Pride and Prejudice when Mr. Bennet says of his daughters, "'They have none of them much to recommend them . . . they are all silly and ignorant, like other girls; but Lizzy has something more of quickness than her sisters'" (PP, 232). Scholarly though he may be, Mr. Bennet cannot so far perceive the fallacy in the argument against the education of women as to give his daughters anything but an almost totally unsupervised education. Elizabeth must, therefore, agree partly with Lady Catherine that her family has suffered through want of a governess (PP, 330). For, although a comparatively good education was available

to the Bennet girls, not all of them took advantage of it: as Elizabeth tells Lady Catherine, "'. . . such of us as wished to learn never wanted the means. We were always encouraged to read, and had all the masters that were necessary. Those who chose to be idle, certainly might'" (PP, 330). Lydia and Catherine, for instance, who needed the supervision of a strict boarding-school! Our real sympathy, however, lies with Elizabeth. Because of her intelligence and quick wit, we tend to think her a better educated girl than she actually is; we never do, however, see her engaged in any intellectual activity except, perhaps, the rather perfunctory interest she displays in books at Netherfield. She has, indeed, suffered more than her sisters from the hit-and-miss type of education her father considers sufficient for girls.

Since there is no evidence in Sense and Sensibility of the Dashwood girls' having been away at school, it may be assumed that they, too, have received their education at home. Whether it was supervised by their parents, visiting masters or a governess, we do not know. Because of Eleanor's predilection for drawing and Marianne's for music, however, it would seem that the emphasis has been on the acquisition of "feminine" accomplishments. But not entirely. That their education has been more consistent and, therefore, better than that of the Bennet girls can be inferred from the respect they both have for studious occupations. On their arrival at Barton, for instance, Sir John Middleton is surprised to find them constantly employed (SS, 23); and that this employment by no means precludes intellectual effort, abortive though it may be, is evident in that, after Marianne's restoration to health later in the novel, the girls " . . . if not pursuing their usual studies with quite so much vigour

as when they first came to Barton, [they were] at least planning a vigorous prosecution of them in future" (SS, 211). The accuracy with which Elinor perceives wherein lie Lucy Steele's deficiencies is a revealing comment on both her own respect for education and its limitations within her society:

> Lucy was naturally clever; . . . but her powers had received no aid from education, she was ignorant and illiterate, and her deficiency of all mental improvement, her want of information in the most common particulars could not be concealed from Miss Dashwood . . . . Elinor saw, and pitied her for the neglect of abilities which education might have rendered so respectable . . . . (SS, 76)

We, in turn, pity Elinor for her own restricted education, which led her no further than her drawing-board.

In Mansfield Park, Jane Austen presents a different method of education in that the Bertram girls are in the care of a governess. (This novel, incidentally, is diametrically opposed to Northanger Abbey, in that, while it illustrates most clearly the neglect of moral training for girls, it also provides the best example of a supervised education at home--at the same time exposing the limitations of such an education.) At first, it would seem that the Bertram girls, with their governess (Miss Lee) and their masters, are receiving fairly good instruction; they boast that, when they were quite young, they were able to

> "repeat the chronological order of the kings of England, with the dates of their accession, and most of the principal events of their reigns! . . . and of the Roman emperors as low as Severus; besides a great deal of the heathen mythology, and all the metals, semi-metals, planets, and distinguished philosophers." (MP, 478)

For a moment, before the heterogeneity of this information strikes us, we may wonder whether Jane Austen really is mocking Lady Catherine

when, in Pride and Prejudice, she has that lady assert, "'I always say that nothing is to be done in education without steady and regular instruction, and nobody but a governess can give it'" (PP, 331). We should know better, of course. The superficiality and ineffectiveness of learning by rote--which would seem to constitute the instruction given by most governesses--is fully exposed when, on Mrs. Norris' telling Maria and Julia that there is much more for them to learn, one of them replies, "'Yes, I know there is, till I am seventeen'" (MP, 479). This illuminating remark gives rise to the suspicion that a good deal of irony probably underlies Jane Austen's comment that "in everything but disposition, they were admirably taught" (MP, 479). Because of "their promising talents and early information" (MP, 479), and more particularly because of their pride and arrogance which go far to offset native ability, they should be away at boarding-school--preferably the kind of establishment in which one of Jane Austen's contemporaries, Eliza Fletcher, found herself and where " . . . the spoilt girl found that her recitations and erudition counted for nothing, and that she was a totally inelegant female child."[9] For a governess in a household such as the Bertrams' has little more status or authority than a poorly-paid servant and, no matter how competent she may be, could hardly have it within her power to convince the headstrong Bertram girls that education is a life-long activity and must continue far beyond the great day of "coming out."

The inadequacies of the governess system are even more evident in Emma. Unlike Miss Lee in Mansfield Park, Miss Taylor has for sixteen years been more like a sister than a governess to Emma, with the result that her pupil's education, completely permissive, has left much to be desired:

> Even before Miss Taylor had ceased to hold the nominal office of governess, the mildness of her temper had hardly allowed her to impose any restraint; and the shadow of authority being now long passed away, they had been living together as friend and friend very mutually attached, and <u>Emma doing just what she liked</u>; highly esteeming Miss Taylor's judgment, but directed chiefly by her own. (<u>E</u>, 763. My italics)

Emma has sincere intentions for self-improvement, of course, but they do not materialize. As Mr. Knightley points out, she has conscientiously drawn up highly commendable reading lists since the age of twelve, but has never pursued them (<u>E</u>, 783). In fact, the only literary activity in which we see her engaged is the collection of riddles with Harriet Smith! At times, she is forced to admit her deficiencies: after the Coles' dinner party, for instance, at which she realizes the inferiority of her musical accomplishments to those of Jane Fairfax, "she did most heartily grieve over the idleness of her childhood; and sat down and practised vigorously an hour and a half" (<u>E</u>, 903). And, we must assume, such was her atonement for years of neglect! Indeed, with no real direction, her cleverness has been a detriment to her; as Mr. Knightley points out,

> "Emma is spoiled by being the cleverest of her family. At ten years old, she had the misfortune of being able to answer questions which puzzled her sister at seventeen. She was always quick and assured; Isabella slow and diffident." (<u>E</u>, 783)

"The shadow of authority" which Miss Taylor at one time represented could never be enough for Emma; like Maria and Julia Bertram, she needs the solid substance of authority, a rigidly-enforced program of studies and the keen competition of minds better than her own. Of all the girls in Jane Austen's novels with any appreciable degree of ability, surely Emma seems to be the most short-changed with regard

to education. Even the Bertram girls have fared better: whereas their training persisted until they were seventeen, Emma's apparently ceased when she was much younger.

There is, however, no evidence in Jane Austen's novels that, by exposing the unsatisfactory results of trying to educate girls at home, she is advocating boarding-schools. (It is interesting to note, just the same, that none of the girls who go away to school--Anne Elliot, Louisa and Henrietta Musgrove, Harriet Smith and Charlotte Palmer--are so selfish, vain and ill-disposed as, for instance, the Bertram girls who have been confined to the four walls of the school-room at home.) On the contrary, she consistently takes the position that such schools, although they might in some instances serve a useful purpose, leave much to be desired. Her strongest single indictment of them is to be found in Sense and Sensibility; describing the apartment which the Dashwood girls are to occupy in Mrs. Jennings' London home, she remarks,

> it had formerly been Charlotte's [Charlotte Palmer], and over the mantelpiece still hung a landscape in coloured silks of her performance, in proof of her having spent seven years at a great school in town to some effect. (SS, 94)

She indicates little more respect for the school in Exeter from which Henrietta and Louisa Musgrove have brought "all the usual stock of accomplishments, and were now, like thousands of other young ladies, living to be fashionable, happy, and merry" (SS, 1233)--their education safely over! Nothing is said of the quality of the education Anne Elliot received during her three years at school in Bath; we know of her unhappiness there, but this was presumably attributable to the recent death of her mother (P, 1218); that her "elegance of

mind" (P, 1212) has resulted from her association with her mother and Lady Russell rather than from her training at school is, however, infinitely more probable. The only school which receives the slightest positive endorsement from Jane Austen is that which Harriet Smith attends in Emma; not an elaborate "finishing school" which encourages vanity by stressing elegance of manners and appearance, Mrs. Goddard's establishment is

> a real, honest, old-fashioned boarding-school, where a reasonable quantity of accomplishments were sold at a reasonable price, and where girls might be sent to be out of the way, and scramble themselves into a little education, without any danger of coming back prodigies. (E, 773)

It would seem that the best Jane Austen can do for girls' boarding-schools is to damn them with faint praise!

If education at home--with the usual run of parents, masters and governesses--and at boarding-school is inadequate, how is it possible in Jane Austen's society for a woman even partially to evade the obstacle of ignorance which society places squarely in the path of her self-realization? For Jane Austen, there is only one answer: by reading--not at random but with great discrimination. She makes her point brilliantly in her first novel and she reinforces it again and again.

Northanger Abbey, with its juxtaposition of the naïve Catherine Morland and the sophisticated Eleanor Tilney, clearly illustrates that reading must be a carefully directed activity. Of Catherine's ill-chosen reading material, in which she indulged between the ages of fifteen and seventeen, we have already made mention; under the influence of Isabella Thorpe at Bath, however, her tastes are led even further astray. When the weather is miserable, the two girls

"shut themselves up to read novels together" (NA, 1077)--not in itself an entirely uninstructive pastime, but extremely dangerous to an uninformed girl like Catherine when the list is composed exclusively of Gothic horrors such as Castle of Wolfenbach, Mysterious Warnings, Necromancers of the Black Forest and Horrid Mysteries (NA, 1079). Catherine, in fact, has no taste for other than "horrid" books: as she asks Isabella, "' . . . are they all horrid? Are you sure they are all horrid?'" (NA, 1079) Eventually, of course, she admits that the unfortunate predicaments in which she finds herself "might be traced to the influence of that sort of reading which she had there [at Bath] indulged" (NA, 1176)--and, we might add, to the lack of discrimination which had directed her reading while "in training for a heroine." Eleanor Tilney, on the other hand, has profited immensely from the informal tutoring of her well-educated brother; when, for instance, Catherine admits that she cares little for any other kind of reading than the Gothic novel and that she finds history, even with the inventions that are meant to enliven it, extremely wearisome and dull, Eleanor states her own position:

"I am fond of history, and am very well contented to take the false with the true. In the principal facts they [the historians] have sources of intelligence in former histories and records, which may be as much depended on, I conclude, as anything that does not actually pass under one's own observation; and as for the little embellishments you speak of, they are embellishments, and I like them as such. If a speech be well drawn up, I read it with pleasure, by whomsoever it may be made; and probably with much greater, if the production of Mr. Hume or Mr. Robertson, than if the genuine words of Caractacus, Agricola, or Alfred the Great." (NA, 1123)

When we consider the quality of his sister's mind, we realize that Henry Tilney's comments on women's mental deficiencies--"'Perhaps the abilities of women are neither sound nor acute, neither vigorous nor

keen. Perhaps they may want observation, discernment, judgment, fire, genius and wit'" (NA, 1125)--are meant to be nothing more than witty generalizations. Certainly he is speaking in good faith when he teasingly says of her, "'. . . she is by no means a simpleton in general'" (NA, 1125). But Catherine *is* a simpleton at this point--and the difference surely lies in their respective reading habits.

When, in *Pride and Prejudice*, Elizabeth is spending a few days at Netherfield during Jane's illness there, the importance of reading is emphasized in a slightly different way. Bingley has expressed amazement that all young women are so accomplished--"'They all paint tables, cover screens, and net purses'" (PP, 253). When Darcy insists that "accomplished" presupposes much greater talent, Miss Bingley--always eager to please him--submits that "'a woman must have a thorough knowledge of music, singing, drawing, dancing, and the modern languages, to deserve the word . . . .'" together with a great deal of style and elegance (PP, 253). Much to everyone's surprise, Darcy goes even further: "'All this she must possess . . . and to all this she must yet add *something more substantial*, in the improvement of her mind by extensive reading'" (PP, 253. My italics). Immediately we feel happier about Elizabeth; she is bound to profit immeasurably from her coming acquaintance with the fine library at Pemberley.

In *Mansfield Park*, Jane Austen returns to her point by emphasizing the training process itself. Indeed, Fanny Price is probably the most fortunate girl in any of the novels, in that she has Edmund, who is aware of both her aptitude and the inestimable value of reading, as her willing guide:

He knew her to be clever, to have a quick apprehension as well as good sense and a fondness for reading, which, *properly directed*, must be an

education in itself. . . . he recommended the books which charmed her leisure hours, he encouraged her taste, and corrected her judgment; he made reading useful by talking to her of what she read and heightened its attraction by judicious praise. (MP, 481. My italics)

We cannot fail to perceive the contrast between the Bertram girls, destined to remain in intellectual poverty because they assume their education will terminate at seventeen, and Fanny, to whom reading will furnish a life-long source of instruction and pleasure.

Henry Tilney, then, by guiding his sister into other fields than the novel, Darcy by insisting on extensive reading as the main prerequisite of a woman's education, Edmund by cultivating Fanny's taste for books, and even Mr. Knightley who deplores Emma's neglect of her reading lists, are all, to varying degrees, opposing the attitudes of their society. There is no doubt that they consider women to be educable.

Mona Wilson speaks the truth when she says, "Miss Austen is, indeed, far from regarding education as a mere matter of superficial accomplishments designed to snare husbands . . . ."[10] We cannot agree so readily, however, with her contention that Jane Austen "found a home education with encouragement to read quite satisfactory for a woman of native wit and intelligence."[11] That she considers it the best compromise a woman can make with her society is probably true. But, like all comic writers, Jane Austen envisions an ideal society, in which all members must be able to realize their potential. And, as early as Northanger Abbey, she presents an almost pathetic little incident which indicates the limitations imposed upon even the most intelligent women of her day. Henry Tilney, discussing with Catherine and Eleanor such topics as forests and crown lands, "shortly found himself arrived at politics; and from politics it was an easy step to

silence" and "the general pause which succeeded his short disquisition on the state of the nation" (NA, 1124). It is understandable that, at this point, Catherine has nothing to contribute to the conversation--but Eleanor? Her silence speaks for itself. In Emma, as we become aware of Jane Fairfax's predicament, the obstacle assumes much greater proportions. For Jane has received what was considered an outstanding education for her day:

> She had fallen into good hands, known nothing but kindness from the Campbells, and been given an excellent education. Living constantly with right-minded and well-informed people, her heart and understanding had received every advantage of discipline and culture; and Colonel Campbell's residence being in London, every higher talent had been done full justice to by the attendance of first-rate masters. (E, 860-861)

And for what do her superior intelligence and admirable education qualify her? For eventual admission to the bar? For lecturing in a university? For the pursuit of medicine which, in those days, was not a highly prestigious profession? Hardly--women were not allowed to sit for matriculation until 1868.[12] For any position whatever through which her talents might benefit society? No. She is equipped for one thing only--"'the governess-trade'" (E, 946). And the despair and frustration with which she contemplates a life confined to the nursery (of an acquaintance of Mrs. Elton!) constitute the strongest and most explicit indictment of a restricted education to be found in Jane Austen's work. And so, while inadequacies in the training of girls like Emma Woodhouse, Elizabeth Bennet, Eleanor Tilney and Anne Elliot go almost unnoticed, they show up in unrelieved starkness in Jane Fairfax, the only one faced with having to earn her own living.

The extent to which girls like Eleanor Tilney and Fanny Price benefit from guidance in their reading has already been pointed out.

It may not, therefore, be unreasonable to suspect that Jane Austen is implying that girls like these--and particularly girls like Jane Fairfax--might profit even more from a higher education, through which proportionately more able and specialized guidance would be available; that she is, in fact, suggesting they should have the same educational opportunities as boys. Indeed, it would seem that, allowing for differences in the studies of the respective periods, she would be among the first to accept the fact, based on the evidence of reputable aptitude tests given in the 1950's and 1960's, that

> . . . most of those who should have been studying physics, advanced algebra, analytic geometry, four years of language--and were not--were girls. They had the intelligence, the special gift which was not sex-directed, but they also had the sex-directed attitude that such studies were "unfeminine."[13]

And so Henry Tilney, after telling Catherine that he has read much more widely than she, qualifies what might seem to her a criticism by adding, "'Consider how many years I have had the start of you. I had entered on my studies at Oxford, while you were a good little girl working your sampler at home!'" (<u>NA</u>, 1122) Although he is directly referring to the eight years' difference in their respective ages, he may also be suggesting that, instead of spending her time on useless embroidery, Catherine, like her brothers, should have been pursuing a course of studies.

