

from “Jane Austen’s Cover Story (and Its Secret Agents)” [from *The Madwoman in the Attic: The Woman Writer and the Nineteenth-Century Literary Imagination*]

[*The Madwoman in the Attic*, by Sandra M. Gilbert and Susan Gubar, has been a landmark book of feminist literary criticism since its 1979 publication. In the selection reproduced here, Gilbert and Gubar argue that, while on the surface Austen’s plots appear to reinforce notions of female subordination to men, the novels can be read more deeply as depictions of women navigating the challenges posed by patriarchal power structures. Austen, whose own writing career contradicted gender norms, thus “describes both her own dilemma and, by extension, that of all women who experience themselves as divided, caught in the contradiction between their status as human beings and their vocation as females.”]

... Austen’s propriety is most apparent in the overt lesson she sets out to teach in all of her mature novels. Aware that male superiority is far more than a fiction, she always defers to the economic, social, and political power of men as she dramatizes how and why female survival depends on gaining male approval and protection. All the heroines who reject inadequate fathers are engaged in a search for better, more sensitive men who are, nevertheless, still the representatives of authority. As in *Northanger Abbey*, the happy ending of an Austen novel occurs when the girl becomes a daughter to her husband, an older and wiser man who has been her teacher and her advisor, whose house can provide her with shelter and sustenance and at least derived status, reflected glory. Whether it be parsonage or ancestral mansion, the man’s house is where the heroine can retreat from both her parents’ inadequacies and the perils of the outside world: like Henry Tilney’s Woodston, Delaford, Pemberley, Donwell, and Thornton Lacy are spacious, beautiful places almost always supplied with the loveliest fruit trees and the prettiest prospects. Whereas becoming a man means proving or testing oneself or earning a vocation, becoming a woman means relinquishing achievement and accommodating oneself to men and the spaces they provide.

Dramatizing the necessity of female submission for female survival, Austen’s story is especially flattering to male readers because

it describes the taming not just of any woman but specifically of a rebellious, imaginative girl who is amorously mastered by a sensible man. No less than the blotter literally held over the manuscript on her writing desk, Austen's cover story of the necessity for silence and submission reinforces women's subordinate position in patriarchal culture. Interestingly, what common law called "coverture" at this time actually defined the married woman's status as suspended or "covered": "the very being or legal existence of the woman is suspended during the marriage," wrote Sir William Blackstone, "or at least is incorporated and consolidated into that of the husband: under whose wing, protection and cover, she performs everything."¹ The happiest ending envisioned by Austen, at least until her very last novel, accepts the necessity of protection and cover for heroines who wish to perform anything at all.

At the same time, however, we shall see that Austen herself "performs everything" under this cover story. As Virginia Woolf noted, for all her "infallible discretion," Austen always stimulates her readers "to supply what is not there."² A story as sexist as that of the taming of the shrew, for example, provides her with a "blotter" or socially acceptable cover for expressing her own self-division. Undoubtedly a useful acknowledgment of her own ladylike submission and her acquiescence to masculine values, this plot also allows Austen to consider her own anxiety about female assertion and expression, to dramatize her doubts about the possibility of being both a woman and a writer. She describes both her own dilemma and, by extension, that of all women who experience themselves as divided, caught in the contradiction between their status as human beings and their vocation as females.

The impropriety of female creativity first emerges as a problem in *Lady Susan*, where Austen seems divided between her delight in the vitality of a talented libertine lady and her simultaneous rejection of the sexuality and selfishness of her heroine's plots. In this first version of the taming of the shrew, Austen exposes the wicked wilfulness of Lady Susan, who gets her own way because of her "artful" (Letters 4, 13, and 17), "bewitching powers" (Letter 4), powers intimately related to her "clever" and "happy command of language" (Letter 8). Using "deep arts," Lady Susan always has a "design" (Letter 4) or "artifice" that testifies to her great "talent" (Letters 16 and 36) as a

1 Sir William Blackstone, *Commentaries of the Laws of England, Book The First* (Oxford, 1765), p. 442. [Footnotes have been modified to include full references to the material reprinted here.]

2 Virginia Woolf, "Jane Austen," *The Common Reader* (New York: Harcourt, Brace and World, 1925), pp. 142, 146.

“Mistress of Deceit” (Letter 23) who knows how to play a number of parts quite convincingly. She is the first of a series of heroines, of varying degrees of attractiveness, whose lively wit and energetic imagination make them both fascinating and frightening to their creator.

Several critics have explored how Lady Susan’s London ways are contrasted to her daughter’s love of the country, how the mother’s talkative liveliness and sexuality are balanced against the daughter’s silence and chastity, how art is opposed to nature.¹ But, if Lady Susan is energetic in her pursuit of pleasure, her daughter is quite vapid and weak; indeed, she seems far more socialized into passivity than a fit representative of nature would be. Actually she is only necessary to emphasize Lady Susan’s unattractiveness—her cruelty to her daughter—which can best be viewed as Austen’s reflex to suppress her interest in such wilful sorts of women. For the relationship between Lady Susan and Frederica is not unlike that between the crafty Queen and her angelic step daughter, Snow White: Lady Susan seems almost obsessed with hatred of her daughter, who represents an extension of her own self, a projection of her own inescapable femininity which she tries to destroy or transcend even at the risk of the social ostracism she must inevitably incur at the end of the novel. These two, mother and daughter, reappear transformed in the mature novels into sisters, sometimes because Austen wishes to consider how they embody available options that are in some ways equally attractive yet mutually exclusive, sometimes because she seeks to illustrate how these two divided aspects of the self can be integrated.

