Silencing Desire: Female-Female Relations and Heterosexual Apathy in Jane Austen

Emily Rupp

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SILENCING DESIRE: FEMALE-FEMALE RELATIONS AND HETEROSEXUAL APATHY IN JANE AUSTEN

A Thesis
Submitted to the School of Graduate Studies and Research
in Partial Fulfillment of the
Requirements for the Degree
Master of Arts

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In my thesis, I assert how the women in Jane Austen’s novels desire that which is not expected of them and how that desire enables a condition of narrative ignorance by subverting those novelistic and societal understandings of female desire within the Regency era. My research focuses upon the issues of choice, female heterosexual apathy – a disinterest or lack of desire shown towards men – and the misunderstandings that the narrators have of their heroines that appear as patterns throughout Austen’s novels. These heroines have desires that are displaced from the realm of the narrator, which reflects the invisibility of female-female desire.

The basis of my research is close readings of Austen’s novels, but to supplement my discussion about the misunderstanding of female desire, historical gender and sexuality theory provides possibilities of how female-female desire and heterosexual apathy could have manifested in late eighteenth-century England.
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INTRODUCTION

Popular culture has made the name Jane Austen synonymous with the concept of Regency-era romance. People read and adapt Austen’s works and focus completely on the perceived marriage plot that runs through all her published novels. Young women envision themselves as an Elizabeth Bennet waiting for her Mr. Darcy to come along. This interpretation of Austen has textual roots, for marriage is indeed an important subject for her characters, but when reading Austen’s works in succession, a striking observation begins to emerge. Most of the marriages that Austen creates for her heroines are not the “happily ever after” ending that the modern romance genre prides itself upon, but rather are ambivalent affairs.

Marianne Dashwood’s narrative arc ends with her expressing that she would be happiest to live alone, but she marries Colonel Brandon not out of her own free will, but because there was “such a confederacy against her” constantly telling Marianne she needed to marry him (Sense and Sensibility 379). The novel ends with Marianne being forced to submit into a marriage that only resulted in love “in time,” rather than during the conception of their union (Sense and Sensibility 380). In Northanger Abbey, the romance plot between Catherine Morland and Henry Tilney becomes subsumed under the Gothic parody that Austen creates, and when the romance does return, the narration is forced to admit that on the part of Mr. Tilney, “his affection originated in nothing better than gratitude…that a persuasion of her partiality for him had been the only cause of giving her a serious thought” (233). There is no passion in Mr. Tilney’s vision of how Catherine feels about him, and he was never moved to marry her based on any actual feelings he holds. Fanny Price only marries Edmund Bertram by the end because he reluctantly gives up his infatuation with Mary Crawford and because he realizes that “loving, guiding, protecting her, as he had been doing ever since her being ten years old, her mind in so great a
degree formed by his care, and her comfort depending on his kindness” makes her a perfect wife
(*Mansfield Park* 465). Edmund’s thoughts give their union a dark tone, turning this moment
from Fanny finding triumph to Fanny being viewed as a perfect object of submission. Mr.
Knightley’s confession to Emma Woodhouse that he had “been in love with you ever since you
were thirteen at least” produces a similar unsettled feeling in the reader, especially with the
knowledge that he similarly watched Emma grow up from a child into a young woman (*Emma*
389). Popular culture’s interpretation of Austen as the ideal romance could not be farther from
the textual truth. The question I formed after realizing this pattern was to ask, “Why would
Austen write extensively about characters who need to marry, especially heroines in need of
finding good husbands, but then write them into marriages that are hollow, passionless, or
forced?” If Austen is, as William Galperin asserts, a “historian of her time”, then the hypothesis
that followed from my question is that Jane Austen is writing marriages that reflect the reality
around her (23). From this, I began to wonder what else these ambivalent marriages Austen’s
novels were revealing about gentry British society.

As I continued with close readings of Austen’s novels, a second pattern began to emerge.
The true crux of Austen’s novels does not lie in the relationships between a heroine and her
future husband, but rather in that heroine’s relationships with other women. Terry Castle, in her
article “Sister-Sister,” observes nearly what I saw, but not exactly: “Sororal or pseudo-sororal
attachments are arguably the most immediately gratifying human connections in Austen’s
imaginative universe.” Castle’s conclusion is similar to mine in that it is the relationships
between women that are most crucial in Austen’s novels, but where we differ is that I do not see
many of the “pseudo-sororal” relationships as sisterly. While bonds such as Elinor and Marianne
Dashwood and the Bennet sisters – especially between Jane and Elizabeth – are indeed crucial
female relationships, what caught my attention instead were the bonds between women who did not have a prior familial connection. Catherine Morland’s relationships with Isabella Thorpe and Eleanor Tilney, Fanny Price’s strained and tension-filled interactions with Mary Crawford, and Emma Woodhouse’s tutelage and of Harriet Smith stood out to me as connections forged, on the part of at least one woman, out of a sense of desire. Austen dedicates more time to developing the bonds between these women than on the romantic plots. Following this trend, Castle also observes that “many of the final happy marriages seem designed not so much to bring about a union between hero and heroine as between the heroine and the hero’s sister.” The question that this observation prompts is to ask why these women are creating marriages that bring them closer to the other women in their lives.