Indeed, the similarity of Catherine's temperament and abilities (to say nothing of lack of abilities!) to those of her brothers--a similarity not obliterated by the conditioning process to which most little girls are subjected from the moment of birth, but which Catherine as a child escapes--brings the discrepancies

between the education of a girl and that of a boy into much sharper focus than is to be found elsewhere in Jane Austen's novels. Very unlike society's ideal little girl, Catherine is "fond of all boys' play and greatly preferred cricket, not merely to dolls, but to the more heroic enjoyments of infancy, nursing a dormouse, feeding a canary-bird, or watering a rose-bush" (NA, 1063). She has no talent for music or drawing, no proficiency in writing or French; displaying an even more unfeminine trait: ". . . she shirked her lessons . . . whenever she could" (NA, 1064). All of these failings are, of course, "natural" in a boy, but "what a strange unaccountable character," what "symptoms of profligacy" in a girl! (NA, 1064) By the age of ten, Catherine has even fewer claims to femininity: "she was . . . noisy and wild, hated confinement and cleanliness, and loved nothing so well in the world as rolling down the green slope at the back of the house" (NA, 1064). Even at fourteen, she is still a typical tomboy, preferring--like her brothers--"cricket, baseball, riding on horseback, and running about the country" to reading instructive books (NA, 1064). The reason for her non-conformity is simple: her mother is so busy with confinements and the younger children that the elder are left to their own devices (NA, 1064). Yet it does not occur to her parents that, once the young-animal enjoyments of childhood start to give way to the consideration of more serious pursuits, Catherine might be just as capable of sharing her brothers' intellectual activities as she has been of sharing their physical adventures. On the contrary, while the boys presumably go off to school (James' education, we know, eventually leads him to Oxford) where their energies and talents will be channelled and disciplined,

Catherine at fifteen--simply because she has nothing else to do--starts her "training for a heroine" (NA, 1064). The conditioning process has at last caught up with her.

And yet Catherine, although denied the education which could conceivably save her from much future embarrassment, indicates that she is, if anything, potentially brighter than at least two of the men with whom she comes in contact. She has only to meet John Thorpe once, for instance, to perceive his outright boorishness (NA, 1086); yet her brother James claims him for a friend whose only fault lies in his being "a little of a rattle" (NA, 1086). Moreover, she is better informed than Thorpe on at least one subject, in spite of his attendance (we hesitate to say "education") at Oxford: he professes to admire Mrs. Radcliffe's novels yet is unaware that she is the author of Udolpho (NA, 1085). It is indeed ironic that Catherine, perhaps the least intelligent of Jane Austen's comic heroines, best demonstrates the common potential of boys and girls, the full implications of which are not evident until we are confronted with Jane Fairfax's predicament in Emma.

Jane Austen never, of course, implies that all women would benefit from a higher education--but then, neither would all men. The advantages of Oxford have obviously been wasted on John Thorpe, whereas they could conceivably have done much for Catherine Morland. Surely Elinor Dashwood would have profited more from a university education than Edward Ferrars; Fanny Price, more than Tom Bertram and perhaps as much as Edmund; Emma, more than Frank Churchill or Mr. Elton; Jane Fairfax probably as much as Mr. Knightley; Anne Elliot, much more than Sir Walter; Elizabeth Bennet, almost as much as Darcy, and Charlotte Lucas, incredibly more than Mr. Collins. (For the

Harriet Smiths, the Mrs. Eltons, the Isabella Thorpes, the Lydia Bennets, the Mrs. John Dashwoods, the Lady Middletons, the Charlotte Palmers and even the Bertram girls, we hesitate to make any claims.) What Jane Austen seems to be suggesting is, simply, that if intelligence and ability are equal, it follows that potential is also equal. All that is needed--and it is a very big "all"--is the recognition of this truth by society, which alone could give the girls the educational opportunities they should have. Certainly, by indicating that intelligence and stupidity are fairly equally divided between men and women, Jane Austen makes her point that any discrimination in education on the basis of sex is _ipso facto_ invalid.

> You must, as I have said, believe that our state of society is founded in common sense, otherwise you will not be struck by _the contrasts the Comic Spirit perceives_ . . . . You will, in fact, be standing in that peculiar oblique beam of light, yourself illuminated to the general eye as the very object of chase and doomed quarry of the thing obscure to you.[14] (My italics)

"The contrasts the Comic Spirit perceives": the difference between the education offered to a boy and that available to a girl; the disparity between a girl's potential and the training deemed fit for her by society. "For centuries stupidity has kept itself stupid by telling girls, 'If you know too much you will never get a husband.'"[15] Clearly this is the voice of the obstructing characters of the older generation who block the progress of the comic rhythm toward a more vital society; and behind the voice is the tacit admission that "a woman cannot know too much unless she knows more than you do."[16] And so, in order to protect the _status quo_ from the very tangible threat of the educated woman, in order to keep intact the arbitrary law which decrees her subjugation, "the object of being attractive to men" has become "the polar star of _feminine education and formation_

of character."[17] (My italics) Here indeed is an example of what Bergson calls "any substitution whatsoever of the artificial for the natural,"[18] which laughter must try to remove. And this is the "ideal," set before the comic heroine by the obstructing forces, on which Jane Austen consistently focusses "that peculiar oblique beam of light" until it is unmistakably "illuminated to the general eye" as nothing but a *tour de force* to perpetuate the illusion of female inferiority and to mask the reality of the potential equality of the sexes. By so emphasizing the discrepancy between what a woman is and what a male-dominated society forces her to be, Jane Austen aligns herself with the philosopher who

> discerns the similarity of boy and girl, until the girl is marched away to the nursery. Philosopher and comic poet are of a cousinship in the eye they cast on life; and they are equally unpopular with our wilful English of the hazy region and *the ideal that is not to be disturbed*.[19] (My italics)

NOTES

[1]*Evelina or A Young Lady's Entrance into the World* (London: Dent, 1964), p. 336.

[2]*The Greeks* (Harmondsworth, Middlesex: Penguin, 1958), pp. 219-236.

[3]*A Room of One's Own*, p. 69.

[4]Defoe's *Moll Flanders* might be an exception.

[5]*A Room of One's Own*, p. 124.

[6]Meredith, *The Egoist*, p. 202.

[7]Langer, *Feeling and Form*, p. 333.

[8]Meredith, "*An Essay on Comedy*," p. 47.

[9]Mona Wilson, *Jane Austen and Some Contemporaries* (London: Cresset Press, 1938), p. 46.

[10]Ibid., p. 8.

[11]Ibid., p. 9.

[12]Ibid., p. 282.

[13]Betty Friedan, *The Feminine Mystique* (New York: W. W. Norton, 1963), p. 161.

[14]Meredith, "*An Essay on Comedy*," p. 48.

[15]G. B. Needham and R. P. Utter, *Pamela's Daughters* (New York: Macmillan, 1936), p. 225.

[16]Ibid., p. 224.

[17]Mill, *The Subjection of Women*, p. 43.

[18]Bergson, "*Laughter*," p. 91.

[19]Meredith, "*An Essay on Comedy*," p. 15.

CHAPTER IV

EMERGENCE OF THE SELF-CONCEPT

> Emotion uncontrolled by reason leads you into ludicrous mistakes . . . . I do not believe the vital issue between Elinor and Marianne--nor between the wise and foolish virgins in any other of Jane Austen's novels--to be the issue between head and heart, old-fashioned rationalist and new-fashioned romanticist. I have tried to show it rather as (in part) an expression of her constant tranquil preference for a true over a false vision of life, particularly with regard to ideas of happiness.
> --Mary Lascelles, _Jane Austen and Her Art_

In order for the comic heroine to have "a true vision of life," she must have a true vision of herself. The development of a reasonably accurate self-concept, then, is often a very important part of the comic action which, of course, comprises the heroine's struggle for self-realization. That her first steps towards an adequate self-concept are made extremely difficult by the obstructing forces which try to bar her from any appreciable moral or intellectual development has already become obvious. Indeed, we can never escape from the fact that the many obstacles with which she has to cope throughout the entire comic action are closely related to, if not part of that one great obstacle, her severely limited education.

It would, of course, be difficult to argue that there is a direct relationship between the quantity and quality of education the comic heroine receives and the degree of self-deception in which she indulges. That there is _some_ relationship between these factors--if only to the extent that the amount of time she can devote to day-dreaming is of necessity much shorter when she has a schedule of

studies on which she must concentrate--is almost indisputable. When she has no intellectual interests whatever, when she has to submit to no self-discipline, when there is nothing, as it were, to take her mind off her mind, she is completely free to give full reign to her imagination and thus indulge her wildest fancies. Intellectually in a state of arrested development, she is unable to exercise either her critical faculty or her rational powers. And, if her moral training has also been defective, her vision may be even more faulty in that she will tend to let her emotions, as well as her imagination, go unchecked by reason. Although not all of Jane Austen's comic heroines have to struggle for an adequate self-concept--some are able to start their climb towards self-realization relatively unimpeded by self-deception--in each case the truth or falsity of the self-concept is closely linked with the kind of education received.

The obstacle Catherine Morland has to overcome before she arrives at an accurate self-concept is characteristic of those facing the comic heroine who, even though she has no exalted view of herself and has, actually, a fair degree of common sense for her age, has received almost no formal education. Her self-deception begins, in fact, at the precise moment she enters her "training for a heroine" (NA, 1064), and is nothing more than a rather pathetic attempt to escape from the empty existence in which an uneducated girl of fifteen often finds herself. Since she has nothing else to think about, she begins to live in her imagination, picturing herself as a fictional heroine. And, if Isabella Thorpe had not introduced her to "horrid books," her fancy might have led her no further than "those quotations which are so serviceable and so soothing in the vicissitudes of their [heroines'] eventful lives" (NA, 1064). The Gothic novel, however

rooted as it is in the whole realm of imagination, emotion and superstition, has a direct appeal to and a terrific impact on a mind like Catherine's which has not been trained to an objective, rational approach to literature. She is, consequently, disproportionately affected by what she reads to the point at which "the luxury of a raised, restless, and frightened imagination over the pages of Udolpho" (NA, 1087) is one of her greatest delights. When the Tilneys invite her to Northanger, then, it is not surprising that she immediately invests the Abbey with all the characteristics of Udolpho:

> Its long, damp passages, its narrow cells and ruined chapel, were to be within her daily reach, and she could not entirely subdue the hope of some traditional legends, some awful memorials of an injured and ill-fated nun. (NA, 1140)

The comic implications and consequences are, of course, hilarious. When Henry Tilney teases her about the horrors she will encounter at Northanger, she is alternately credulous and ashamed of her credulity, yet she remains credulous. That the Abbey is so easily accessible strikes her as "odd and inconsistent" (NA, 1152). She is keenly disappointed to find the interior handsome, elegantly furnished, clean and well-lit--"to an imagination which had hoped for . . . painted glass, dirt, and cobwebs, the difference was very distressing" (NA, 1153). To find some marked resemblance to Udolpho, however, is vital: there must be a mystery somewhere and she must be the one to solve it. The first possibility is the large old chest in her room, which she regards with "fearful curiosity" (NA, 1154); when all her efforts to open it are rewarded by the sight of a neatly folded white cotton counterpane, she realizes she has been "a great simpleton" and immediately forms "wise resolutions with the most violent despatch"

(NA, 1155). But she has not yet learned her lesson. Preparing for bed, with a storm raging outside, she notices a high old black cabinet and cannot rest until, after considerable effort, she extricates a roll of paper from its recesses. Unfortunately, just as she is about to examine it, she accidentally--and to her utmost horror--extinguishes her candle. A night of mental agony follows: "hollow murmurs seemed to creep along the gallery, and more than once her blood was chilled by the sound of distant moans" (NA, 1159). In her imagination, Catherine is indeed at Udolpho: she is living, not her own life, but that of a character in a Gothic novel. When, the next morning, the seemingly mysterious old manuscript turns out to be a recent inventory of linen, she is utterly ashamed of her folly: "nothing could now be clearer than the absurdity of her recent fancies" (NA, 1159). And yet, on such slight evidence as Colonel Tilney's dislike of the walk his deceased wife once enjoyed and his indifference toward her portrait, coupled with the fact that her illness was sudden and short, Catherine's imagination is soon again at work. She feels her suspicions are entirely justified when she sees the Colonel thoughtfully and quietly pacing the drawing room: "it was the air and attitude of a Montoni!" (NA, 1168) Her imagination delves further: perhaps he didn't murder his wife, perhaps she still lives, imprisoned in a cell somewhere in the Abbey! It is not until she finally has an opportunity to examine the neat, sunny, handsome room which Mrs. Tilney had occupied, and which could not possibly hold any mystery, that she realizes the full extent of her foolishness. And when Henry, accidentally meeting her on her way to her room and suspecting what she has been doing, gives her the facts of his mother's illness and of his father's attachment to her, "the visions of romance were over. . . .

Most grievously was she humbled" (NA, 1175). Her next step is to understand the cause of her folly:

> It had been all a voluntary, self-created delusion, each trifling circumstance receiving importance from an imagination resolved on alarm, and every thing forced to bend to one purpose by a mind which, before she entered the Abbey, had been craving to be frightened. (NA, 1175. My italics)

When Henry asks her, "'Does our education prepare us for such atrocities?'" (NA, 1175) he is unwittingly posing a rhetorical question. Catherine's education, or lack of it, has perfectly prepared her to blur the distinction between literature and life. But now, fully aware of her mistake, she makes rapid progress toward a truer vision of the world around her and also toward a greater social awareness. She is prepared to admit that "some slight imperfection" (NA, 1176) might conceivably exist even in Henry and Eleanor, and that Coloney Tilney may be somewhat disagreeable without being an utter villain. More important, when the Colonel so unreasonably orders her to leave Northanger, "her anxiety had foundation in fact, her fears in probability . . . ." (NA, 1192) and the dark room, the high wind and the strange noises all go unnoticed. Catherine is no longer a Gothic heroine. By finally seeing herself clearly in relation to her experience, she has overcome a major obstacle.

The difficulties facing Emma before she can know the truth about herself are, like those of Catherine, the result of an overactive imagination and an underactive intellect. Miss Taylor, as we have already seen (in Chapter III) has allowed her to do exactly as she pleased, with the result that, as Mr. Knightley observes, "'She will never submit to anything requiring industry and patience, and a subjection of the fancy to the understanding'" (E, 783. My italics).