In *Sense and Sensibility* (1811), as most readers of the novel have noted, Marianne Dashwood’s sensibility links her to the Romantic imagination. Repeatedly described as fanciful, imaginative, emotionally responsive, and receptive to the natural beauty of trees and the aesthetic beauties of Cowper, Marianne is extremely sensitive to language, repelled by clichés, and impatient with the polite lies of civility. Although quite different from Lady Susan, she too allows her lively affections to involve her in an improper amorous involvement, and her indiscreet behavior is contrasted with that of her sister Elinor, who is silent, reserved, and eminently proper. If the imagination is linked with Machiavellian evil in *Lady Susan*, it is closely associated with self-destruction in *Sense and Sensibility*: when Elinor and Marianne have to confront the same painful situation—betrayal by

1 A. Walton Litz, *Jane Austen: A Study of Her Artistic Development* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1965), p. 43, and Margaret Drabble, “Introduction,” *Lady Susan / The Watsons / Sanditon* (London: Penguin, 1974), pp. 13–14.

the men they deemed future husbands—Elinor's stoical self-restraint is the strength born of her good sense while Marianne's indulgence in sensibility almost causes her own death, the unfettered play of her imagination seeming to result in a terrible fever that represents how imaginative women are infected and sickened by their dreams.

Marianne's youthful enthusiasm is very attractive, and the reader, like Colonel Brandon, is tempted to find "something so amiable in the prejudices of a young mind, that one is sorry to see them give way to the reception of more general opinions" (I, chap. 11). But give way they apparently must and evidently do. Eagerness of fancy is a passion like any other, perhaps more imprudent because it is not recognized as such. As delightful as it might first seem, moreover, it is always shown to be a sign of immaturity, of a refusal to submit. Finally this is unbecoming and unproductive in women, who must exert their inner resources for pliancy, elasticity of spirit, and accommodation. *Sense and Sensibility* is an especially painful novel to read because Austen herself seems caught between her attraction to Marianne's sincerity and spontaneity, while at the same identifying with the civil falsehoods and the reserved, polite silences of Elinor, whose art is fittingly portrayed as the painting of screens.

Pride and Prejudice (1813) continues to associate the perils of the imagination with the pitfalls of selfhood, sexuality, and assertion. Elizabeth Bennet is her father's favorite daughter because she has inherited his wit. She is talkative, satirical, quick at interpreting appearances and articulating her judgments, and so she too is contrasted to a sensible silent sister, Jane, who is quiet, unwilling to express her needs or desires, supportive of all and critical of none. While moral Jane remains an invalid, captive at the Bingleys, her satirical sister Elizabeth walks two miles along muddy roads to help nurse her. While Jane visits the Gardners only to remain inside their house waiting hopelessly for the visitors she wishes to receive, Elizabeth travels to the Collins' establishment where she visits Lady Catherine. While Jane remains at home, lovesick but uncomplaining, Elizabeth accompanies the Gardeners on a walking tour of Derbyshire. Jane's docility, gentleness, and benevolence are remarkable, for she suffers silently throughout the entire plot, until she is finally set free by her Prince Charming. In these respects, she adumbrates Jane Fairfax of Austen's *Emma* (1816), another Jane who is totally passive and quiet, despite the fact that she is repeatedly humiliated by her lover. Indeed, although Jane Fairfax is eventually driven to a gesture of revolt—the pathetic decision to endure the "slave-trade" of becoming a governess rather than wait for Frank Churchill to become her husband—she is a paragon of submissive politeness and patience throughout

her ordeal, so much so that, “wrapped up in a cloak of politeness,” she was to Emma and even to Mr. Knightley “disgustingly ... suspiciously, reserved” (II, chap. 2).

Just as Jane Bennet forecasts the role and character of Jane Fairfax, Elizabeth Bennet shares much with Emma who, perhaps more than all the others, demonstrates Austen’s ambivalence about her imaginative powers, since she created in Emma a heroine whom she suspected no one but herself would like.¹ A player of word games, a painter of portraits and a spinner of tales, Emma is clearly an avatar of Austen the artist. And more than all the other playful, lively girls, Emma reminds us that the witty woman is responding to her own confining situation with words that become her weapon, a defense against banality, a way of at least *seeming* to control her life. Like Austen, Emma has at her disposal worn-out, hackneyed stories of romance that she is smart enough to resist in her own life. If Emma is an artist who manipulates people as if they were characters in her own stories, Austen emphasizes not only the immorality of this activity, but its cause or motivation: except for placating her father, Emma has nothing to do. Given her intelligence and imagination, her impatient attempts to transform a mundane reality are completely understandable.

Emma and her friends believe her capable of answering questions which puzzle less quick and assured girls, an ability shown to be necessary in a world of professions and falsehoods, puzzles, charades, and riddles. But word games deceive especially those players who think they have discovered the hidden meanings, and Emma misinterprets every riddle. Most of the letters in the novel contain “nothing but truth, though there might be some truths not told” (II, chap. 2). Because readiness to talk frequently masks reticence to communicate, the vast majority of conversations involve characters who not only remain unaffected by dialogue, but barely hear each other talking: Isabella, Miss Bates and Mr. Woodhouse, Mrs. Elton and Mr. Weston are participating in simultaneous soliloquies. The civil falsehoods that keep society running make each character a riddle to the others, a polite puzzle. With professions of openness Frank Churchill has been keeping a secret that threatens to embarrass and pain both Emma and Jane Fairfax. Emma discovers the ambiguous nature of discourse that mystifies, withholds, coerces, and lies as much as it reveals.