Even Emma's own decision to improve Harriet Smith's mind by reading and discussion results only in good intentions, for "it was much easier to chat than to study; much pleasanter to let her imagination range and work at Harriet's fortune, than to be labouring to enlarge her comprehension, or exercise it on sober facts . . . . (E, 803) Unlike Catherine, whose extremely limited social circle (we hear only of Mrs. Allen) may have influenced her to indulge in romantic fiction, Emma as mistress of Hartfield has a comparatively wide acquaintance. She is not, therefore, tempted to direct her imagination toward literature (particularly since her only interest in books is their appearance on a reading list) but chooses instead to let it play with the lives of those around her. With "a disposition to think a little too well of herself" (E, 763), she likes to manoeuvre people and to feel she is controlling their destinies; she considers herself especially adept in the field of matchmaking which is, to her, "'the greatest amusement in the world!'" (E, 767) Even when she is only a spectator, she tries to take credit for influence; she boasts, for instance, of her success in promoting the match betwen Miss Taylor and Mr. Weston, in spite of Mr. Knightley's contention that "'success supposes endeavour. . . . You made a lucky guess; and that is all that can be said'" (E, 768). At their first meeting, she engages to manage Harriet's future--and Harriet herself:

> She would notice her; she would improve her; she would detach her from her bad acquaintances, and introduce her into good society; she would form her opinions and her manners. It would be an interesting, and certainly a very kind undertaking; highly becoming her own situation in life, her leisure, and powers. (E, 775)

When her plans for Harriet and Mr. Elton miscarry (because Mr. Elton is actually courting her!) she is deeply humiliated and ". . . the

sight of Harriet's tears made her think that she should never be in charity with herself again" (E, 848). Frank Churchill's rescue of Harriet from the gypsies, however, immediately sets her imagination working on another match for her protégée:

> Such an adventure as this . . . could hardly fail of suggesting certain ideas to the coldest heart and the steadiest brain. So Emma thought, at least. Could a linguist, could a grammarian, could even a mathematician have seen what she did . . . without feeling that circumstances had been at work to make them peculiarly interesting to each other? How much more must an imaginist, like herself, be on fire with speculation and foresight? (E, 966-967. My italics)

And so the comedy is enriched because, like Catherine Morland, although she realizes her errors each step of the way, she learns nothing from them. She does decide not to interfere with Harriet and Frank, but feels "there could be no harm in a scheme, a mere passive scheme" (E, 967). While taking the precaution of not mentioning names and of warning Harriet of all the difficulties, however, she cannot refrain from encouraging her by adding, "'. . . but yet, Harriet, more wonderful things have taken place: there have been matches of greater disparity'" (E, 971). Much as Emma would like to manage Jane Fairfax's life, she can only "lament that Highbury afforded no young man worthy of giving her independence--nobody that she could wish to scheme about for her" (E, 863). But her imagination is not so easily subdued. With no evidence whatever except the arrival of a piano for Jane, she conjures up an attachment between Jane and Mr. Dixon--and incautiously confides her assumption to Frank Churchill. Naturally she is distressed when she hears of Frank's long-standing engagement with Jane, but she blames them for their secrecy rather than herself for her imprudence. It is not until she

learns that Harriet's sights are set not on Frank but on Mr. Knightley--not, in fact, until she realizes the match she has always, unconsciously, wanted for herself is threatened ("How little do we know our thoughts--our reflex actions indeed, yes; but our reflex reflections!")[1]--that she finally sees herself in her true light and, at the same time, exhibits the social awareness which she has always lacked:

> With insufferable vanity had she believed herself in the secret of everybody's feelings; with unpardonable arrogance proposed _to arrange everybody's destiny_. She was proved to have been universally mistaken; and she had not quite done nothing--for she had done mischief. (_E_, 1016. My italics)

Like Catherine, after undergoing the full humiliation she has brought upon herself, she relinquishes her world of fancy for a world of fact. As she forces herself to face a lonely, dismal future--a virtually deserted Hartfield, the Westons occupied with their baby, Frank and Jane gone and, worst of all, Mr. Knightley married to Harriet--she does not allow her imagination to relieve the darkness of the prospect. The only comfort she permits herself is to be found in

> the resolution of her own better conduct, and the hope that, however inferior in spirit and gaiety might be the following and every future winter of her life to the past, it would yet find her _more rational, more acquainted with herself_, and leave her less to regret when it were gone. (_E_, 1022. My italics)

Emma no longer sees herself as a kind of _dea ex machina_. She has triumphed over her impediment to an accurate self-concept and is well on her way to a true vision of life.

The self-concepts of Catherine and Emma, faulty as they are, do not constitute nearly so great an obstacle to self-realization as does the concept of self as a romantic heroine. For one thing,

although their imaginations are out of hand, their emotions are involved to a comparatively limited degree: Catherine exhibits mainly self-induced fear while Emma's feelings are almost entirely vicarious. On the other hand, the girl who thinks of herself as a romantic heroine is a _creature_ of emotion; she, too, has an exaggerated imagination, but she uses it almost exclusively to reinforce the excessive sensibilities which she prides herself on possessing to an infinite degree. Since her emotions dominate every area of her life, the operation of her critical faculty remains at an absolute minimum. Unfortunately, her romantic fantasies center around love and marriage--the _sine qua non_ of her existence--and she thus becomes the "ideal woman" of the old society:

> Men, for whom we are told women were made, have too much occupied the thoughts of women; and this association has so entangled love with all their motives of action; and . . . having been solely employed either to prepare themselves to excite love, or actually putting their lessons in practice, they cannot live without love.[2]

Although she thinks of herself as a highly complex, sensitive creature, she is--in her emotionalism, passivity and dependence on the male--just the kind of malleable object her society wishes her to be. The obstructing characters, of course, try to impose this self-concept on all women and go out of their way to reinforce it during courtship because, as we shall see in a subsequent chapter, the entanglement of such a self-concept with the difficulties surrounding courtship results in an almost insurmountable obstacle to the establishment of a new and ideal society which is the goal of the comic action.

If a character is comic in proportion to his lack of self-knowledge, then "the romantic heroine" is the most comic of all. Her uninhibited view of herself--and we can be sure Marianne Dashwood

holds such a view, although she does not admit it so frankly--is expressed by Laura in Love and Freindship:

In my Mind, every Virtue that could adorn it was centered; it was the Rendez-vous of every good Quality and of every noble sentiment. A sensibility too tremblingly alive to every affliction of my Freinds, my Acquaintance and particularly to every affliction of my own, was my only fault, if a fault it could be called.[3]

Isabella, in Northanger Abbey, adds a further dimension to the concept:

"When once my affections are placed, it is not in the power of anything to change them. But I believe my feelings are stronger than anybody's; I am sure they are too strong for my own peace . . . ." (NA, 1116)

And Lady Catherine de Bourgh suggests a superannuated romantic heroine when she contends, "'I believe nobody feels the loss of friends so much as I do'" (PP, 357). It is obvious that the vanity (always a prime target of the comic spirit) inherent in this kind of self-deception heightens the comedy by increasing the size of the obstacle to be overcome.

In Sense and Sensibility, Colonel Brandon remarks to Elinor, "'Your sister, I understand, does not approve of second attachments,'" to which Elinor replies, "'No . . . her opinions are all romantic'" (SS, 33). We know very little of Marianne's formal education, except that she has become fond of Cowper and Scott and plays the piano rather well; certainly it has not been demanding enough to absorb her best qualities--her cleverness, eagerness and enthusiasm--and redirect them to some constructive activity. They are, instead, driven inward and transmuted into that inordinate sensibility which, as we have seen (in Chapter II), her mother values, cherishes and encourages. The extent to which the rational processes of these two women are

short-circuited by their emotions is revealed by Elinor who "knew that what Marianne and her mother conjectured one moment, they believed the next--that with them, to wish was to hope, and to hope was to expect" (_SS_, 12). To Marianne, the romantic heroine _par excellence_, her extreme sensibility is her most precious possession and she constantly underlines its rarity with great pride. She remarks that Elinor, on quitting Norland, "'cried not as I did'" (_SS_, 23) and, later, as she grieves for the dead leaves at her former home, declares, "'. . . my feelings are not often shared, not often understood. But _sometimes_ [referring to Willoughby] they are'" (_SS_, 53). To her, the strength of an emotion may be measured by the intensity of its outward expression: "the business of self-command she settled very easily; with strong affections it was impossible, with calm ones it could have no merit" (_SS_, 62). Her "romantic opinions" also place an undue stress on appearance. Because Edward Ferrars is not handsome, she is convinced he must lack the inner qualities necessary to attract Elinor: "'His eyes want all that spirit, that fire, which at once announce virtue and intelligence'" (_SS_, 10). Referring to Colonel Brandon, she asserts, "'. . . thirty-five has nothing to do with matrimony'" (_SS_, 22). And, on Elinor's suggestion that a more mature woman might not agree, she exclaims, "'A woman of seven-and-twenty . . . can never hope to feel or inspire affection again . . . .'" (_SS_, 22) She subscribes unconditionally to the romantic ideal of "togetherness": "'I could not be happy with a man whose taste did not in every point coincide with my own. He must enter into all my feelings; the same books, the same music must charm us both'" (_SS_, 10). She deplores the calmness with which Edward reads Cowper, "'those beautiful lines which have frequently almost driven me wild'" (_SS_, 10)--a revealing comment,

incidentally, on the quality of her formal education! In the best romantic tradition, she discounts Elinor's contention that wealth is a contributing factor to happiness; she is quite willing to settle for a mere "competence" and yet it turns out that her "competence" is twice the sum of Elinor's "wealth" (SS, 54). Marianne's interaction with Willoughby--a man who endorses society's concept of the "ideal woman"--will be discussed in a subsequent chapter. For present purposes it will suffice to say that their association at Barton only increases her lack of social awareness; in their complete preoccupation with each other, she is as guilty as he of "slighting too easily the forms of worldly propriety" (SS, 29). After Willoughby leaves, she thinks of no one but herself. Her indulgence of her sorrow becomes emotional exhibitionism:

> She was without any power, because she was without any desire of command over herself. . . . giving pain every moment to her mother and sisters, and forbidding all attempt at consolation from either. (SS, 49)

Even after the storm has subsided and she is temporarily refreshed by Edward's visit, her lack of "general civility" and her refusal to be more attentive to their acquaintance are still deeply disturbing to Elinor (SS, 56). En route to London, with prospects of happiness ahead, she ignores both Elinor and Mrs. Jennings and "sat in silence almost all the way, wrapt in her own meditations, and scarcely ever voluntarily speaking" (SS, 94). Until she reaches London she is a truly comic figure, not only because of her grossly inaccurate self-concept, but also because of the vanity she exhibits in her self-conscious flaunting of her sensibilities. When she begins her long process of disillusionment, however, tragic implications begin to emerge: our sympathy is evoked and we become more involved with

her than with the group around her. We *cannot* laugh at her anguish when she first confronts Willoughby or when, later, she receives his letter. (At this point we must remind ourselves that comedy and tragedy are permitted to interplay within the comic form[4] and admit that here, for a while, tragedy is predominant.) Unlike Catherine and Emma, Marianne has such a long way to go: because of her complete emotional involvement she has cut herself off from any rational contact; she has no previous experience of insight by the light of which she can retrace her steps. And Willoughby's outright rejection of her serves only to reinforce her ideal of "falling a sacrifice to an irresistible passion" (*SS*, 227). It is not until Elinor tells her of Edward's forthcoming marriage and of the distress she herself has suffered for many months that Marianne takes her first halting step toward self-knowledge: "'Oh! Elinor . . . you have made me hate myself for ever. How barbarous have I been to you!" (*SS*, 157) But, as she admits later, feeling she is the greater sufferer of the two, she still leaves to Elinor the discharge of all their social obligations. Only when she faces death during her illness does she become aware of the full extent of her self-deception:

> ". . . I saw in my own behaviour . . . nothing but a series of imprudence toward myself, and want of kindness to others. *I saw that my own feelings had prepared my sufferings*. . . . I cannot express my own abhorrence of myself. Whenever I looked towards the past, I saw some duty neglected, or some failing indulged . . . . I have laid down my plan . . . my feelings shall be governed and my temper improved." (*SS*, 206-207. My italics)

Despite the near-tragedy which befalls Marianne, however, the comic is triumphant: "Marianne Dashwood was born to an extraordinary fate. She was born to discover the falsehood of her own opinions, and to counteract, by her conduct, her most favourite maxims" (*SS*, 227).

Marianne is no longer a romantic heroine. After a particularly arduous struggle, she is able to abandon that self-concept which is the greatest impediment to a woman's self-realization.

As indicated earlier in this chapter, some of Jane Austen's comic heroines are not hindered by a false view of themselves. Elinor Dashwood, whose behaviour is consistently contrasted with that of Marianne, possesses from the start "a strength of understanding, and coolness of judgment" (SS, 3) which never forsake her and which permit her, even in the midst of her distress over Edward, to fulfil her social commitments. Because Fanny Price is so meek, she may seem to conform to the traditional concept of the ideal woman--until we remember the quiet strength of mind with which she resists pressure to act against her better judgment, either by taking part in the theatricals at Mansfield Park or by consenting to accept Henry Crawford's attentions; in direct contrast to Julia and Maria Bertram who, in spite of their apparent self-assurance, are a variation of the romantic heroine type, she is never mistaken, never deceived. Anne Elliot, who "at seven-and-twenty, thought very differently from what she had been made to think at nineteen" (P, 1226), could very easily--regretting her lost youth--indulge in the self-pity of the romantic heroine, yet shows not the slightest inclination to do so. Among the lesser comic heroines we cannot overlook Eleanor Tilney who, confined to Northanger with her tyrannical father most of the time, might be expected to resort to Cinderella-type fantasies: that she does not, is indicated by the singular lack of self-consciousness with which she is able to engage in the social functions at Bath. Jane Fairfax, whose straitened circumstances might have led her to escape into the realm of imagination, relies firmly on her

reason: parrying Frank Churchill's hints about the origin of her piano, she says--and her words are an unconscious criticism of Emma--"'Till I have a letter from Colonel Campbell . . . I can imagine nothing, with any confidence. It must be all conjecture'" E, 909-910. My italics). That the more accurate self-concepts of all these girls is due to their better education is highly probable.

Somewhere between the self-deceived and the enlightened comic heroines lies Elizabeth Bennet. Her only error seems to be an over-confidence in first impressions: she is right about almost everyone but she is totally wrong about Wickham and Darcy. That she considers this error to be of no inconsiderable magnitude is obvious from her thoughts as she reads and re-reads Darcy's letter of explanation:

"How humiliating is this discovery! . . . Had I been in love, I could not have been more wretchedly blind. But vanity, not love, has been my folly. Pleased with the preference of one, and offended by the neglect of the other, I have courted prepossession and ignorance, and driven reason away, where either were concerned. Till this moment I never knew myself." (PP, 356. My italics)

Certainly Elizabeth feels she has entertained a false self-concept! Perhaps we tend to see her as more discerning than she really is because of the quickness with which she overcomes this obstacle and the skill with which she avoids any further error. Moreover, anyone with such a delightful sense of humour (a trait unknown to the romantic heroine) cannot labour under a false self-concept for long. When, for instance, she overhears Darcy say of her, "'She is tolerable, but not handsome enough to tempt me'" (PP, 236), she is not crushed but, on the contrary, "told the story . . . with great spirit among her friends; for she had a lively, playful disposition, which delighted in anything ridiculous" (PP, 236). Even Jane is closer to the periphery of the realm of romance than Elizabeth; her sadness over

Bingley's departure induces her aunt to say to Elizabeth, "'It had better have happened to _you_, Lizzy; you would have laughed yourself out of it sooner'" (_PP_, 316). Although Mr. Bennet, as a father, leaves much to be desired, his influence on Elizabeth, in which both his strengths and his weaknesses are revealed, has enabled her to overcome any obstacle with comparative ease.

It should be pointed out that the comic heroine, in her quest for self-realization, must face a problem hardly ever encountered by the comic hero. Although he too must fight the arbitrary laws of an inflexible society and, in the process, may have to reach a greater degree of self-awareness, he is at least able to start out equipped with that society's own weapons of education and enlightenment: from the outset, he can be himself. On the other hand, the comic heroine, even if she has an adequate self-concept, is always one step removed from reality because almost nothing is known about her real, her essential nature: "what is now called the nature of women is an eminently artificial thing--the result of forced repression in some directions, unnatural stimulation in others."[5] Because their intellect has been repressed and their emotions stimulated, all women--not only the Mariannes but also the Elinors--live more in their emotions than do men. As Anne Elliot, claiming that an unhappy love affair has a more lasting effect on a woman than on a man, points out to Captain Harville:

"We live at home, quiet, confined, and our feelings prey upon us. You are forced on exertion. You have always a profession, pursuits, business of some sort or other, to take you back into the world immediately . . . ." (_P_, 1352)

That any of the comic heroines can, under the circumstances, attain and then preserve "a true over a false vision of life" is indeed remarkable. And if we tend to feel that some of them seem to overcompensate for the pull of their emotions by displaying an inordinate amount of self-control and sometimes acting more rationally than the situation warrants, it could be that we are reflecting the prejudices of a society which still looks askance at the rational woman. Perhaps we too must learn that

> the heroines of comedy are like women of the world, not necessarily heartless from being clear-sighted; they seem so to the sentimentally reared, only for the reason that they use their wits, and are not wandering vessels crying for a captain or a pilot.[6]

NOTES

[1]Samuel Butler, *The Way of All Flesh* (New York: Holt, Rinehart & Winston, 1960), p. 22.

[2]Wollstonecraft, *Rights of Woman*, p. 183.

[3]Jane Austen, "Love and Freindship," in *Minor Works*, Vol. VI of *Works*, ed. R. W. Chapman (London: Oxford Univ. Press, 1958) p. 78. All subsequent references to "Love and Freindship" will be to this edition.

[4]Langer, *Feeling and Form*, p. 334.

[5]Mill, *The Subjection of Women*, p. 49.

[6]Meredith, "*An Essay on Comedy*, p. 15.

CHAPTER V

THE ILLUSION OF INDEPENDENCE

> The general opinion of men is supposed to be, that the natural vocation of a woman is that of a wife and mother. I say, is supposed to be, because, judging from acts--from the whole of the present constitution of society--one might infer that their opinion was the direct contrary.
> --J. S. Mill, The Subjection of Women

Armed with a reasonably accurate self-concept and the happy confidence which often accompanies it, the comic heroine might be tempted to think that she can fulfil her destiny in whatever way she chooses. But, with the exception of Emma Woodhouse, there is no positive evidence that she *is* so tempted. All her life, the obstructing characters have been directing their entire efforts towards convincing her that she can find fulfilment in one role only--the role for which God and nature intended her--that of wife and mother. They would seem to protest too much. By refusing to prepare women for any other way of life, they give rise to the suspicion that they are consciously or unconsciously afraid that, if given any choice whatsoever, many women would express their deep dissatisfaction with their lot by open rebellion against or refusal to enter into the married state. As Mill points out, the exertion of such tremendous pressures to keep women in a state of bondage is a tacit admission that men do *not* believe the vocation of wife and mother is "natural" to a woman but do in fact believe the exact opposite; and the doctrine to which they actually subscribe is, "'It is necessary to society that women should marry and produce children. They will not do so unless they are

compelled. Therefore it is necessary to compel them.'"[1] The same kind of argument was used, Mill adds, to defend the practice of slavery in the American cotton fields and impressment into the British navy.[2] And if we think that the pressures to which women have been subjected were a phenomenon peculiar only to Jane Austen's and earlier societies, we should look to our own mass media and their consistent--and, incidentally, increasingly successful--efforts to persuade women to return to their "natural" role by keeping up the pretense that a certain, very special talent, a very special and wholly feminine talent, is required to make floors shine and to keep laundry white. Even today, "the feminine mystique says that the highest value and the only commitment for women is the fulfillment of their own femininity."[3]--which, of course, means giving up any claim for recognition as an individual and living only through their husbands and children. But whereas the women of today have the weapons, if they choose to use them, to combat this kind of propaganda, to the women of Jane Austen's day it represented a virtually insurmountable obstacle, with deep social, economic and intellectual implications.

Although Jane Austen's comic heroines are allowed to engage in relatively free social intercourse with other young people, their movements are almost completely restricted to the narrow, dull routine of home and neighborhood. The limited view of the world which they are bound to acquire is parodied as early as Love and Freindship: "Isabel had seen the World. She had passed 2 Years at one of the first Boarding-schools in London; had spent a fortnight in Bath and had supped one night in Southampton" (LF, 78). The same tone is maintained in Northanger Abbey when Catherine, supervised by the Allens, is "about to be launched into all the difficulties and

dangers of a six weeks' residence in Bath" (NA, 1066). But parody gives way to realism when Catherine, in Bath, unwittingly reveals to Henry Tilney the emptiness of her existence at home: "'I walk about here, and so I do there; but here I see a variety of people in every street, and there I can only go and call on Mrs. Allen'" (NA, 1104). In reply, Henry succinctly sums up the limitations imposed on most women of the day: "'What a picture of intellectual poverty! However, when you sink into this abyss again, you will have more to say. You will be able to talk of Bath, and of all that you did here'" (NA,1103). She will indeed but, ironically, the abyss to which she returns will be even deeper because by then she will have relinquished the fictional world which has formerly relieved her boredom. Eleanor Tilney's life, if anything, is more confined; apart from her occasional visits to Bath, it consists of the "hours of companionship, utility, and patient endurance" (NA, 1206) she must devote to her capricious father. Fanny Price's visit to Portsmouth, the Dashwood girls' sojourn in London with Mrs. Jennings, Elizabeth Bennet's holiday with the Gardiners--all are considered major and almost unprecedented events in the lives of the comic heroines. Persuading her husband that his mother and sisters need no financial assistance, Mrs. John Dashwood represents the attitude of her society towards the social activities of the single woman:

"They will live so cheap! Their housekeeping will be nothing at all. They will have no carriage, no horses, and hardly any servants; they will keep no company, and can have no expenses of any kind!'"
(SS, 7)

(Substantially the same argument is used today to justify lower salaries for women than for men.) And we must always remember that

Emma Woodhouse, "the heiress of thirty thousand pounds" (E, 845), is "'very, very seldom . . . ever two hours from Hartfield'" (E, 954).

Since social restrictions in themselves are rarely stringent enough to force women into marriage, the obstructing influences are always ready with their big guns--economic pressures. In Jane Austen's society, there was simply no way in which a young woman could achieve economic independence on her own. By this time, the rise of industrialism had gradually abolished the economic niche of the single woman in the household[4] just as, two hundred and fifty years earlier, the dissolution of the monasteries had closed the door to the sanctuary she had once been able to find in religious orders.[5] With no useful purpose to fulfil, with only a superficial education, and neither the training nor the opportunity for lucrative employment, the unmarried gentlewoman had now to choose between working for a pittance as a governess or accepting the status of a family dependent. Because of her almost inevitable poverty, she soon became a much-maligned figure: "the Puritan-commercial organization of society deprived her of every opportunity for productive activity, and then found fault with her because she was unproductive."[6] And so, in the eighteenth century, "the old maid" became a ridiculous if not frankly odious literary caricature:[7] Moll Flanders, reflecting Defoe's attitude, speaks of "that frightful state of life called an old maid";[8] Fielding, as evidenced in his treatment of Bridget Allworthy and Mrs. Western, saw the single woman as a farcical and completely unsympathetic figure. And the general attitude of Jane Austen's day is voiced by Harriet Smith as she says to Emma, who has just assured her she will never be like Miss Bates, "'But still, you will be an old maid--and that's so dreadful!'" (E, 814) While most of her society shared this view,

Jane Austen was the first writer to break tradition by presenting an old maid without ridicule and with compassion.[9] Miss Bates "enjoyed a most uncommon degree of popularity for a woman neither young, handsome, rich, nor married" (E, 773). Living in very reduced circumstances, devoting herself almost entirely to the care of her aged mother, yet never indulging in self-pity,

> . . . she was a happy woman, and a woman whom no one named without good-will.. . . [she] thought herself a most fortunate creature, and surrounded with blessings in such an excellent mother, and so many good neighbors and friends, and a home that wanted for nothing. (E, 773)

The underlying pathos of her situation, however, and that of all old maids like her, is evident in her gratitude to friends for their social and economic favours--and particularly in her vulnerability, because she is poor and harmless, to insults such as Emma's in the Box Hill incident. No one but Miss Bates herself, it would seem, could regard her situation with anything but pity. And yet, compared to most middle-aged single women, she _is_ fortunate. As Emma points out, "'. . . a very narrow income has a tendency to contract the mind, and sour the temper'"(E, 814). But, because of her "universal good-will and contented temper" (E, 773), this tendency is unknown to Miss Bates. And so, if our comic heroines do not capitulate to marriage, and if they become poor--a very real possibility for all of them except Emma--a life like that of Miss Bates is the _best_ they can anticipate. Of this the obstructing influences make very sure.

It is extraordinary that, with the exception of Emma, Jane Austen's comic heroines do not seem to consider, much less worry about, the alternatives to their not marrying. That their conditioning has been so successful as to convince them that they will "just naturally

marry" is hardly conceivable--particularly in the case of those who are emotionally committed to men who seem unavailable. The answer must be that their common possession of three inestimable qualities--youth and beauty and hope--has given them the illusion of freedom from a state which is too far in the future to constitute a tangible threat. We must except, of course, two of the minor comic heroines: Jane Fairfax who has to relinquish hope because she must start to earn her living now, and Charlotte Lucas who is twenty-seven and plain. These two girls realize early what the major comic heroines will, theoretically at least, have to recognize sooner or later--that the obstacles to their achieving the status of independent human beings are irremovable.

Although "brought up for educating others" (E, 860), Jane Fairfax, as we have already seen (in Chapter III) is restricted to earning her living as a governess. All she can hope for is a mere subsistence. And she is quite aware that her social and intellectual deprivations will be no less than her economic:

> With the fortitude of a devoted novitiate, she had resolved at one-and-twenty to complete the sacrifice, and retire from all the pleasures of life, of rational intercourse, equal society, peace and hope, to penance and mortification for ever. (E, 861)

Obviously, Jane has no illusions whatever about the "'governess-trade,'" which she compares with the slave-trade--"'widely different, certainly, as to the guilt of those who carry it on; but as to the greater misery of the victims, I do not know where it lies'" (E, 946). When Mrs. Elton assures her that she will be "'delightfully, honourably, and comfortably settled,'" Jane, far from deceived, replies, "'You may well class the delight, the honour, and the comfort of such

a situation together . . . they are pretty sure to be equal . . . .'" (E, 946-947) Brilliant, clear-sighted, capable, yet condemned to a life of frustration, futility and waste by a society which prohibits her realizing her truly great potential, she is the only comic heroine actively to seek independence; at the same time, before she takes her first steps toward it, she knows that any real independence for her is quite impossible.

It is understandable how economic pressures such as this could force a girl like Charlotte Lucas, for instance, into marriage. Perhaps, as the daughter of Sir William Lucas, she could not with propriety accept a position as a governess; or perhaps, and much more likely, she is unwilling to face the miseries involved, especially when she is pretty well assured they would eventually end in a dependent spinsterhood. In any event, she feels she is choosing the least of several evils in her decision to marry Mr. Collins:

> Without thinking highly either of men or of matrimony, marriage had always been her object; it was the only honourable provision for well-educated young women of small fortune, and however uncertain of giving happiness, must be *their pleasantest preservative from want*. This preservative she had now obtained; and at the age of twenty-seven, without having ever been handsome, she felt all the good luck of it. (PP, 306. My italics)

"All the good luck of it!" That Charlotte can actually believe this, knowing full well that Mr. Collins "was neither sensible nor agreeable; his society was irksome, and his attachment to her must be imaginary" (PP, 306), testifies to her extreme aversion to the alternatives. To condemn Charlotte, as we shall do in the next chapter, for compromising her sex by playing into the hands of a male egoist, is one thing; to understand her problem and that of thousands of women like her who feel they must conform in order to survive, is another.

And, in this sense, Charlotte is a realist:

"I am not romantic, you know; I never was. I ask only a comfortable home; and considering Mr. Collins's character, connections, and situation in life, I am convinced that my chance of happiness with him is as fair as most people can boast on entering the marriage state." (PP, 307)

She knows the slight degree of autonomy she will attain in a home with Mr. Collins is better--at least, better for her--than eventual dependence on relatives and no autonomy at all.

Free from the pressures which might force her into the "'governess-trade,'" an unwelcome marriage or dependence on others, Emma is the only major comic heroine who does not face a gigantic obstacle to independence. That she, who should have nothing to fear from spinsterhood, is the only one to talk about it, is rather singular. She is quite confident, of course, that a rich, full life awaits her as a single woman. As she reassures Harriet,

". . . I shall not be a poor old maid; and it is poverty only which makes celibacy contemptible to a generous public! A single woman with a very narrow income must be a ridiculous, disagreeable old maid! . . . but a single woman of good fortune is always respectable, and may be as sensible and pleasant as anybody else!" (E, 814)

Up to a point she is right: because of her wealth, the pejorative connotations of spinsterhood will not attach to her. She does not realize, however, that she is doomed to social, emotional and intellectual poverty, if she pursues a single course. Early in the novel, the barrenness of the existence which conceivably awaits her is indicated:

. . . with all her advantages, natural and domestic, she was now [after Miss Taylor's marriage] in great danger of suffering from intellectual solitude. She dearly loved her father, but he was no

companion for her. He could not meet her in conversation, rational or playful. (E, 764)

While Mr. Woodhouse lives, the conditioning of society--which decrees that the place of a single daughter is with an aged parent--will condemn her to the multiple role of nurse, guardian and companion (the same relationship, ironically, in which Miss Bates stands to her mother) and hence to the inevitable and perpetual tediousness of "many a long October and November evening" (E, 764). After his death, she will be emotionally limited to her sister's family: "'There will be enough of them, in all probability, to supply every sort of sensation that declining life can need. . . . My nephews and nieces--I shall often have a niece with me'" (E, 814). And, making no allowance for the tendency toward garrulity which is common among the middle-aged, she is sure that she will never "'bore people half so much about all the Knightleys together as she [Miss Bates] does about Jane Fairfax'" (E, 815). Worst of all, however, will be her intellectual limitations, of which she is quite unaware: "'If I know myself, Harriet, mine is an active, busy mind, with a great many independent resources; and I do not perceive why I should be more in want of employment at forty or fifty than one-and-twenty'" (E, 814). But we know she does not know herself. She has no "independent resources": she has nothing with which to amuse herself but her imagination. With the full confidence of youth, she asserts, "'Woman's usual occupations of eye, and hand, and mind, will be as open to me then as they are now . . . . If I draw less, I shall read more; if I give up music, I shall take to carpet-work'" (E, 814). Unlike Elinor Dashwood, however, she has never taken her drawing seriously: she has a portfolio of portraits but ". . . not one of them had ever been finished . . . ." (E, 787).

And, unlike Jane Fairfax, Anne Elliot and even Marianne Dashwood, she does not play the piano for her own amusement. That reading has never been one of her occupations we have already established. She is faced, literally, with the cramped world of Miss Bates which she deplores so vehemently, a world in which neighborhood visits and local gossip comprise the main interests. Her wealth will ensure material comfort but it will not provide an escape from the mass of trivialities which constitute the narrow province assigned to women. And so, even to Emma, the vision of an interesting, challenging and satisfying independence is only an illusion.

None of Jane Austen's comic heroines, then, can hope for the status of independent individuals, unhampered by the restrictions and pressures of a marriage-oriented society which scorns the "old maid" and which considers any marriage, no matter how bad, better than no marriage at all. Moreover, if they were to remain single, their fate would be worse than that of Miss Bates other than economically because most of them are intelligent enough to recognize and resent the denial of self (which Miss Bates pleasantly accepts) in their continual adaptation to the needs of others--a denial, by the way, they would have to accept in a conventional marriage. Their intelligence, then, is a potential handicap. In effect, the only type of woman who fits naturally into such a society is the pretty, limited Harriet Smith, with her great social and emotional flexibility. Unlike most of our comic heroines who, we feel, would choose to remain single if unable to marry the men of their choice, Harriet is in love with three different men in the course of a few months; as Mr. Knightley remarks, "'. . . Harriet Smith is a girl who will marry somebody

or other . . . .'" (_E_, 800) For the brilliant, capable, emotionally mature woman, there seems to be no place at all. The inevitable conclusion is that the degree of adjustment a single woman can expect to make to such a society is in inverse ratio to her abilities and intelligence. Here, again, we have something "inert or stereotyped . . . on the surface of living society . . . rigidity . . . clashing with the inner suppleness of life,"[10] which, in spite of the tragic implications, must depend on "thoughtful laughter" for its removal.

> The contrast between Mrs. Churchill's importance in the world and Jane Fairfax's struck her; one was everything, the other nothing--and she sat musing on the difference of woman's destiny . . . .
> (_E_, 997)

Despite her seemingly flippant attitude toward her own future, Emma does speak with genuine concern in the cause of unmarried women, especially if they happen to be poor. And, through Emma, Jane Austen would seem to imply that it ought to be possible for a woman to be herself, whether married or not; it ought to be possible for her to take a productive place in society and thus contribute to its regeneration other than only biologically. Miss Bates, for instance, leads a far more useful life in terms of the general good than does Mrs. Elton. If it were feasible for Charlotte Lucas, who quite frankly does not think very highly "either of men or of matrimony" (_PP_, 306), to obtain a "'comfortable home'" without the burdensome appendage of Mr. Collins or any other man, she could conceivably lead an immensely satisfying single life. (Lady Russell, a rich widow with no desire to remarry, could be an adumbration of the independent single woman Jane Austen seems to suggest; but, because Lady Russell's character is by no means fully developed, this thought

cannot be pushed too far.) By implying that the unmarried woman is not of necessity a burden on the community, Jane Austen is moving counter to the usual comic hypothesis that an "old maid" is a social outcast because she is incapable of furthering the physical regeneration of society. It is the obstructing characters themselves, she would seem to say, who are guilty of impeding the progress of society because of their denying a productive role to the single woman. For, although most women find happiness and fulfilment in their traditional role of wife and mother, many do not; many need a separate identity, and these represent an immense potential contribution to the community. Plato himself, from his usual highly tenable position, steadfastly maintained that a society which does not utilize the talents and abilities of its women is losing half its manpower. By refusing to recognize that a woman's freedom to be herself is not only in her own but also in the public interest, the obstructing characters are indeed "congregating in absurdities, planning shortsightedly, plotting dementedly . . . [and violating] the unwritten but perceptible laws binding them in consideration one to another.[11] To force all women into the same role, whether they are suited for it or not, constitutes not only a categorical denial of human rights but also a grave danger to the equilibrium of the group--an equilibrium which the comic spirit must always strive to maintain.