Yet Austen could not punish her more thoroughly than she does, and in this respect too Emma resembles the other imaginative girls.

1 James Edward Austen-Leigh, *Memoir of Jane Austen*, ed. R.W. Chapman (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1967), p. 157.

For all these heroines are mortified, humiliated, even bullied into sense. Austen's heavy attack on Emma, for instance, depends on the abject failure of the girl's wit. The very brilliant and assertive playfulness that initially marks her as a heroine is finally criticized on the grounds that it is self-deluding. Unable to imagine her visions into reality, she finds that she has all along been manipulated as a character in someone else's fiction. Through Emma, Austen is confronting the inadequacy of fiction and the pain of the "imaginist" who encounters the relentless recalcitrance of the world in which she lives, but she is also exposing the vulnerable delusions that Emma shares with Catherine Morland before the latter learns that she has no story to tell. Not only does the female artist fail, then, her efforts are condemned as tyrannical and coercive. Emma feels great self-loathing when she discovers how blind she has been: she is "ashamed of every sensation but the one revealed to her—her affection for Mr. Knightley—Every other part of her mind was disgusting" (III, chap. 2).

Although Emma is the center of Austen's fiction, what she has to learn is her commonality with Jane Fairfax, her vulnerability as a female. Like the antithetical sisters we have discussed, Jane Fairfax and Emma are doubles. Since they are the most accomplished girls in Highbury, exactly the same age, suitable companions, the fact that they are not friends is in itself quite significant. Emma even believes at times that her dislike for Jane is caused by her seeing in Jane "the really accomplished young woman which she wanted to be thought herself" (II, chap. 2). In fact, she has to succumb to Jane's fate, to *become* her double through the realization that she too has been manipulated as a pawn in Frank Churchill's game. The seriousness of Emma's assertive playfulness is made clear when she behaves rudely, making uncivil remarks at Box Hill, when she talks indiscreetly, unwittingly encouraging the advances of Mr. Elton, and when she allows her imagination to indulge in rather lewd suppositions about the possible sexual intrigues of Jane Fairfax and a married man. In other words, Emma's imagination has led her to the sin of being unladylike, and her complete mortification is a prelude to submission as she becomes a friend of Jane Fairfax, at one with her too in her realization of her own powerlessness. In this respect, Mr. Elton's recitation of a well-known riddle seems ominous:

My first doth affliction denote,
Which my second is destin'd to feel
And my whole is the best antidote
That affliction to soften and heal.— [I, chap. 9]

For if the answer is woe/man, then in the process of growing up female Emma must be initiated into a secondary role of service and silence.

Similarly, in *Northanger Abbey* Catherine Morland experiences “the liberty which her imagination had dared to take” as a folly which makes her feel that “She hated herself more than she could express” (II, chap. 10) so that she too is reduced to “silence and sadness” (II, chap. 15). Although Marianne Dashwood’s sister had admitted that “thirty-five and seventeen had better not have anything to do with matrimony together” (I, chap. 8), Marianne allows herself at the end to be given away to Colonel Brandon as a “reward” (III, chap. 14) for his virtuous constancy. At nineteen she finds herself “submitting to new attachments, entering on new duties” (III, chap. 14). “With such a confederacy against her,” the narrator asks, “what else could she do?” Even Elizabeth Bennet, who had “prided” herself on her “discernment,” finds that she had never known even herself (II, chap. 13). When “her anger was turned against herself” (II, chap. 14), Elizabeth realizes that “she had been blind, partial, prejudiced, absurd” (II, chap. 13). Significantly, “she was humbled, she was grieved; she repented, though *she hardly knew of what*” (III, chap. 8; italics ours).

All of these girls learn the necessity of curbing their tongues: Marianne is silent when she learns submission and even when “a thousand inquiries sprung up from her heart ... she dared not urge one” (III, chap. 10). When she finds that “For herself she was humbled; but she was proud of him” (III, chap. 10), Elizabeth Bennet displays her maturity by her modest reticence: not only does she refrain from telling both her parents about her feelings for Mr. Darcy, she never tells Jane about Mrs. Gardiner’s letter or about her lover’s role in persuading Mr. Bingley not to propose. Whereas before she had scorned Mr. Collins’s imputation that ladies never say what they mean, at the end of *Pride and Prejudice* Elizabeth refuses to answer Lady Catherine and lies to her mother about the motives for that lady’s visit. Furthermore, Elizabeth checks herself with Mr. Darcy, remembering “that he had yet to learn to be laughed at, and it was rather too early to begin” (III, chap. 16).

Emma also refrains from communicating with both Mrs. Elton and Jane Fairfax when she learns to behave discreetly. She manages to keep Harriet’s secret even when Mr. Knightley proposes to her. “What did she say?” the narrator coyly asks. “Just what she ought, of course. A lady always does” (III, chap. 13). And at this point the novelist indicates her own ladylike discretion as she too refrains from detailing the personal scene explicitly. The polite talk of ladies, as Robin Lakoff has shown, is devised “to prevent the expression of

strong statements,”¹ but such politeness commits both author and heroine alike to their resolve “of being humble and discreet and repressing imagination” (I, chap. 17). The novelist who has been fascinated with double-talk from the very beginning of her writing career sees the silences, evasions, and lies of women as an inescapable sign of their requisite sense of doubleness.