It is maintained, of course, by permitting the comic heroine to find self-realization within the framework of an ideal marriage. Fortunately, she is rescued from spinsterhood before she is confronted with the deprivations of the single existence which otherwise

would await her, before her daily pursuits lose their importance and savor and become irksome--before, in effect, she is really conscious of the size of the obstacle she can neither overcome nor circumvent. Otherwise, she would be so ill-equipped to meet the further obstacles inherent in courtship that she might enter into a marriage of expedience through sheer desperation--and thus, by her own hand, frustrate the purpose of the comic action. It is well indeed that she still has her illusion of independence, for

". . . it is only on the standing-ground of a happy and independent celibacy that a woman can really make a free choice in marriage. To secure this standing-ground, a pursuit is more needful than a pecuniary competence, for a life without aim or object is one which more than all others, goads a woman into accepting any chance of a change."[12]

NOTES

[1]The Subjection of Women, pp. 54-55.

[2]Ibid., p. 55.

[3]Friedan, Mystique, p. 43.

[4]Ian Watt, The Rise of the Novel: Studies in Defoe, Richardson and Fielding (Berkeley & Los Angeles: Univ. of California Press, 1962), p. 145.

[5]Needham and Utter, Pamela's Daughters, pp. 222-223.

[6]Ibid., p. 223.

[7]Watt, p. 144.

[8]Daniel Defoe, The Fortunes and Misfortunes of the Famous Moll Flanders (New York: Holt, Rinehart & Winston, 1949), p. 72.

[9]Needham and Utter, p. 241.

[10]Bergson, "Laughter," p. 89.

[11]Meredith, "An Essay on Comedy," p. 48.

[12]Fraser's Magazine, 1862, as quoted in Needham and Utter, Pamela's Daughters, p. 253.

CHAPTER VI

THE CHALLENGE OF COURTSHIP

> But I hate to hear you talking so like a fine gentleman, and as if women were all fine ladies, instead of rational creatures.
> [Mrs. Croft to Frederick Wentworth]
> --Jane Austen, Persuasion

In the comic heroine's struggle for self-realization which, in Jane Austen's society, can be found only in the right kind of marriage, the period of courtship is obviously crucial. The obstacles she must face, of course, are not new: they have shaped her education, influenced her self-concept and closed all the avenues to independence. But in the area of courtship, where men and women meet as potential marriage partners, she is no longer a passive victim. She becomes an active participant in a social rite. She is finally confronted with a choice; and on her choice depends the direction the coming generation will take, whether toward the old bondage or a new freedom. As might be expected, the obstructing influences converge in this vital area and bring to bear the full weight of their combined power. In the interests of the old, established society, they must try to force her into the traditional pattern of courtship. This she must avoid at all costs: by so doing she will not only open the way to a more ideal society but she will also expose the driving forces behind the arbitrary laws which have decreed her subjugation--male egoism and sentimentality.

Since the concept of male superiority has prevailed throughout countless generations, it is not surprising that most men remain egoists. But egoism is, of course, just another form of self-deception

which must be constantly reinforced, particularly when it is based on the fallacious assumption that physical strength presupposes mental strength. And so the energies and talents of half the human race have been diverted to this task:

> Women have served all these centuries as looking-glasses possessing the magic and delicious power of reflecting the figure of man at twice its natural size. . . . That serves to explain in part the necessity that women so often are to men. And it serves to explain how restless they are under her criticism. . . . For if she begins to tell the truth, the figure in the looking-glass shrinks; his fitness for life is diminished.[1]

Since the rational woman poses such a threat to the confidence of an egoist, it is in his own interest to prevent her evolution. He does not want a real woman but aspires to "the common male Egoist ideal of a waxwork sex"[2]--someone, some<u>thing</u> he can mould into whatever form pleases him most. (Pygmalion, as he appears in the Greek legend, could be seen as the archetypal egoist who, disliking ordinary women, sculptures out of ivory what to him is the perfect woman, and then falls in love with the artificial creature he has created. In the Shavian version, a further dimension is given to the story in that "Pygmalion" rejects the woman he has formed when she tries to assume an identity of her own.) The qualities the egoist finds especially attractive are those ascribed to the romantic heroine, particularly "naivete, dependence, and meek adoration for the 'stronger sex.'"[3] Not only has male egoism, then, prevented the development of women as individuals, but it has also "led men to form a sentimental image of [them] that is totally divorced from reality."[4]

Since these qualities which are so appealing to the egoist are not part of the natural character of a woman, she tends consciously or unconsciously to assume them. And, unfortunately, ". . . when women

conform to this stereotype they become sentimentalists too."[5] With no opportunity for a life of her own and with complete social and economic dependence on the male, however, it is extremely difficult for a woman not to adhere to the pattern which delights the source of all her amenities. Moreover, she has been conditioned since birth to make herself attractive to the male and now, when "meekness, submissiveness, and resignation of all individual will into the hands of a man [are represented] as an essential part of sexual attractiveness,"[6] she will not wish to relinquish her gains:

> Women are told from their infancy, and taught by the example of their mothers, that a little knowledge of human weakness, justly termed cunning, softness of temper, outward obedience, and a scrupulous attention to a puerile kind of propriety, will obtain for them the protection of man; and should they be beautiful, everything else is needless, for, at least, twenty years of their lives.[7]

To warn them that they are sacrificing long-term freedom for short-term favours would indeed seem futile.

And so, at this point, a common fallacy should be exposed. It is too often assumed that, since a society which is based on the subordination of women is always male-dominated, men alone are the obstructing characters who uphold the "absurd or irrational law" which denies women's claim for recognition. On the contrary, those women who foster male egoism and sentimentalism by conforming to the unrealistic image men have prescribed for them are equally guilty: they too are accepting and perpetuating the myth of female inferiority. And "they are blind to their interests in swelling the ranks of the sentimentalists"[8], because they thus become obstacles to their own self-realization.

Closely connected with male egoism and male and female sentimentalism is the subtle reversal of male and female roles which lies at the heart of the traditional pattern of courtship. This shrewd sleight-of-hand is, of course, a derivative of the old courtly love convention to which, incidentally, most of the artificiality which pervades the relations between the sexes may be traced. In reality, it is a concerted effort on the part of the obstructing characters to keep a woman permanently inferior by placing her on a pedestal during courtship, thus making her feel temporarily superior. And so another reason why the obstacle of inadequate education is placed so firmly in the path of the comic heroine becomes apparent: unenlightened, she is much more likely to fall victim to the hoax; to welcome naïvely the gallantry in the male which gives her a false, idealized picture of herself and, consequently, makes her less likely to rebel against the passive, inferior role to which, as an object, she is being condemned for life. Even today, it takes a remarkably discerning girl to realize that a woman placed on a pedestal is, for all practical purposes, a woman treated as an inferior; that a woman's actual status varies in inverse ratio to the degree of idealization she has attained, and that the conventions of courtly love are possible only in a man's world.

That Jane Austen considers traditional courtship, with all its implications of egoism and sentimentalism, a grave threat to society and thus a legitimate target for her comic irony is obvious throughout her work. Nowhere is her awareness so succinctly exhibited, however, than in the courtship she parodies in _Pride and Prejudice_ as Mr. Collins in his "wilful self-deception" (_PP_, 297) pursues first Elizabeth Bennet and then Charlotte Lucas. With no sublety whatever with which to cloak his egoism, Mr. Collins is only too happy to

express his sentimental view of women and the combination of meekness and cunning he thinks it only correct to expect of them. After Elizabeth has unconditionally refused him three times, he smugly asserts,

". . . I know it to be the established custom of your sex to reject a man on the first application, and perhaps you have even now said as much to encourage my suit as would be consistent with *the true delicacy of the female character*." (*PP*, 297. My italics)

Nonplussed, Elizabeth can only repeat her refusal, which he knowingly translates into an effort to increase his ardor by keeping him in suspense, "'according to the practice of elegant females'" (*PP*, 297). Elizabeth then makes the straightforward plea of the anti-sentimental, clear-sighted heroine:

"I do assure you, sir, that I have no pretensions whatever to that kind of elegance which consists in tormenting a respectable man. I would rather be paid the compliment of being believed sincere. . . . Do not consider me now as *an elegant female*, intending to plague you, but as *a rational creature*, speaking the truth from her heart." (*PP*, 297. My italics)

A few days later, finally convinced of her refusal and encouraged by Charlotte's attention, he persists in following the time-honoured custom of courtship and "hasten[s] to Lucas Lodge to throw himself at her feet" (*PP*, 305). With only her material comfort in mind, Charlotte is only too willing to accept the rules of the game. She makes sure his reception "was of the most flattering kind"--seeing him approach, she "instantly set out to meet him accidentally in the lane" where "so much love and eloquence awaited her" (*PP*, 305). Since a prolonged exposure to Mr. Collins' brand of gallantry could only be irksome, she accepts him immediately, and "solely from the pure and disinterested desire of an establishment" (*PP*, 305). (Charlotte's position as a realist can be appreciated, as indicated in Chapter V, but it cannot

dispel the dissatisfaction evoked by her deliberate fostering of male egoism.) In what is little more than a vignette, Jane Austen has outlined and exposed to the light of the comic spirit "the basic insincerity in the relations between the sexes"[9] which underlies the traditional pattern of courtship and which is endlessly perpetuated by the male egoist and the female conformist. Consistently throughout her novels she emphasizes the many facets of this enormous obstacle which must be recognized, understood and eventually overcome by the comic heroine.

According to established standards, courtship usually begins with love at first sight on the part of one or both of the persons concerned. Assuming, as it does, instantaneous and complete knowledge of the other person, the idea has generally been considered exciting and romantic. In fact, however, since such knowledge can be based only on appearance, and unless a rather shaky case for intuition can be admitted, such "love" can exist only between people who are attracted to each other as objects. Jane Austen parodies this sentimental aspect of courtship as early as Love and Freindship in which Laura, immediately after meeting a young man who has merely lost his way, exclaims,

> My natural sensibility had already been greatly affected by the sufferings of the unfortunate stranger and no sooner did I first behold him, than I felt that on him the happiness or Misery of my future Life must depend. (LF, 80)

In Northanger Abbey, Isabella Thorpe confides to Catherine, "'The very first day that Morland came to us last Christmas, the very first moment I beheld him, my heart was irrevocably gone'" (NA, 1129). The depth of her emotion is placed in its proper perspective by her next

statement: "'I remember I wore my yellow gown, with my hair done up in braids . . . .'" (NA, 1129) That her "love" is only a mask for her interest in his supposed wealth is obvious when she declares, "'Had I the command of millions, were I mistress of the whole world, your brother would be my only choice'" (NA, 1129). A woman's beauty evokes much the same immediate response from a man: "Mr. Rushworth was from the first struck with the beauty of Miss Bertram, and, being inclined to marry, soon fancied himself in love" (MP, 491). Even Mr. Collins, seeking the status symbol of marriage which he can humbly present to Lady Catherine, assures Elizabeth, "'Almost as soon as I entered the house, I singled you out as the companion of my future life'" (PP, 295). Jane Austen makes it evident that people thus chosen are not loved for what they are but for what they can give.

Love at first sight is, of course, often followed by the whirlwind courtship so dear to the heart of loyal romanticists. With delicious irony, Jane Austen exposes the motives which this supposedly intoxicating relationship may disguise as, in Emma, she reveals the stages of Mr. Elton's courtship of Miss Augusta Hawkins:

> The story told well: he had not thrown himself away--*he had gained a woman of ten thousand pounds* . . . with such delightful rapidity; the first hour of introduction had been so very soon followed by distinguishing notice; the history . . . of the rise and progress of the affair was so glorious; the steps so quick, from the accidental rencontre, to the dinner at Mr. Green's, and the party at Mrs. Brown's--smiles and blushes rising in importance--with consciousness and agitation richly scattered; the lady had been so easily impressed--so sweetly disposed; had, in short, to use a most intelligent phrase, been *so very ready to have him*, that vanity and prudence were equally contented. (E, 872. My italics)

The Eltons are, perhaps, Jane Austen's best example of a pair of shrewd bargaining agents operating under the cloak of feverish romance.

With the exception of Catherine Morland who, because she is preoccupied with fictional heroines at the time, is deeply impressed by what she considers the power of Isabella's love for her brother, Jane Austen's comic heroines are perceptive enough to laugh at such travesties of courtship. But the obstacles are not always so easily recognizable. The remarkably clear-sighted Jane Fairfax, for instance, has been persuaded by Frank Churchill to consent to a secret engagement. Particularly attractive to the traditionalists, the element of secrecy is generally thought to heighten a romance; for one thing, it provides a direct link with the courtly love "ideal" and, for another, it creates a private, exclusive world into which lovers can escape from the demands of society. But Jane Austen exposes the secret engagement for what it really is--a selfish, hypocritical and anti-social relationship which brings little joy and much pain, distress and misunderstanding to the partners. Revealing the truth which underlies the romantic illusion, Jane Fairfax admits, "'I will not say that since I entered into the engagement I have not had some happy moments; but I can say, that I have never known the blessing of one tranquil hour'" (E, 1019).

Even when emotions are not seriously involved, it is extremely difficult for a woman not to be influenced to some extent by the gallantries of a conventional courtship. Because women have been made to think that their success as individuals can be rated by the degree to which men find them attractive, their vanity is bound to be vulnerable. If an engaging young man is attentive, they are flattered; if not, they are disappointed, perhaps hurt. Moreover, they tend to respond too quickly: as Jane Bennet wisely observes, "'It is very often nothing but our own vanity that deceives us. Women fancy

admiration means more than it does'" (PP, 313). All things considered, it is not surprising that two of the comic heroines, Elizabeth Bennet and Emma Woodhouse, are at one point tempted to mount the pedestal.

From the moment of their introduction, Elizabeth is favourably impressed with Wickham. And since, the first time they are in the same company, she is "the happy woman by whom he finally seated himself" (PP, 276), she soon has the opportunity of assessing and admiring the conversational skill and charming manner which captivate all who meet him. To do justice to Wickham, there is no evidence that he pursues Elizabeth as deliberately as, for instance, Henry Crawford pursues Maria Bertram in Mansfield Park; all we can lay to his debit are his singling her out a few times in company and his conscious use of his charm to prejudice her against Darcy. Preparing for the ball at Netherfield, however, Elizabeth "had dressed with more than usual care, and prepared in the highest spirits for the conquest of all that remained unsubdued of his heart" (PP, 284-285). And her disappointment, on finding him absent, is so acute that ". . . every prospect of her own was ruined for the evening . . . ." (PP, 285) Elizabeth, it would seem, is more interested in Wickham than his actions toward her warrant but, when her aunt reveals her anxieties about their obvious preference for each other, Elizabeth assures her that she is not in love with Wickham, at least not at the moment--"'I see the imprudence of it'" (PP, 318). When he transfers his attentions to Miss King, she can see him go "without material pain" for "her heart had been but slightly touched and her vanity [my italics] was satisfied with believing that she would have been his only choice, had fortune permitted it" (PP, 321). Elizabeth has adroitly jumped from the pedestal

before it could constitute a real obstacle to her.

Long before Frank Churchill's arrival in Highbury, Emma is predisposed in his favour. And, since there are so few attractive young men in the neighborhood, it is remarkable that she is not even more flattered by the unqualified attention he shows in his frequent visits to Hartfield and his eagerness in marking her "as his peculiar object" (E, 892) at such social functions as the Coles' dinner party. On his leaving for Enscombe just before the Crown Inn Ball, she feels he stops just short of making a serious declaration of love. She is sure, at least, of "his having a decidedly warm admiration, a conscious preference of herself" which, with all that had gone before, "made her think that she must be a little in love with him" (E, 922). The strength of her feeling lessens, however, as the length of his absence increases: "Emma continued to entertain no doubt of her being in love. Her ideas only varied as to the how much. At first, she thought it was a good deal; and afterwards but little" (E, 923). By the time he returns to Highbury, "her own attachment had really subsided into a mere nothing . . . ." (E, 954). And soon she is busy scheming to unite him with Harriet. She is not, however, above giving him "the admission to be gallant" (E, 987) and happily accepting the flattery he showers upon her during the Box Hill party--although she is well aware it means nothing to her. At this point she seems both pleased and amused briefly to play the role of an idealized heroine. As she upholds her side of a very obvious flirtation which, incidentally, sets her and Frank apart from the group (Emma herself remarks, "'. . . nobody speaks but ourselves . . . .'" [E, 988]), she is carried away by her flippancy almost to the point of the pertness and familiarity of which she once accused Mrs. Elton (E, 928), and quite to the point of

her unforgiveable rudeness to Miss Bates. Mr. Knightley's sharp rebuke quickly brings her to her senses, however, and much later she frankly admits to him the reason for any interest she has ever displayed in Frank Churchill:

> "I was tempted by his attentions, and *allowed myself to appear pleased*. . . . let me swell out the causes ever so ingeniously, they all center in this at last--*my vanity was flattered*, and I allowed his attentions." (*E*, 1024. My italics)

Like Elizabeth, Emma is much too clear-sighted ever to be taken in completely or for long by outward gallantry.