Austen’s self-division—her fascination with the imagination and her anxiety that it is unfeminine—is part of her consciousness of the unique dilemma of all women, who must acquiesce in their status as objects after an adolescence in which they experience themselves as free agents. Simone de Beauvoir expresses the question asked by all Austen’s heroines: “if I can accomplish my destiny only as the *Other*, how shall I give up my Ego?”² Like Emma, Austen’s heroines are made to view their adolescent eroticism, their imaginative and physical activity, as an outgrown vitality incompatible with womanly restraint and survival: “how improperly had she been acting. . . . How inconsiderate, how indelicate, how irrational, how unfeeling, had been her conduct! What blindness, what madness, had led her on!” (III, chap. 11). The initiation into conscious acceptance of powerlessness is always mortifying, for it involves the fall from authority into the acceptance of one’s status as a mere character, as well as the humiliating acknowledgment on the part of the witty sister that she must become her self-denying, quiet double. Assertion, imagination, and wit are tempting forms of self-definition which encourage each of the lively heroines to think that she can master or has mastered the world, but this is proven a dangerous illusion for women who must accept the fate of being mastered, and so the heroine learns the benefits of modesty, reticence, and patience.

If we recall Sophia’s dying advice to Laura in *Love and Friendship*—“Run mad as often as you chuse; but do not faint”—it becomes clear that Austen is haunted by both these options and that she seems to feel that fainting, even if it only means playing at being dead, is a more viable solution for women who are acceptable to men only when they inhabit the glass coffin of silence, stillness, secondariness. At the same time, however, Austen never renounces the subjectivity of what her heroines term their own “madness” until the end of each of their stories. The complementarity of the lively and the quiet sisters, moreover, suggests that these two inadequate responses to the female situation are inseparable. We have already seen that Marianne Dashwood’s situation when she is betrayed by the man she considers

1 Robin Lakoff, *Language and Woman’s Place* (New York: Harper Colophon, 1975), p. 19.

2 Simone de Beauvoir, *The Second Sex* (New York: Knopf, 1953), p. 315.

her fiancé is quite similar to her sister's, and many critics have shown that Elinor has a great deal of sensibility, while Marianne has some sense.¹ Certainly Elizabeth and Jane Bennet, like Emma Woodhouse and Jane Fairfax, are confronted with similar dilemmas even as they eventually reach similar strategies for survival. In consistently drawing our attention to the friendship and reciprocity between sisters, Austen holds out the hope that maturity can bring women consciousness of self as subject and object.

Although all women may be, as she is, split between the conflicting desire for assertion in the world and retreat into the security of the home—speech and silence, independence and dependency—Austen implies that this psychic conflict can be resolved. Because the relationship between personal identity and social role is so problematic for women, the emerging self can only survive with a sustained double vision. As Austen's admirers have always appreciated, she does write out accommodations, even when admitting their cost: since the polarities of fainting and going mad are extremes that tempt but destroy women, Austen describes how it is possible for a kind of dialectic of self-consciousness to emerge. While this aspect of female consciousness has driven many women to schizophrenia, Austen's heroines live and flourish *because* of their contradictory projections. When the heroines are able to live Christian lives, doing unto others as they would be done, the daughters are ready to become wives. Self-consciousness liberates them from the self, enabling them to be exquisitely sensitive to the needs and responses of others. This is what distinguishes them from the comic victims of Austen's wit, who are either imprisoned in officious egoism or incapacitated by lethargic indolence: for Austen selfishness and selflessness are virtually interchangeable.

Only the mature heroines can sympathize and identify with the self-important meddlers and the somnambulant valetudinarians who abound in Austen's novels. But their maturity implies a fallen world and the continual possibility, indeed the necessity, of self-division, duplicity, and double-talk. As the narrator of *Emma* explains, "Seldom, very seldom, does complete truth belong to any human disclosure; seldom can it happen that something is not a little disguised or a little mistaken" (III, chap. 13). Using silence as a means of manipulation, passivity as a tactic to gain power, submission as a means of attaining the only control available to them, the heroines *seem* to

1 See, for example, the most recent presentation of this argument by Everett Zimmerman, "Admiring Pope no more than is Proper: *Sense and Sensibility*," in *Jane Austen: Bicentenary Essays*, ed. John Halperin (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1975), pp. 112–22.

submit as they get what they both want and need. On the one hand, this process and its accompanying sense of doubleness is psychologically and ethically beneficial, even a boon to women who are raised by it to real heroism. On the other hand, it is a painful degradation for heroines immersed or immured in what de Beauvoir would call their own "alterity."

The mortifications of Emma, Elizabeth, and Marianne are, then, the necessary accompaniment to the surrender of self-responsibility and definition. While Marianne Brandon, Elizabeth Darcy, and Emma Knightley never exist except in the slightly malevolent futurity of all happily-ever-afters, surely they would have learned the intricate gestures of subordination. And in *Mansfield Park* (1814), where Austen examines most carefully the price of doubleness, the mature author dramatizes how the psychic split so common in women can explode into full-scale fragmentation when reintegration becomes impossible. Nowhere in her fiction is the conflict between self and other portrayed with more sensitivity to the possibility of the personality fragmenting schizophrenically than in this novel in which Austen seems the most conflicted about her own talents.

Fanny Price and Mary Crawford enact what has developed into a familiar conflict in Austen's fiction. Fanny loves the country, where she lives quietly and contentedly, conservative in her tastes, revering old buildings and trees, and acquiescent in her behavior, submitting to indignities from every member of the household with patient humility. But "what was tranquillity and comfort to Fanny was tediousness and vexation to Mary" (II, chap. 11), because differences of disposition, habit, and circumstance make the latter a talented and restless girl, a harpist, a superb card player, and a witty conversationalist capable of parody and puns. In the famous play episode the two are most obviously contrasted: exemplary Fanny refuses to play a part, deeming the theatrical improper in Sir Bertram's absence, while Mary enters into the rehearsals with vivacity and anticipation of the performance precisely because it gives her the opportunity to dramatize, under the cover of the written script, her own amorous feelings toward Edmund. This use of art links Mary to Austen in a way further corroborated by biographical accounts of Austen's delight as a girl in such home theatricals. While many critics agree that Austen sets out to celebrate Fanny's responsiveness to nature,¹ in fact it is

1 Fanny Price's love for *Mansfield Park* as a place of peace and tranquility is discussed by Tony Tanner, "Jane Austen and 'The Quiet Thing,'" in *Critical Essays on Jane Austen*, ed. B.C. Southam (New York: Barnes and Noble, 1968), pp. 136–61. See also Alistair M. Duckworth, *The Improvement of the Estate* (Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University Press, 1971), pp. 71–80.

Mary who most resembles her creator in seeing “inanimate nature, with little observation; her attention was all for men and women, her talents for the light and lively” (I, chap. 8).

In spite of their antithetical responses, Mary and Fanny, like the other “sisters” in Austen’s fiction, have much in common. Both are visitors in the country and virtually parentless outsiders at Mansfield Park. Both have disreputable family histories which they seek to escape in part through their contact with the Bertram household. Both are loving sisters to brothers very much in need of their counsel and support. Both are relatively poor, dependent on male relatives for financial security. While Mary rides Fanny’s horse, Fanny wears what she thinks is one of Mary’s necklaces. While Fanny loves to hear Mary’s music, Mary consistently seeks out Fanny’s advice. They are the only two young people aware that Henry is flirting outrageously with both Bertram sisters and thereby creating terrible jealousies. Both see Rushworth as the fool that he is, both are aware of the potential impropriety of the play, and both are in love with Edmund Bertram. Indeed, each seems incomplete because she lacks precisely the qualities so fully embodied by the other: thus, Fanny seems constrained, lacking nerve and will, while Mary is insensitive to the needs and feelings of her friends; one is too silent, the other too talkative.

Perhaps Fanny does learn enough from Mary to become a true Austen heroine. Not only does she “come out” at a dance in her honor, but she does so in a state “nearly approaching high spirits” (II, chap. 10). She rejects the attempts at persuasion made by Sir Thomas and he accuses her of “wilfulness of temper, self-conceit, and ... independence of spirit” (III, chap. I). In defending herself against the unwelcome addresses of Henry Crawford, Fanny also speaks more, and more angrily, than she ever has before. Finally, she does liberate herself from the need for Edmund’s approval, specifically when she questions his authority and becomes “vexed into displeasure, and anger, against Edmund” (III, chap. 8). Recently, two feminist critics have persuasively argued that, when Fanny refuses to marry for social advantage, she becomes the moral model for all the other characters, challenging their social system and exposing its flimsy values.¹ And certainly Fanny does become a kind of authority figure for her younger sister Susan, whom she eventually liberates from the noisy confinement of the Portsmouth household.

1 Irene Tayler and Gina Luria, “Gender and Genre: Women in British Romantic Literature,” in *What Manner of Woman: Essays on English and American Life and Literature*, ed. Marlene Springer (New York: New York University Press, 1977), p. 113.

Yet, trapped in angelic reserve, Fanny can never assert or enliven herself except in extreme situations where she only succeeds through passive resistance. A model of domestic virtue—"dependent, helpless, friendless, neglected, forgotten" (II, chap. 7)—she resembles Snow White not only in her passivity but in her invalid deathliness, her immobility, her pale purity. And Austen is careful to show us that Fanny can only assert herself through silence, reserve, recalcitrance, and even cunning. Since, as Leo Bersani has argued, "non-being is the ultimate prudence in the world of *Mansfield Park*,"¹ Fanny is destined to become the next Lady Bertram, following the example of Sir Thomas's corpse-like wife. With purity that seems prudish and reserve bordering on hypocrisy, Fanny is far less likeable than Austen's other heroines: as Frank Churchill comments of Jane Fairfax, "There is safety in reserve, but no attraction" (II, chap. 6). Obedience, tears, pallor, and martyrdom are effective but not especially endearing methods of survival, in part because one senses some pride in Fanny's self-abasement.

If Fanny Price seems unable fully to actualize herself as an authentic subject, Mary Crawford fails to admit her contingency. Because of this, like the Queen who insists on telling and living her own lively stories, she is exorcised from *Mansfield Park*, both the place and the plot, in a manner that dramatizes Austen's obsessive anxiety over Mary's particular brand of impropriety—her audacious speech. When Mary's liberty deteriorates into license and her self-actualization into selfishness, Edmund can only defend her by claiming that "She does not *think* evil, but she speaks it—speaks it in playfulness—" and he admits this means "the mind itself was tainted" (II, chap. 9). Although Mary's only crimes do, in fact, seem to be verbal, we are told repeatedly that her mind has been "led astray and bewildered, and without any suspicion of being so; darkened, yet fancying itself light" (III, chap. 6). Because she would excuse as "folly" what both Fanny and Edmund term "evil," her *language* gives away her immodesty, her "blunted delicacy" (III, chap. 16). Edmund says in horror, "No reluctance, no horror, no feminine—shall I say? no modest loathings!" (III, chap. 16). It is, significantly, "the manner in which she spoke" (III, chap. 16) that gives the greatest offense and determines Edmund's final rejection.