Only once does Jane Austen let a comic heroine seriously stumble over the obstacle of a traditional courtship. According to conventional standards, the situation is perfect. Marianne Dashwood is the lady on the pedestal, the epitome of everything a young man could possibly desire in a woman. Willoughby is the gallant lover, the kind of suitor every young girl presumably dreams of one day finding. The circumstances under which they meet--her fall, the coincidence of his passing just at that time, his insistence on carrying her home--could not be more "romantic." Immediately she is aware that "his person and air were equal to what her fancy had ever drawn for the hero of a favourite story . . . ." (*SS*, 25) A few days later she confides to Elinor, "'It is not time or opportunity that is to determine intimacy: it is disposition alone. . . . of Willoughby, my judgment has long been formed'" (*SS*, 34-35). That Willoughby shares all her tastes and feelings she has no doubt; not only does he admire the same books, but even the same passages! But then, she is so charming and so lovely that ". . . any young man of five-and-twenty must have been insensible indeed, not to become an immediate convert

to the excellence of such works, <u>however disregarded before</u>" (<u>SS</u>, 28. My italics). In every way he appears to be "all that her fancy had delineated . . . as capable of attaching her; and his behaviour declared his wishes to be in that respect as earnest as his abilities were strong" (<u>SS</u>, 29). There seems to be no doubt that he loves her with an affection as deep as her own. Apart from their obvious delight in each other, whenever they are in company they have no thought or consideration for anyone else. And, as Elizabeth Bennet at one point ironically inquires, "'Is not general incivility the very essence of love?'" (<u>PP</u>, 316) Their lack of social awareness is disturbing to Elinor who "could not be surprised at their attachment" but "only wished that it were less openly shown" (<u>SS</u>, 31). Her mother, however, who is "romantic," thinks their display of feelings is "the natural consequence of a strong affection" (<u>SS</u>, 32). For once, it would seem, Jane Austen has given us a pair of young lovers in an ideally romantic relationship.

It is not until much later, until after Marianne has nearly died through her love of Willoughby, that the ironic reality beneath the charming illusion comes to light. From the beginning, Willoughby confesses to Elinor, he had only his own selfish amusement in mind: "'. . . I endeavoured by every means in my power, to make myself pleasing to her, without any design of returning her affection'" (<u>SS</u>, 191). Since even at that time he was planning to marry a woman of fortune, he admits, "'To attach myself to your sister . . . was not a thing to be thought of . . . .'" (<u>SS</u>, 191) The crowning irony is, of course, that he never <u>did</u> come to love Marianne: explaining that he was unaware of the injury he was inflicting on her because he did not know the meaning of love, he adds,

> "But have I ever known it? Well may it be doubted; for, *had I really loved*, could I have sacrificed my feelings to vanity, to avarice? or, what is more, could I have sacrificed hers? But I have done it." (*SS*, 191. My italics)

All he admits to is that he found himself, "'by insensible degrees, sincerely fond of her'" (*SS*, 191). For Willoughby is an egoist and, therefore, capable only of self-love; Marianne's "'lovely person and interesting manners'" (*SS*, 191) which so elevate his vanity are the egoist's ideal. And by her behaviour, she joins--although perhaps unconsciously--the ranks of the female sentimentalists: "when he was present, she had no eyes for anyone else. Everything he did was right. Everything he said was clever" (*SS*, 32). Shockingly apparent is the discrepancy between the idealized status he gives her at Barton and the actual status he assigns to her in London. His letter of explanation, for instance, even when the pressures to which he was subjected when writing it are given full consideration, exhibits less kindness for her than he would show to an object, particularly such a valuable object as money. Elinor, never blinded by emotion, cannot understand how Willoughby could be

> capable of departing so far from the *appearance* of every honourable and delicate feeling--so far from *the common decorum of a gentleman*, as to send a letter so impudently cruel . . . a letter of which every line was an insult . . . . (*SS*, 108. My italics)

As Marianne's pedestal crumbles beneath her, she is indeed crushed by the forces of male egoism and sentimentality.

But not forever. Within two years, "*and with no sentiment superior to strong esteem and lively friendship*" (*SS*, 227. My italics), Marianne weds Colonel Brandon. No traditional courtship precedes their marriage; no games are played between them. She simply and

quite suddenly becomes fully aware of his long and deep attachment to her. Even more remarkable, she "found her own happiness in forming his . . . and her whole heart became in time, as much devoted to her husband, as it had once been to Willoughby" (SS, 227).

In Marianne's transition from misery to happiness, Jane Austen clarifies the relationship which she seems to believe should precede marriage. It should not be traditional courtship, which she consistently ridicules (because it frustrates the goal which underlies the comic action) and which she invariably shows as ending either unsatisfactorily or unhappily. Too often this kind of relationship is but a disguise for questionable motives; if not, it is based on an infatuation which has only the appearance of genuine affection. The so-called romantic love it pretends to exalt is at best only a glorified self-deception and, at worst, a highly destructive force, making of its victims, ". . . a pipe for fortune's finger/To sound what stop she please."[10] As an alternative, she offers a relationship based primarily on friendship and respect which gradually grows into genuine affection and eventually culminates in deep and lasting love. (Ironically, Marianne--formerly so "romantic"--is the only comic heroine who marries before the friendship and esteem she feels for her suitor have ripened into love.) Because such an honest and sincere relationship could only be degraded by artificial trappings and conventional gallantries, the actual "courtship" of the lovers consists of a simple and mutual declaration of a love which has become apparent to both, and is telescoped--like that of Colonel Brandon and Marianne--into a paragraph or two at the end of the novel.

In order to participate in such a relationship, the comic heroine must, above all, insist upon being herself and not the unreal

because idealized image of lady-love to be found in a romance. This is the reason it is so important that she achieve an accurate self-concept before she enters the period of courtship for, as Marianne would readily vouch, ". . . it must be an ill-constructed tumbling world where the hour of ignorance is made the creator of our destiny by being forced to the decisive elections upon which life's main issues hang."[11] But to be herself is no easy task in a society which almost unanimously regards her as a puppet it has conditioned to react according to plan. Consequently--and this is perhaps why heroines such as Fanny Price, Elinor Dashwood and, at times, even Anne Elliot--appear somewhat drab--her virtues tend to consist more of what she does not do than of what she does: she must not conform to the sentimental, "ideal" image the obstructing characters have placed before her and she must never resort to "feminine" guile or trickery to gain her ends. Above all, since it is virtually impossible for her to be herself unless she is seen as herself, she must not let herself be attracted to an egoist but must, instead, choose a man who is willing to treat her as a rational creature and a potential equal. She must, in effect, refuse to be everything that the society which has perpetuated her subjection has decreed she should be. Otherwise, she will never clear the obstacle of traditional courtship and enter into what, to Jane Austen, seems the ideal relationship which is the goal of the comic action and the cause for the final celebrations.

"'Now I must give one smirk, and then we may be rational again'" (NA, 1071). Thus Henry Tilney concludes a set of questions he has playfully asked Catherine Morland--ordinary questions such as, "'Have you been long in Bath, madam?'" (NA, 1070) which, exchanged by two young people on holiday, are too often charged with the counterfeit

emotion which precedes a sudden attachment. And so the quality of the relationship between Henry and Catherine is established at their first meeting. It is only fitting, of course, that the tone of a work which parodies the sentimental novel should be light; nevertheless, it is interesting that Catherine's delusions of romance never spill over into the area of courtship. Although she is immediately and favourably impressed by Henry, she is happy to let their acquaintance grow along natural lines. Unlike Isabella Thorpe, she resorts to no cunning: it does not occur to her, for instance, to try to arouse Henry's jealousy by playing off John Thorpe against him. Instead, she is miserable until she can explain to Henry the misunderstandings which have arisen through Thorpe's interest in her. During her stay at Northanger with "her two young friends" (NA, 1180. My italics), their mutual fondness increases, but never to the point of any anti-social action such as excluding Eleanor from any of their activities. Although, by this time, Catherine is in love with Henry, she tries her best not to show it; and, since Henry never indulges in conventional gallantry, she has no evidence of his attraction to her until he follows her to Fullerton. Their entire "courtship," then, takes place on a subsequent walk to the Allens', during which "she was assured of his affection; and that heart in return was solicited which, perhaps, they pretty equally knew was already his own . . . ." (NA,1202)

At one point, Charlotte Lucas says to Elizabeth Bennet, "'. . . there are very few of us who have heart enough to be really in love without encouragement'" (PP, 242). Indeed, it takes a particular kind of comic heroine to appreciate the worth of the man she loves enough to resist the temptation to belittle it because he does not seem to return to her affection. Early in their friendship, Elinor

Dashwood is convinced of "'the excellence of his [Edward Ferrars'] understanding, and his principles'" (SS, 11). She cannot help but notice, however, "a want of spirits about him, which, if it did not denote indifference, spoke a something almost as unpromising" (SS, 12-13). When he visits Barton, she is hurt by his "coldness and reserve" but, refusing to capitulate to vanity, "avoided every appearance of resentment or displeasure" (SS, 53). Edward's actions do seem peculiar, even discourteous, yet any other behaviour would amount to deception, in the light of his secret engagement to Lucy Steele. And so, when Elinor learns of this previous commitment, she is "consoled by the belief that Edward had done nothing to forfeit her esteem" (SS, 82). (It may be worth noting that a secret engagement, the result of "the youthful infatuation of nineteen" [SS, 82. My italics], stands between Elinor and Edward, and that another "romantic" attachment between Lucy and Edward's brother, based on "an earnest, an unceasing attention to self-interest" [SS, 225] on Lucy's part, eventually removes the barrier between them.) Elinor respects his position; she does not try to make him suffer by encouraging his jealousy of Colonel Brandon; and eventually she instruments Colonel Brandon's giving him the living at Delaford so that he and Lucy may be comfortably settled. During what each thinks is their last meeting before his marriage, they both exhibit admirable self-control by offering each other good wishes instead of uttering the one careless word which could easily precipitate a "romantic" parting. When eventually he is free to declare himself, his "courtship" is capsuled into one sentence:

> . . . about three hours after his arrival, he had secured his lady, engaged her mother's consent, and was not only in the rapturous profession of the lover, but in the reality of reason and truth, one of the happiest of men." (SS, 216. My italics)

Fanny Price, in Mansfield Park, loves with even less encouragement than Elinor because, although Elinor knows Edward is not in love with Lucy, Fanny must actually watch the progress of Edmund's attachment to Mary Crawford. That he has only brotherly feelings toward her (Fanny) is further evidenced by his confiding to her all the problems of his courtship. Fanny's clear-sightedness is, of course, exhibited in her adamant refusal to be affected by the gallantries of Henry Crawford: she has witnessed his pseudo-courtship of Maria Bertram and recognizes him for the supreme egoist he is. Considering her naïveté and inexperience, however, it is surprising that she is not taken in to some extent--particularly when she feels her love for Edmund is hopeless--by his sincere offers of marriage, and tempted to think, "This time it will be different." Although she cannot be praised for not attempting to make Edmund jealous, since he favours the match with Henry, she can be commended for withstanding the heavy pressures which are exerted on her from all sides and for continuing to keep her relationship with Edmund on the same friendly basis. And so, after his break with Mary, "Fanny's *friendship* was all that he had to cling to" (MP, 751. My italics). His "courtship" of her is nominal: very soon he began "to prefer soft light eyes to sparkling dark ones" (MP, 758) and, because he and Fanny have known each other so long and so well as friends,

> . . . there was nothing on the side of prudence to stop him or make his progress slow; . . . her mind, disposition, opinions, and habits wanted no half concealment, no self-deception on the present, no reliance on future improvement. Even in the midst of his late infatuation, he had acknowledged Fanny's mental superiority. What must be his sense of it now, therefore! (MP, 758)

Insofar as she continues to love with no encouragement, Anne Elliot in _Persuasion_ may be grouped with Elinor and Fanny. In the background, of course, is her youthful association with Frederick Wentworth:

> He was, at that time, a remarkably fine young man, with a great deal of intelligence, spirit, and brilliancy; and Anne an extremely pretty girl, with gentleness, modesty, taste, and feeling. . . . _They were gradually acquainted, and when acquainted, rapidly and deeply in love_. (_P_, 1225. My italics)

When she hears he will visit the Crofts at Kellynch, she is too clear-sighted to palliate the "revival of former pain" (_P_, 1227) by idly dreaming that he still loves her; she faces squarely the knowledge that, since he has long ago made his fortune and could have returned to her at any time, he must have been either "indifferent or unwilling" (_P_, 1244) to do so. At their first meeting she realizes "that to retentive feelings eight years may be little more than nothing" (_P_, 1245) but Frederick is sure that "her power with him was gone for ever" (_P_, 1246). Although they are frequently in the same social group, since Frederick is ostensibly but not too seriously courting the Musgrove girls, they meet only on the most formal footing; they are "worse than strangers, for they could never become acquainted. It was a perpetual estrangement" (_P_, 1247). Anne has no hope whatever. Deeply disturbed by the slightest word or gesture of acknowledgment on his part, she tries to steel herself to his indifference but "his cold politeness, his ceremonious grace, were worse than anything" (_P_, 1253). Her first breakthrough comes at Lyme, after she has demonstrated her capability at the time of Louisa's accident; as Frederick asks her to stay with Louisa, he speaks "with a glow, and yet a gentleness, which seemed almost restoring the past" (_P_, 1279). With this

slight encouragement, Anne might conceivably be tempted to hone her own weapons of elegance and charm with which to combat the youth and vitality of the Musgrove girls. But she does not. On their arrival at Uppercross, he asks her advice about the means of breaking the news of Louisa's accident to her parents and ". . . the remembrance of the appeal remained a pleasure to her, *as a proof of friendship*, and of deference for her judgment, a great pleasure . . . ." (*P*, 1281. My italics) When they next meet, in Bath, she is "fully sensible of his being less at ease than formerly" (*P*, 1316), but she refuses to let herself be heartened by what perhaps means nothing. Later, his comments about Louisa Musgrove's engagement to Captain Benwick, particularly his emphasis on there being "'too great a disparity, and in a point no less essential than mind'" (*P*, 1320), coupled with his surprise that Benwick could have recovered so quickly from his love for Fanny Harville, make her supremely happy:

> . . . all declared that he had a heart returning to her at least; that anger, resentment, avoidance, were no more; and that they were succeeded, not merely by *friendship and regard*, but by the tenderness of the past. . . . She could not contemplate the change as implying less. He must love her. (*P*, 1322. My italics)

Instead of encouraging Mr. Elliot's attentions (of whom she is aware that Frederick is very jealous) further to stimulate Frederick's love, or to punish him for his former neglect, she is concerned only that he know the truth. And, a few days later, discussing constancy with Captain Harville in his presence, she makes sure he knows her real feelings by avowing, "'All the privilege I claim for my own sex . . . is that of loving longest, when existence or when hope is gone'" (*P*, 1353-54). Her sincerity prompts his letter, which constitutes his "courtship." During their subsequent conversation, he reveals the reason, which had become apparent to him at Lyme, why he regards

her as so superior to other women: "Her character was now fixed on his mind as perfection itself, maintaining the loveliest medium of fortitude and gentleness . . . ." (P, 1358. My italics) With their common "maturity of mind" and "consciousness of right" (P, 1362), there is no need for courtship, only for a clarification of past events.

Perhaps the reason we tend to see Emma Woodhouse and Elizabeth Bennet as the greatest of the comic heroines is that, unlike Catherine, Elinor, Fanny and Anne, they are not partially protected from the obstacle of traditional courtship by an emotional commitment to a man who is not an egoist. And, unlike Marianne, although each has been tempted to capitulate, she has recovered from her temporary aberration before she is faced with her great moment of decision.