When, during the episode of the theatricals, Fanny silently plays the role of the angel by refusing to play, Mary Crawford metamorphoses

1 Leo Bersani, *A Future for Astyanax* (Boston: Little, Brown, 1976), p. 77. That Fanny disavows the role of angel assigned her by Henry Crawford as "an office of high responsibility" (347) is no contradiction, for her very disavowal certifies her exemplary, Christian humility.

into a siren as she coquettishly persuades Edmund to participate in the very theatricals he initially condemned as improper. Fanny knows that in part her own reticence is caused by fear of exposing herself, but this does not stop her from feeling extremely jealous of Mary, not only because Mary is a fine actress but because she has chosen to play a part that allows her to express her otherwise silent opposition to Edmund's choice of a clerical profession. Heretical, worldly, cynical in her disdain for the institutions of the Church, Mary is a damned Eve who offers to seduce prelapsarian Edmund Bertram in the garden of the green room, when the father is away on a business trip, and she almost succeeds, at least until the absent father reappears to burn all the scripts, to repress this libidinal outbreak in paradise and call for music which "helped conceal the want of real harmony" (II, chap. 2). Since the rehearsals have brought nothing but restlessness, rivalry, vexation, pettiness, and sexual license, *Lover's Vows* illustrates Austen's belief that self-expression and artistry are dangerously attractive precisely because they liberate actors from the rules, roles, social obligations, and familial bonds of every day life.¹

Mary's seductive allure is the same as her brother Henry's. He is the best actor, both on and off the stage, because he has the ability to be "every thing to every body" (II, chap. 13). But he can "do nothing without a mixture of evil" (II, chap. 13). Attractive precisely because of his protean ability to change himself into a number of attractive personages, Henry is an impersonator who degenerates into an imposter, not unlike Frank Churchill, who is also "acting a part or making a parade of insincere professions" (*E*, II, chap. 6). Indeed, Henry is a good representative of the kind of young man with whom each of the heroines falls briefly in love before she is finally disillusioned: Willoughby, Wickham, Frank Churchill, Henry Crawford, and Mr. Elliot are eminently agreeable because they are self-changers, self-shapers. In many respects they are attractive to the heroines because somehow they act as doubles: younger men who must learn to please, narcissists, they experience traditionally "feminine" powerlessness and they are therefore especially interested in becoming the creators of themselves.

In *Mansfield Park*, however, Austen defines this self-creating spirit as a "bewitching" (II, chap. 13) "infection" (II, chap. 1), and the epidemic restlessness represented by the Crawfords is seen as far more

1 Lionel Trilling's influential essay, "*Mansfield Park*," in *Jane Austen: A Collection of Critical Essays*, ed. Ian Watt (Englewood Cliffs, N.J.: Prentice-Hall, 1963), pp. 124–40, has been restated most effectively by Stuart M. Tave, *Some Words of Jane Austen* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1973), pp. 158–204.

dangerous than Fanny's invalid passivity. Fanny's rejection of Henry represents, then, her censure of his presumptuous attempt to author his own life, his past history, and his present fictional identities. Self-divided, indulging his passions, alienated from authority, full of ambition, and seeking revenge for past injuries, the false young man verges on the Satanic. While he manages to thrive in his own fashion, finding a suitable lover or wife and generally making his fortune in the process, his way cannot be the Austen heroine's. Although his crimes are real actions while hers are purely rhetorical, she is more completely censured because her liberties more seriously defy her social role.

When her Adam refuses to taste the fruit offered by Mary Crawford, Austen follows the example of Samuel Richardson in her favorite of his novels, *Sir Charles Grandison*, where Harriet draws a complimentary analogy between Sir Charles and Adam: the former would not have been so compliant as to taste the forbidden fruit; instead he would have left it to God to annihilate the first Eve and supply a second.¹ Just as Fanny sees through the play actor, Henry Crawford, to the role-player and hypocrite, Edmund finally recognizes Mary's playfulness as her refusal to submit to the categories of her culture, a revolt that is both attractive and immoral because it gains her the freedom to become whatever she likes, even to choose not to submit to one identity but to try out a variety of voices. For all these reasons, she has to be annihilated. But, unlike Richardson, Austen in destroying this unrepentant, imaginative, and assertive girl is demonstrating her own self-division.