Considering how wrong she is about so many things, Emma is for the most part very perceptive in her view of men. She is not at all flattered, for instance, by Mr. Elton's attentions:

> Contrary to the usual course of things, Mr. Elton's wanting to pay his addresses to her had sunk him in her opinion. . . . Sighs and fine words had been given in abundance; but she could hardly devise any set of expressions, or fancy any tone of voice, *less allied with real love*. (E, 845. My italics)

And, even when she is playing with the idea of being in love with Frank Churchill, she is rational enough to reflect, "'. . . I do not look upon him to be quite the sort of man--I do not altogether build upon his steadiness or constancy'" (E, 923-924). It never occurs to her to be coquettish with Mr. Knightley and, of course, she is completely unaware of his attachment to her. "One of the few people who could see faults in Emma Woodhouse, and the only one who ever told her of them" (E, 766-777), he is so far from gallantry that he seems to be

exactly what he professes to be--"'a partial old friend'" (E, 784). Emma does not for a moment attribute his dislike of Frank Churchill to jealousy. And she herself is not jealous when Mrs. Weston suspects Mr. Knightley is interested in Jane Fairfax. In fact, there is no indication of anything but friendship on either side until the Crown Inn Ball; when Emma remarks that they are not quite so much brother and sister as to make it improper for them to dance together, Mr. Knightley gives but the slightest hint of his feeling for when he replies, "'Brother and sister! no, indeed'" (E, 964). The hint makes no impression on Emma, however, and even if it had, his severe remonstrance for her cruel behaviour to Miss Bates on Box Hill would have utterly negated it. When, however, she fears Harriet Smith may have won Mr. Knightley, "a few minutes were sufficient for making her acquainted with her own heart. . . . It darted through her with the speed of an arrow that Mr. Knightley must marry no one but herself!" (E, 1012) She realizes, for the first time, her great need of him and the extent of her debt to him:

> She had herself been first with him for many years past. She had not deserved it . . . but still, from family attachment and habit, and thorough excellence of mind, *he had loved her, and watched over her* from a girl, with an endeavour to improve her, and an anxiety for her doing right, which no other creature had at all shared. (E, 1017. My italics)

Overwhelmed by her own unworthiness, she has not to suffer long. On her assuring him, the next day, that she has never loved Frank Churchill, his declaration of love is both sincere and artless and, incidentally, gives us a glimpse of an Emma we have never seen before:

> "*I cannot make speeches, Emma* . . . . If I loved you less, I might be able to talk about it more. But you know what I am. *You hear nothing but truth from me*. I have blamed you, and lectured you, and

you have borne it as no other woman in England would have borne it. . . . God knows, I have been a very indifferent lover. But you understand me." (E, 1026. My italics)

And she does. With no wish for gallantry, with no desire to be arch or to flatter him, or to keep him in suspense, "she was his own Emma, by hand and word, when they returned into the house . . . ." (E, 1028)

Without doubt, Elizabeth Bennet has a greater temptation to yield to the obstacle of traditional courtship than any of the other comic heroines: without fortune, without expectation, she is sought by a wealthy, prominent man. His wooing, however, does not follow the traditional pattern. Far from idealizing Elizabeth, he follows his declaration of love by dwelling on "his sense of her inferiority--of its being a degradation" (PP, 345). Her refusal is based, of course, on her genuine and long-standing dislike of him: she taxes him with undue criticism of her family, with ruining Wickham and with harming Jane by persuading Bingley to leave Netherfield. And he attributes her attack to hurt pride:

"These bitter accusations might have been suppressed, had I, with greater policy, concealed my struggles, and *flattered you* into the belief of my being impelled by unqualified, unalloyed inclination; by reason, by reflection, by everything. *But disguise of every sort is my abhorrence*." (PP, 347. My italics)

While Darcy thus abnegates any claim to the status of a courtly lover, we are more interested in Elizabeth's reaction. With everything to be gained by accepting his love and overlooking his reservations--by, in fact, nothing more than a little well-directed flattery and well-disguised humility--Elizabeth still disdains to join the ranks of the female conformists. Tempted by neither his wealth nor his status, she does not equivocate in her refusal: "'. . . I had not known you a

month before I felt that you were the last man in the world whom I could ever be prevailed on to marry'" (<u>PP</u>, 347). Furthermore, she quite frankly and justifiably criticizes him for not behaving "'in a more gentlemanlike manner'" (<u>PP</u>, 347). On receiving his letter the next morning, she feels genuinely ashamed of those reproaches which were unjust; she undergoes no sudden reversal of feeling, however, but decides that, if they should meet again, she will not be so blinded by prejudice as to continue to misjudge him. Their accidental meeting at Pemberley is characterized by a different kind of relationship between them--a kind of <u>friendliness</u> which quickly takes root. To her, as well as to her aunt and uncle, he is consistently kind and gracious. Although she is eventually convinced he still loves her, she is not yet sure of her own feeling. Certainly, she no longer hates him:

> The respect created by the conviction of his valuable qualities . . . was now heightened into somewhat of a <u>friendlier</u> nature, by the testimony so highly in his favour . . . . She respected, she esteemed, she was grateful to him, she felt a real interest in his welfare; and she only wanted to know how far she wished that welfare to depend upon herself, and how far it would be for the happiness of both that she should employ the power, which her fancy told her she still possessed, of bringing on the renewal of his addresses. (<u>PP</u>, 388-389. My italics)

Only when this happy interlude is ended by the news of Lydia's elopement with Wickham (which Elizabeth frankly relates to Darcy), and in the full consciousness of the inferiority of her family which must be even more clear to him than to her, does she realize her true feeling: ". . . never had she so honestly felt that she could have loved him, as now, when all love must be vain" (<u>PP</u>, 396). Elizabeth's change of heart is the culmination of a long, slow process. Commenting on it, Jane Austen makes her most explicit statement on the respective worth

of "romantic" and "real" love:

> If _gratitude_ _and_ _esteem_ are good foundations of affection, Elizabeth's change of sentiment will be neither improbable nor faulty. But if otherwise--if the regard springing from such sources is unreasonable or unnatural, in comparison of _what_ _is_ _so_ _often_ _described_ _as_ _arising_ _on_ _a_ _first_ _interview_ _with_ _its_ _object_, _and_ _even_ _before_ _two_ _words_ _have_ _been_ _exchanged_, nothing can be said in her defence, except that she had given somewhat of a trial to the latter method in her partiality for Wickham, and that its ill success might, perhaps, authorise her to seek _the_ _other_ _less_ _interesting_ _mode_ _of_ _attachment_. (_PP_, 397. My italics)

Later, when everything is clarified, Jane asks Elizabeth how long she has loved Darcy, to which Elizabeth replies, "'It has been coming on so gradually, that I hardly know when it began'" (_PP_, 456). Elizabeth, although often mistaken about him, has always been _herself_ with Darcy: even in her distress over Lydia, she does not resort to "feminine" wiles to engage his sympathy. And it is well for her that she _does_ remain herself because Darcy, although by no means faultless, is one of the few men who do not share society's sentimental view of women. As Elizabeth points out, in what is an accurate description of the effect of the female conformist on the male who is not an egoist:

> "The fact is, that you were sick of civility, of deference, of officious attention. You were disgusted with the women who were always speaking and looking and thinking for _your_ approbation alone. I roused and interested you, because I was so unlike _them_. Had you not been really amiable, you would have hated me for it; but, in spite of the pains you took to disguise yourself, your feelings were always noble and just; and, in your heart, you thoroughly despised the persons who so assiduously courted you." (_PP_, 460)

Their essential "courtship" consists simply of Darcy's asking Elizabeth whether her feelings have undergone any change since he last approached her, and her honest and frank reply that they have altered to such an extent that she is now only too happy to accept the assurance of his love.

And so, in spite of the concerted efforts of the obstructing characters who control the old, rigid society, Jane Austen's comic heroines overcome the major obstacle to their self-realization and look forward to a marriage in which they can find fulfilment as individuals. That their success lies in their behaving as "'rational creatures'" instead of "'elegant females'" and in their being so regarded by their suitors, testifies to the wisdom of Mr. Knightley's contention: "'Mystery--finesse--how they pervert the understanding! My Emma, does not everything serve to prove more and more the beauty of *truth* and *sincerity* in all our dealings with each other?'" (*E*, 1036. My italics)

There is no evidence that Jane Austen ever allied herself with the cause of Feminism.[12] Apparently uninterested in political movements, "here was a woman about the year 1800 writing without hate, without bitterness, without fear, without protest, without preaching."[13] And yet, by ridiculing the traditional concept of courtship and by exposing it in the light of the comic spirit for what it really is--a framework within which egoism and sentimentalism, disguised by the myth of "romantic" love, can take advantage of women's ignorance and dependence and thus perpetuate the whole vicious circle of female subjugation--she exhibits ideals very close to those of the Feminists. Her methods are different but her goal is the same:

> . . . her name should be linked with that of the great Vindicator of the Rights of Women, Mary Wollstonecraft . . . the *vis comica* of the one has been as powerful an agency in their vindication as the *saeva indignatio* of the other. . . . Jane Austen and Mary Wollstonecraft were bent on the destruction of the fair sex . . . and the evolution of the rational woman.[14]

NOTES

[1]Woolf, A Room of One's Own, pp. 53-54.

[2]Meredith, The Egoist, p. 123.

[3]Lionel Stevenson, "Introduction" to The Egoist, p. ix.

[4]Ibid.

[5]Ibid.

[6]Mill, The Subjection of Women, p. 43.

[7]Wollstonecraft, Rights of Woman, pp. 49-50.

[8]Meredith, "An Essay on Comedy," p. 32.

[9]Stevenson, p. ix.

[10]Hamlet, III, ii, 75-76.

[11]Meredith, The Egoist, p. 78.

[12]A. S. Kumar, "Jane Austen--The Feminist Sensibility," Indian Journal of English Studies, III (1961), 135.

[13]Woolf, Room, p. 101.

[14]Wilson, Jane Austen, p. ix.

CHAPTER VII

MARRIAGE: THE COMIC RESOLUTION

> . . . the movement of comedy is usually a movement from one kind of society to another. At the beginning of the play the obstructing characters are in charge of the play's society. . . . The society emerging at the conclusion . . . represents, by contrast, a kind of moral norm, or pragmatically free society.
> --Northrop Frye, Anatomy of Criticism

Since comedy is concerned with society and celebrates the forces of love through which it is regenerated, it is only to be expected that most comedies end with the marriage of the hero and the heroine. Jane Austen's comedies are no exception. Having overcome her obstacles, the comic heroine is free to make the marriage of her choice. That this marriage constitutes both the resolution of the comic action and the turning point in the fortunes of the heroine is not coincidence; for the "pragmatically free society" which will form around the newly married couple is not only the goal of the comic action but also the one area in which the comic heroine can fully realize herself. In a sense, then, the society which emerges at the end of Jane Austen's comedies is different from that which takes shape at the end of most comedies--Fielding's Tom Jones and Shakespeare's Twelfth Night, for instance--the ideals of which "are seldom defined or formulated."[1] Far from being vaguely and amorphously idealistic, Jane Austen's new society, like that glimpsed at the conclusion of Meredith's The Egoist and Congreve's The Way of the World, is based firmly on the principle of the potential equality of the sexes. It is obvious that the marriage which establishes this radically different

society must indeed be remarkable.

In order that the quality and implications of this redemptive, pivotal marriage may be accurately assessed, it must be compared with the marriages entered into or approved by the members of the obstructing group which has endorsed the concept of female inferiority. As R. W. Chapman states:

> . . . the contrast between the two generations, between the ill-assorted matches contracted before the action of the novels begins and the marriage of true minds, a harmony in diversity, that she [Jane Austen] plans for her heroes and heroines, is very marked.[2]

We must conditionally except, of course, the Morlands and the elder Dashwoods who, though they have unconsciously acted on the assumption of female inferiority, have nevertheless enjoyed congenial--and therefore fairly equal--marriages. Of the actual relationship of the Woodhouses we know nothing, but can surmise much from the fact that Mr. Woodhouse is a man "whose talents could not have recommended him at any time" (_E_, 764); very wealthy, he must have married a woman considerably superior to him intellectually since, as Mr. Knightley tells us (_E_, 783), it is from her that Emma has inherited all her abilities. We have more definite information on the Sir Walter Elliots: Sir Walter's "_good looks and his rank_ had one fair claim on his attachment, since to them he must have owed a wife of very superior character to anything deserved by his own" (_P_, 1212. My italics). In _Mansfield Park_, "the greatness of the match" between the wealthy Sir Thomas Bertram and the comparatively poor but very beautiful Miss Maria Ward astounded the whole county (_MP_, 469)--and Sir Thomas has the rest of his life to contemplate with perhaps even greater astonishment the infinite stupidity and uselessness of his handsome wife. The disparity

between Mr. and Mrs. Bennet is equally obvious, and unnecessarily aggravated by Mr. Bennet's lack of tolerance and exhibition of active dislike for the woman who precipitated his youthful error:

> . . . captivated by youth and beauty, and that appearance of good humour which youth and beauty generally give, [he] had married a woman whose weak understanding and illiberal mind had very early in their marriage put an end to all real affection for her. (PP, 372. My italics)

These "ill-assorted matches" result, of course, from the tendency of the older generation to regard women as objects to be bargained for in a market where beauty, wealth and status are prime assets.

Speaking of Colonel Brandon's preference for Marianne Dashwood, Mrs. Jennings happily speculates that "it would be an excellent match for *he* was rich and *she* was handsome" (SS, 21). Mrs. Jennings speaks from first-hand knowledge. Her own daughter's marriage was apparently based on the same premise, as evidenced by Elinor's reflections on the ill-nature of Charlotte's husband:

> His temper might perhaps be a little soured by finding, like many others of his sex, that through some unaccountable bias in favour of beauty, he was the husband of a very silly woman--but she knew that this kind of blunder was too common for any sensible man to be lastingly hurt by it. (SS, 67)

Wickham is attracted to Lydia Bennet by the identical qualities which attracted her father to her mother. Mr. Rushworth marries Maria Bertram for her beauty, which she trades for "the enjoyment of a larger income than her father's, as well as . . . the house in town" (MP, 491). Mr. Collins' unrelieved unattractiveness Charlotte Lucas is willing to accept in return for the privilege of having her own home. Mr. Elton marries Miss Hawkins for her money, which she is only

too happy to exchange for status. None of these marriages, although contracted between members of the younger generation, can institute a new society. Based not on equality but on a commercial relationship between the sexes which Defoe deplores as "the disaster of the times,"[3] they do but perpetuate the old, sterile society. And if by any chance we entertain the delusion that the old society has long vanished, we should remember that even today the real reasons for which people marry do not bear too close a scrutiny, for "according to the standards of our society, a man makes a successful marriage when he hooks a pretty girl. And a woman has made a good match if she marries a successful man."[4] The old society is still very much with us.

Mary Crawford, discussing marriage with Mrs. Grant, remarks:

". . . there is not one in a hundred of either sex who is not taken in when they marry. . . . it is, of all transactions, the one in which people expect most from others, and are least honest themselves. . . . I know so many who have married in the full expectation and confidence of some one particular advantage in the connection, or accomplishment, or good quality in the person, who have found themselves entirely deceived, and been obliged to put up with exactly the reverse. What is this but a take in?" (MP, 495-496)

In case we may be slightly misled by the inclusion of one "'good quality in the person,'" we must remember that Mary says elsewhere, "'A large income is the best recipe for happiness I ever heard of'" (MP, 598). When marriage is the result of a bartering process based on appearances, it is not surprising that the participants are hoodwinked. It would be strange if they were not. For each seeks in the other only what it is to his material advantage to find, and shows only what it profits him to disclose, disguising all the rest. Only when the choice of both partners is determined by "that higher species of self-command, that just consideration of others, that knowledge of

[their] own heart[s], that principle of right" (MP, 524) which constitute the essential core of Jane Austen's value system, can it be said that happiness in marriage does not depend entirely on chance.

In the marriages which herald the new society, it is the intrinsic worth of the partners which is all-important. Wealth and status, for instance, are never decisive factors in the choice of the comic heroines. Catherine Morland gives no thought to money. Elinor Dashwood marries Edward Ferrars in the full knowledge of his disinheritance. Although Elizabeth Bennet playfully tells Jane that her love for Darcy began when she first saw Pemberley, we know that his wealth and position could not even slightly modify her original dislike of him. For Emma Woodhouse, who is wealthy in her own right, the question of money does not arise. Anne Elliot might come under fire because of her refusal, as a young girl, to marry Frederick Wentworth, but we already know her reasons and we must remember that she later disclaims vehemently against the sort of prudence which sets financial security at too high a premium. Indeed, all the comic heroines would seem to agree with Fanny Price who--not in the least tempted by Henry Crawford's wealth and position--never sways from her conviction as to "how wretched, and how unpardonable, how hopeless, and how wicked it was, to marry without affection" (MP, 665).