In all six of Austen's novels women who are refused the means of self-definition are shown to be fatally drawn to the dangerous delights of impersonation and pretense. But Austen's profession depends on just these disguises. What else, if not impersonation, is characterization? What is plot, if not pretense? In all the novels, the narrator's voice is witty, assertive, spirited, independent, even (as D.W. Harding has shown) arrogant and nasty.² Poised between the subjectivity of lyric and the objectivity of drama, the novel furnishes Austen with a unique opportunity: she can create Mary Crawford's witty letters or Emma's brilliant retorts, even while rejecting them as improper; furthermore, she can reprove as indecent in a heroine what is necessary to an author. Authorship for Austen is an escape from the very restraints she imposes on her female characters. And in this respect she seems typical, for women may have contributed so significantly

1 Samuel Richardson, *Sir Charles Grandison*, 6 vols. (Oxford: Shakespeare Head, 1931), 4:302.

2 D.W. Harding, "Regulated Hatred: An Aspect of the Work of Jane Austen," *Scrutiny* 8 (March 1940): 346-62.

to narrative fiction precisely because it effectively objectifies, even as it sustains and hides, the subjectivity of the author. Put another way, in the novels Austen questions and criticizes her own aesthetic and ironic sensibilities, noting the limits and asserting the dangers of an imagination undisciplined by the rigors of art.

Using her characters to castigate the imaginative invention that informs her own novels, Austen is involved in a contradiction that, as we have seen, she approves as the only solution available to her heroines. Just as they manage to survive only by seeming to submit, she succeeds in maintaining her double consciousness in fiction that proclaims its docility and restraint even as it uncovers the delights of assertion and rebellion. Indeed the comedy of Austen's novels explores the tensions between the freedom of her art and the dependency of her characters: while they stutter and sputter and lapse into silence and even hasten to perfect felicity, she attains a woman's language that is magnificently duplicitous. In this respect, Austen serves as a paradigm of the literary ladies who would emerge so successfully and plentifully in the nineteenth century, popular lady novelists like Rhoda Broughton, Charlotte Mary Yonge, Home Lee, and Mrs. Craik¹ who strenuously suppressed awareness of how their own professional work called into question traditional female roles. Deeply conservative as their content appears to be, however, it frequently retains traces of the original duplicity so manifest in its origin, even as it demonstrates their own exuberant evasion of the inescapable limits they prescribe for their model heroines.

Although Austen clearly escapes the House of Prose that confines her heroines by making her story out of their renunciation of story-telling, she also dwells in the freer prospects of Emily Dickinson's "Possibility" by identifying not only with her model heroines, but also with less obvious, nastier, more resilient and energetic female characters who enact her rebellious dissent from her culture, a dissent, as we have seen, only partially obscured by the "blotter" of her plot. Many critics have already noticed duplicity in the "happy endings" of Austen's novels in which she brings her couples to the brink of bliss in such haste, or with such unlikely coincidences, or with such sarcasm that the entire message seems undercut:² the

1 Wendy Kolmar at Indiana University is currently writing a dissertation on these and lesser-known Victorian women novelists, entitled "Women Writing for Women: Victorian Middle-Class Fiction in the 1860s and 70s."

2 The most sustained discussion of Austen's ironic undercutting of her own endings appears in Lloyd W. Brown, *Bits of Ivory: Narrative Techniques in Jane Austen's Fiction* (Baton Rouge: Louisiana State University Press, 1973), pp. 220–29.

implication remains that a girl without the aid of a benevolent narrator would never find a way out of either her mortifications or her parents' house.

Perhaps less obvious instances of Austen's duplicity occur in her representation of a series of extremely powerful women each of whom acts out the rebellious anger so successfully repressed by the heroine and the author. Because they so rarely appear and so infrequently speak in their own voices, these furious females remain secret presences in the plots. Not only do they play a less prominent role in the novels than their function in the plot would seem to require; buried or killed or banished at the end of the story, they seem to warrant this punishment by their very unattractiveness. Like Lady Susan, they are mothers or surrogate mothers who seek to destroy their docile children. Widows who are no longer defined by men simply because they have survived the male authorities in their lives, these women can exercise power even if they can never legitimize it; thus they seem both pushy and dangerous. Yet if their energy appears destructive and disagreeable, that is because this is the mechanism by which Austen disguises the most assertive aspect of herself as the Other. We shall see that these bitchy women enact impulses of revolt that make them doubles not only for the heroines but for their author as well.

We have seen Austen at her most conflicted in *Mansfield Park*, so perhaps it is here that we can begin to understand how she quietly yet forcefully undercuts her own moral. Probably the most obnoxious character in the book, Aunt Norris, is clearly meant to be a dark parody of Mary Crawford, revealing—as she does—how easily Mary's girlish liveliness and materialism could degenerate into meddlesome, officious penny-pinching. But, as nasty as she is repeatedly shown and said to be when she tries to manage and manipulate, to condescend to Fanny, to save herself some money, Aunt Norris is in some ways castigated for moral failures which are readily understandable, if not excusable. After all, she is living on a small, fixed income, and if she uses flattery to gain pecuniary help, her pleasures are dependent on receiving it. Like Fanny Price, Aunt Norris knows that she must please and placate Sir Thomas. Even when he gives "advice," both accept it as "the advice of absolute power" (II, chap. 18). Perhaps one reason for her implacable hatred of Fanny is that Aunt Norris sees in her a rival for Sir Thomas's protection, another helpless and useful dependent. Furthermore, like Fanny, Aunt Norris uses submission as a strategy to get her own way: acquiescing to the power in authority, she manages to talk her brother-in-law into all her schemes. ...

... [But] women like Aunt Norris are never really completely stifled. The despised Mrs. Ferrars of *Sense and Sensibility*, for example, exacts the punishment which Elinor Dashwood could not help but wish on a man who has been selfishly deceiving her for the entire novel. By tampering with the patriarchal line of inheritance, Mrs. Ferrars proves that the very forms valued by Elinor are arbitrary. But even though *Sense and Sensibility* ends with the overt message that young women like Marianne and Elinor must submit to the powerful conventions of society by finding a male protector, Mrs. Ferrars and her scheming protégée Lucy Steele prove that women can themselves become agents of repression, manipulators of conventions, and survivors.

Most of these powerful widows would agree with Lady Catherine De Bourgh in seeing “no occasion for entailing estates from the female lines” (*PP*, II, 6). Opposed to the very basis of patriarchy, the exclusive right of male inheritance, Lady Catherine quite predictably earns the vilification always allotted by the author to the representatives of matriarchal power. She is shown to be arrogant, officious, egotistical, and rude as she patronizes all the other characters in the novel. Resembling Lady Susan in her disdain for her own pale, weak, passive daughter, Lady Catherine delights in managing the affairs of others. Probably most unpleasant when she opposes Elizabeth’s right to marry Darcy, she questions Elizabeth’s birth and breeding by admitting that Elizabeth is “a gentleman’s daughter,” but demanding, “who was your mother?” (III, chap. 14).

As dreadful as she seems to be, however, Lady Catherine is herself in some ways an appropriate mother to Elizabeth because the two women are surprisingly similar. Her ladyship points this out herself when she says to Elizabeth, “You give your opinion very decidedly for so young a person” (II, chap. 6). Both speak authoritatively of matters on which neither is an authority. Both are sarcastic and certain in their assessment of people. Elizabeth describes herself to Darcy by asserting, “There is a stubbornness about me that never can bear to be frightened at the will of others” (II, chap. 8), and in this respect too she resembles Lady Catherine, whose courage is indomitable. Finally, these are the only two women in the novel capable of feeling and expressing genuine anger, although it is up to Lady Catherine to articulate the rage against entailment that Elizabeth must feel since it has so rigidly restricted her own and her sisters’ lives. When Elizabeth and Lady Catherine meet in conflict, each retains her decided resolution of carrying her own purpose. In all her objections to Elizabeth’s match with Darcy, Lady Catherine only articulates what Elizabeth has herself thought on the subject, that her mother is an unsuitable

relation for him and her sister an even less appropriate connection. Highly incensed and unresponsive to advice, Elizabeth resembles her interlocutor; it is fitting not only that she takes the place meant for Lady Catherine's daughter when she marries Darcy, but that she also sees to it that her husband is persuaded to entertain his aunt at Pemberley. As Darcy and Elizabeth both realize, Lady Catherine has been the author of their marriage, bringing about the first proposal by furnishing the occasion and place for meetings, and the second by endeavoring to separate them when she actually communicates Elizabeth's renewed attraction to a suitor waiting for precisely such encouragement.

The vitriolic shrew is so discreetly hidden in *Emma* that she never appears at all, yet again she is the causal agent of the plot. Like her predecessors, Mrs. Churchill is a proud, arrogant, and capricious woman who uses all means, including reports of her poor health, to elicit attention and obedience from her family. In fact, only her death—which clears the way for the marriage of Frank Churchill to Jane Fairfax—convinces them that her nervous disorders were more than selfish, imaginary complaints. Actually Mrs. Churchill can be viewed as the cause of all the deceit practiced by the lovers inasmuch as their secret engagement is a response to her disapproval of the match. Thus this disagreeable woman with “no more heart than a stone to people in general, and the devil of a temper” (I, chap. 14) is the “invisible presence” which, as W.J. Harvey explains, “enables Jane Austen to embody that aspect of our intuition of reality summed up by Auden—‘we are lived by powers we do not understand.’”¹

But Mrs. Churchill is more than the representative of the unpredictable contingency of reality. On the one hand, she displays an uncanny and ominous resemblance to Jane Fairfax, who will also be a penniless upstart when she marries and who is also subject to nervous headaches and fevers. Mrs. Churchill, we are told by Mr. Weston, “is as thorough a fine lady as anybody ever beheld” (II, chap. 18), so it is quite fitting that polite Jane Fairfax becomes the next Mrs. Churchill and inherits that lady's jewels. On the other hand, Mrs. Churchill seems much like Emma, who is also involved in becoming a pattern lady: selfish in their very imaginings, both have the power of having too much their own way, both are convinced of their superiority in talent, elegance of mind, fortune, and consequence, and both want to be first in society where they can enjoy assigning subservient parts to those in their company.

1 W.J. Harvey, “The Plot of *Emma*,” in *Emma*, A Norton Critical Edition, ed. Stephen M. Parrish (New York: Norton, 1972), p. 456.

The model lady haunts all the characters of *Emma*, evoking “delicate plants” to Mr. Woodhouse (II, chap. 16) and the showy finery of Selena for Mrs. Elton. But it is Mrs. Churchill who illustrates the bankruptcy of the ideal, for she is not only a monitory image of what Austen’s heroines could be, she is also a double of what they are already fast becoming. If Mrs. Churchill represents Austen’s guilt at her own authorial control, she also reminds us that feminine propriety, reserve, and politeness can give way to bitchiness since the bitch is what the young lady’s role and values imply from the beginning, built—as we have seen them to be—out of complicity, manipulation, and deceit. At the same time, however, Mrs. Churchill is herself the victim of her own ladylike silences, evasions, and lies: no one takes seriously her accounts of her own ill health, no one believes that her final illness is more than a manipulative fiction, and her death—one of the few to occur in Austen’s mature fiction—is an ominous illustration of feminine vulnerability that Austen would more fully explore in her last novel. ...

(1979)