Even more significant, perhaps, the heroes are not unduly attracted by the beauty of the heroines--only one of whom, Marianne Dashwood, seems to have a legitimate claim to great beauty. Catherine Morland, Elinor Dashwood and Fanny Price are pretty girls but do not evoke any memorable comment on their appearance from their respective suitors. At first, Darcy finds Elizabeth only "'tolerable'" and not until he begins to admire her as a person does he notice her "'fine

eyes.'" Mr. Knightley readily admits that Emma is handsome--"'. . . I confess that I have seldom seen a face or figure more pleasing to me than hers'" (_E_, 784)--but is interested in her primarily because she promises rational companionship. At the time of Frederick Wentworth's return, Anne is "faded and thin" (_P_, 1213), to such an extent that he remarks upon her changed appearance to her sister Mary; not until he realizes that he still loves her can he say, "'. . . to my eye you could never alter'" (_P_, 1359). In marriages based on such values as these, it would be highly improbable if happiness were only a matter of chance.

> . . . there is a spot the size of a shilling at the back of the head which one can never see for oneself. It is one of the good offices that sex can discharge for sex--to describe that spot the size of a shilling at the back of the head. . . . Be truthful, one would say, and the result is bound to be amazingly interesting. Comedy is bound to be enriched.[5]

Such "good offices" are not performed in the "ill-assorted matches" of the old, rigid society. Sir Thomas, for instance, might have redirected some of Lady Bertram's attitudes; released from its bonds of selfishness, her essentially gentle nature might have softened his own harsh manners. Mr. Bennet, by strengthening his wife's weak understanding and correcting her illiberal views, might have transmuted some of her undeniable sociability into a measure of social awareness. Both women, perhaps, had they been treated more like people, could have become less like objects. According to Mill, this neglect on the part of husbands is deliberate:

> I believe that their [women's] disabilities elsewhere are only clung to in order to maintain their subordination in domestic life; because the generality of the male sex cannot yet tolerate the idea of living with an equal.[6]

Charlotte Lucas makes no attempt to modify but chooses to ignore Mr. Collins' stupidity. The Eltons, by reinforcing each other's snobbery and egoism, only enlarge the size of their respective shilling-spots. On the other hand, the partners in the marriages based on "harmony in diversity" do much to help and complement each other. Through Henry Tilney's understanding and sophistication, Catherine loses much of her naïveté. Fanny Price's clear-sightedness helps rid Edmund of his illusions. Anne Elliot is the cause of Frederick Wentworth's relinquishing his pride. Mr. Knightley redeems Emma from her over-active fancy and her dangerous flippancy; in turn, her playfulness will modify his seriousness. When Elizabeth feels she has lost Darcy, she reflects:

> It was an union that must have been to the advantage of both: by her ease and liveliness, his mind might have been softened, his manners improved; and from his judgment, information, and knowledge of the world, she must have received benefit of greater importance. (PP, 417)

Darcy admits, "'You taught me a lesson . . . . by you I was properly humbled'" (PP, 453). That this mutual give-and-take will continue is suggested by Elizabeth's checking her temptation to tease Darcy about Bingley's pliability because "she remembered that he had yet to learn to be laughed at, and it was rather too early to begin'" (PP, 455), and evidenced by his becoming, after their marriage, "the object of open pleasantry" (PP, 465). And so the virtual isolation in which the partners in the marriages condoned by the old society exist is superseded by "the perfect union, the perfect communication,"[7] between the marriage partners who meet each other on terms of equality in the new society:

> What marriage may be in the case of two persons of cultivated faculties, identical in opinions and purposes, between whom there exists that best kind of equality, similarity of powers and capacities with reciprocal superiority in them--so that each can enjoy the luxury of looking up to the other, and can have alternately the pleasure of leading and of being led in the path of development--I will not attempt to describe. . . . But I maintain, with the profoundest conviction, that this, and this only, is the ideal of marriage . . . .[8]

Comedy, always concerned with what benefits society, is indeed enriched, because the anti-social has been supplanted by the truly social.

By now it must be obvious that the most remarkable phenomenon in the marriage around which the new society forms is the quality of the husband chosen by the comic heroine. Too little has been said about him: his real worth must be assessed. That Jane Austen's men are usually seen only in relation to her women[9] is generally true, but this does not in any way diminish their status. Neither is it strange or unusual. In many comic novels, the heroine is seen only in relation to the male protagonist: she waits passively, symbolizing all the virtues of hearth and home, while he overcomes the impediments to their union. In Jane Austen's novels, in which the protagonist is a woman, the hero must stand by until she overcomes her obstacles. But he is rarely passive; on the contrary, by consistently aligning himself with her cause, he helps to lead her out of her impasse. In itself, his assistance is not unusual but, under the circumstances, it becomes highly significant because it places him, too, in opposition to the obstructing characters. Unlike most of his sex, he is neither an egoist nor a sentimentalist; he prefers a rational woman to a doll on a pedestal, and he pays all women the compliment of refusing to idealize them. Consequently, he will see his wife not as an object, a puppet who continues to play her mechanical role in a different

environment, but as an individual in her own right whose claim for recognition is valid and whose opportunity to realize herself fully is long overdue. Furthermore, he has helped to prepare her for that opportunity. Henry Tilney, for instance, commends Catherine's "teachableness of disposition" (*NA*, 1160). Edmund Bertram, "loving, guiding, protecting" Fanny since she was ten years old (*MP*, 757), and always eager "to direct her thoughts or fix her principles" (*MP*, 712) is responsible for the taste and cultivation of her adult mind. Mr. Knightley has "watched over her [Emma] from a girl, with an endeavour to improve her, and an anxiety for her doing right, which no other creature had at all shared" (*E*, 1017). That Darcy will perform the same service for Elizabeth at a more advanced level is almost certain; as Mr. Bennet remarks:

"I know that you could be neither happy nor respectable unless you truly esteemed your husband--*unless you looked up to him as a superior*. Your lively talents would place you in the greatest danger in an unequal marriage. You could scarcely escape discredit and misery." (*PP*, 458. My italics)

These men are, of course, intellectually superior to the women they marry. And perhaps this is why they are so often considered father figures--as indeed they are. Edward Ferrars and Frederick Wentworth, who marry intellectual equals, are not father figures in this particular sense, although they are in another and equally important sense. For all the comic heroines--and we must include even Elinor Dashwood and Anne Elliot--have been relegated by their society to a position of inferiority; they are not yet ready to assume the responsibility inherent in full equality with the male. Essentially, they are in the same position as subjects in a former dictatorship who must be carefully prepared to undertake the obligations central to democratic

freedom. And so the comic heroine must be trained for her new position, and by a man who treats her as a unique, rational human being with a very real potential of her own--by a man who, in effect, abjures the whole concept of female inferiority. By so doing, these men are acting against what the old society would consider their own interests for, if their actions were to become a universal law, the resulting equality of the sexes would destroy the whole myth of male superiority. It is plain, therefore, why we must never underestimate Jane Austen's heroes. Above all, as co-founders of the new, free society, they serve as the criterion for ideal citizenship in that they are prepared to sacrifice private interest for the common good.

Since "the tendency of comedy is to include as many people as possible in its final society; the blocking characters are more often reconciled or converted than simply repudiated,"[10] the social expansiveness of Jane Austen's new society is not limited to the relationship between husband and wife. Most of the obstructing characters who have, in one way or another, denied the comic heroines' claim for recognition, are reconciled and admitted. Although people like the Eltons, Sir Walter Elliot and Colonel Tilney are permitted to exist only on the periphery of the new society, none but Mrs. Norris and Mr. Wickham are categorically repudiated. Sir Thomas Bertram, Mrs. Dashwood and Lady Russell, eager to renounce the old society, are welcomed into the new.

With its explicit promise of a better life for the children of the coming generation, Jane Austen's new society is even more socially inclusive than the comic pattern demands. Not only are the heroes shown as ideal father figures; the major comic heroines (with the exception of Catherine Morland and Marianne Dashwood) are also

carefully displayed as potentially ideal parents at some point of the action. As Mr. Knightley watches Emma play with her sister's children, he remarks on her ability to handle them:

"If you were as much guided by nature in your estimate of men and women, and as little under the power of fancy and whim in your dealings with them, as you are where these children are concerned, we might always think alike." (E, 822)

"New as anything like an office of authority was to Fanny, new as it was to imagine herself capable of guiding or informing anyone" (MP, 711), she is, while in Portsmouth, a tremendous influence for good on her sister Susan:

She gave advice, advice too sound to be resisted by a good understanding, and given so mildly and considerately as not to irritate an imperfect temper, and she had the happiness of observing its good effects not unfrequently. (MP, 712)

Anne Elliot is very attached to her sister's children, "who loved her nearly as well, and respected her a great deal more than their mother" (P, 1235); as Mary herself indicates, Anne can control them much more effectively than she: "'You can make little Charles do anything; he always minds you at a word'" (P, 1244). Elinor Dashwood's "strength of understanding, and coolness of judgment, which qualified her, though only nineteen, to be the counsellor of her mother" (SS, 3), and the "'common sense, common care, common prudence'" (SS, 51) which are native to her and which she tries to persuade her mother to exercise on Marianne's behalf, unquestionably give her the stature of an ideal parent figure. If anything, Elizabeth Bennet qualifies for an even more impressive stature. Not only does she frequently join with Jane "in an endeavour to check the imprudence of Catherine and Lydia" (PP, 359) in her attempt to compensate for the deficiencies of her

parents; as we have already seen (in Chapter II) she openly criticizes her father for his neglect and implores him to accept his responsibility. Furthermore, she is deeply conscious of the unfortunate effects of mismatched parents on their children:

> . . . she had never felt so strongly as now [after her parents have permitted Lydia to go to Brighton] the disadvantages which must attend the children of so unsuitable a marriage, nor ever been so fully aware of the evils arising from so ill-judged a direction of talents . . . . (PP, 373)

And eventually she is able to help right the wrong of which she is so keenly aware; Catherine, who shares many of the faults common to her mother and Lydia, divides most of her time between Elizabeth and Jane after they are married, and "in society so superior to what she had generally known, her improvement was great. . . . she became, by proper attention and management, less irritable, less ignorant, and less insipid" (PP, 463). It becomes obvious that, while Jane Austen's heroes are already father figures in a very special sense, her comic heroines, far from child-like themselves, are potentially ideal mothers who will gain in stature as their independence as individuals is increased and encouraged by their husbands:

> To be a good mother--a woman must have sense, and that independence of mind which few women possess who are taught to depend entirely on their husbands. Meek wives are, in general, foolish mothers . . . .[11] (my italics)

We cannot help but contrast the fate of the "young olive-branch" expected by the Collinses (PP, 450) and who will have to face all the prejudices and problems of the old society which checkmated his mother, with that of the child of the new society, the ideals of which both his parents are capable of upholding.

As the social and moral significance of Jane Austen's comedy becomes increasingly manifest, it would seem that her work lies even further beyond the charge of triviality than previously indicated (in Chapter I), particularly that implicit in such a criticism as levelled by Mr. E. N. Hayes:

> . . . the objection is not to her having confined her attention to the nineteenth century gentry of England and the problems of courtship, but to her having neither the depth of mind nor the fullness of passion to extend these subjects beyond the particulars of her time to the eternal problems of mankind.[12]

By illuminating the many facets of the age-old problem of the subjugation of women, Jane Austen has certainly extended her subject to "the eternal problems" of at least one-half of mankind. And by focussing the light of the comic spirit on the resulting "basic insincerity of the relations between the sexes" which could indeed by "the canker at the very heart of our civilization. . . . spread[ing] a blight of frustration and distrust through all human activities,"[13] she would seem not only to deal with timeless problems of great importance to all men but also to demonstrate the very "depth of mind" and "fullness of passion" which Mr. Hayes accuses her of lacking. He would seem, in the first place, to be deceived by her lack of didacticism, by the "charming display of good manners"[14] with which she conducts her comic attack; and, in the second place, to so underestimate the power and the purpose of the comic form that he does not realize that "the eternal problems of mankind" are the very substance of comedy. In his rather half-hearted rebuttal, Mr. William Frost suggests this oversight:

> What her best works . . . deal with is humanity in its domestic relations--a topic likely to be of continuing interest and importance

at least as long as human beings go on living together in social contexts of one sort or another . . . .[15]

His relatively weak defence of the comic form, however, suggests that he too tends to undervalue its significance. The essential distinctions between comedy and tragedy have already been discussed (in Chapter I), but it is well to remember the existence of "a comic road to wisdom" and a comic control of life which "may be more usable, more relevant [than the tragic control] to the human condition in all its normalcy and confusion, its many unreconciled directions."[16] That "the comic action touches experience at more points than the tragic action"[17] would seem to be true almost by definition, yet we tend to ignore the implications as to the relative importance of the two art forms:

. . . which of Shakespeare's plays really shows a more profound knowledge of the hearts of fathers and children: Lear, or Henry IV, 1 and 2, and Henry V? Is not the crisis luridly overstated in Lear and met with greater insight in the figures of Henry IV, Hal, Hotspur, and Falstaff? Can we honestly claim that Shakespeare reveals more about life in the tragedy of Lear than in the conflicts between Henry and his wild son? Are not many of the problems raised in the great tragedies solved in the great comedies?[18]

With its concentration on "one aim, one passion, one conflict and ultimate defeat,"[19] tragedy has nothing whatever to do with the welfare of the group. On the other hand, "the idea of good citizenship"[20] consistently underlies the great comedies--those of Jane Austen no less than those of Aristophanes. To Jane Austen, "the idea of good citizenship" is inextricably intertwined with the principle of the potential equality of men and women which, if generally accepted, would replace the old estrangement with a new freedom of communication between husband and wife, between parent and child--a freedom which

would gradually extend to all members of the community, supplanting the old anti-social isolation with a new social inclusiveness. And so, because of her deep concern with the establishment of a "moral norm," a "pragmatically free society,"--which, she suggests, can only result when the cornerstone of the group is a marriage in which both partners meet on equal footing--she aligns herself with such figures as Meredith and Bergson who firmly believe that "comedy is a premise to civilization."[21] Consequently, in the light of her undeniable mastery of the comic form and the high purpose to which she directs it, any allegation of triviality would indeed seem myopic if not entirely invalid. For, by following the "movement from illusion to reality," the essential movement of comedy,[22] the "thoughtful laughter" Jane Austen evokes inevitably leads to the recognition of a universal truth:

> The moral regeneration of mankind will only really commence, when the most fundamental of the social relations is placed under the rule of equal justice, and when human beings learn to cultivate their strongest sympathy with an equal in rights and in cultivation.[23]

NOTES

[1]Frye, Anatomy of Criticism, p. 169.

[2]Jane Austen: Facts and Problems (Oxford: The Clarendon Press, 1949), p. 186.

[3]Moll Flanders, p. 65.

[4]John Arnett, Discussion of a Paper, "Class Mobility and Emotional Health in Some Canadian Families," read to the Canadian Political Science Association, June, 1965, by William A. Morley, Vancouver Sun, June 12, 1965, p. 5, col. 3.

[5]Woolf, A Room of One's Own, p. 136.

[6]The Subjection of Women, p. 77.

[7]S. C. Burchell, "Jane Austen: The Theme of Isolation," NCF, X (1954), 148.

[8]Mill, The Subjection of Women, p. 123.

[9]Kumar, "Jane Austen--The Feminist Sensibility," 135-136.

[10]Frye, p. 165.

[11]Wollstonecraft, Rights of Woman, p. 227.

[12]"Emma: A Dissenting Opinion," NCF, IV (1949), 8-9.

[13]Stevenson, "Introduction" to The Egoist, p. ix.

[14]Kumar, 139.

[15]"Emma: A Defense," NCF, IV (1949), 325-328.

[16]Sypher, "Appendix" to Comedy, p. 254.

[17]Ibid., p. 206.

[18]Ibid., p. 207.

[19]Langer, Feeling and Form, p. 357.

[20]Meredith, "An Essay on Comedy," p. 38.

[21]Sypher, "Introduction" to Comedy, p. xvi.

[22]Frye, p. 169.

[23]Mill, p. 123.

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