My thesis asserts that Austen’s heroines do not love the men they marry, and that most of her heroines instead display what I have termed heterosexual apathy. Heterosexual apathy defines for these heroines a lack of attraction toward men. These heroines marry out of a sense of social duty, positioning, and expectation, but ultimately love is not a factor in their decisions. These heroines prioritize the relationships with other women in their lives, and often their marital decisions are wrapped up around these women. My thesis also asserts that much of the reason that Austen’s novels are frequently misread as examples of perfect, heterosexual marriage plots is due to narrative ignorance. Austen’s free indirect discourse narration purposely circumvents around the possibility for eroticism between women because the narrative personas she creates only focus on what is most probable within Regency society, which is that of heterosexual marriage. The use of free indirect discourse is also reflective of what these heroines understand about themselves, and the lack of narrative knowledge thus stems from their own ignorance of the difference between true desire and socially-imposed expectations of heterosexual, domestic
marriage. This confusion is the result of a society that denies the possibility of female-female relationships, either by purposefully acting against its formation or by being unaware that women could desire other women at all. These heroines’ own ignorance of how exactly their desires operate reflects the realities of shifting conceptions of marriage and sexuality during that time, and feeds into the assertion of Austen as historian of the society she belonged to.

The first chapter of my thesis will focus on *Northanger Abbey* and will interrogate how Gothic parody both limits the narrator’s focus via expectations of genre but also allows for heterosexual apathy and female-female desire to exist within the subversion of tropes. Catherine Morland’s relationships with Eleanor Tilney and Isabella Thorpe are contrasted with her interactions with and thoughts toward Henry Tilney to display how desire and apathy are expressed below the narrative consciousness. The next chapter will focus on *Mansfield Park*, which builds upon the heterosexual apathy of *Northanger Abbey* by elaborating how female desire is controlled by using the theme of acting parts in a play as the mechanism at work curbing the women from expressing their true desires. In this second chapter, I argue that Fanny Price is far from a passive heroine, but rather is keenly adept at navigating social expectations and understanding how to operate within this system, and that it is this societal pressure that pushes her toward Edmund Bertram in spite of her unconscious heterosexual apathy. I also analyze how the embodiment of social roles limits and restricts Fanny’s own interactions with the other women in her life, especially that of Mary Crawford, and buries a true desire that is given no chance to flourish. True desires are also the focus of my third chapter on *Emma*, revealing through this book how Emma Woodhouse’s heterosexual apathy reflects itself via her failure as a matchmaker. Emma’s inability to process desire results in misunderstanding all those around her. I also argue that *Emma* elaborates upon the class issues surrounding marriage
in a more complex manner than in *Mansfield Park*, that Emma uses marriage less as a tool for romantic happiness but rather for providing financial comfort and stability for the women she cares about. Finally, there will be a fourth coda chapter, looking at Elinor Dashwood in *Sense and Sensibility*, Elizabeth Bennet in *Pride and Prejudice*, and Maria Bertram in *Mansfield Park*. This exploratory coda will examine how even when heterosexual desire exists, that sexual desire alone is not enough to motivate women to marriage, and they choose men that they either have no feelings for or desire in a tamer manner. I begin to pose further questions for analysis to think about the conceptions of domestic heterosexuality and whether mutual desire was as prevalent a reason for marriage as expected.

My thesis addresses how women’s desires are ignored, restricted, or controlled, revealing what is often hidden under the paradigm of heterosexual monogamous relationships. This research is crucial for, as reaction to Terry Castle’s “Sister-Sister” article showed, Jane Austen studies were not always willing to acknowledge the possibilities for historical, queer relationships within her texts (or possibly her own life). Reading past literatures solely through heteronormative frameworks operates on an assumption that is misguided and ultimately incorrect. Scholars such as Valerie Traub, Sharon Marcus, Theresa Braunschneider, and Eve Kosofsky Sedgwick write upon queer history, offering interpretations for how queer identities existed and operated during the 19th century and prior. Even when these scholars conflict upon details, they all provide texts that assert that queer identities did not spring into being only when our modern terminology did. Variations in gender and sexuality have always existed in shifting forms and understandings, and it is imperative as a result for scholars of this literature to avoid the trappings of assuming heteronormativity in classic texts. Being able to frame a marriage plot onto the text of a novel does not correlate to a lack of queerness in that text. Rather, I argue in
my thesis that to reduce Jane Austen’s novels to nothing more than marriage plots detracts from the real depth of her social commentary on the marital condition within gentry Regency society.
CHAPTER I

“IN ALL PROBABILITY”: EXPECTATIONS OF GENRE AND THE NARRATIVE ELISION OF FEMALE DESIRE IN NORTHANGER ABBEY

Northanger Abbey reproduces a common didactic plot of “Girl Being Taught a Lesson”; in this case, the “girl,” Catherine Morland, learns that fantasy must be separated from reality, and she replaces her Gothic-tinged perspective of the world with the status quo of Regency-era domesticity (Sedgwick 833). Henry Tilney urges Catherine to “consult your own understanding, your own sense of the probable” of regular life in England to prove that the Gothic is an extraordinary world that is not represented within reality (Northanger Abbey 195). As Tilney clarifies that his father is not a murderer, his didactic moment simultaneously subverts the ideology he promotes as he concedes that General Tilney showed his wife only the minimum amount of affection and attention. The additional layer created here eludes Mr. Tilney and Catherine as the reader instead receives Jane Austen’s own didactic message: domesticity harms the woman that enters it. The Gothic fantasy results in a better ending for women than the domestic reality Mr. Tilney promotes: a home purified from the corrupting effects of masculine tyranny, financial inheritance, and the woman’s own choice of husband. The novels that guide Catherine up to this moment provide an alternative possibility that is now being denied her.

Austen writes Catherine into this domestic ending despite the revelation of its hostility to women for two reasons. First, in parodying the Gothic form, she still must mimic the formula of these novels. Marriage must still take place due to expectations of genre. Secondly, Austen is what William Galperin terms a “historian of her time,” and in her time, marriage was an undeniable reality (23). To fulfill the function of historian, Austen must operate within what is “probable” as opposed to what is “possible” (Galperin 2). As shown with the above didactic
moment, Austen manipulates the probable into revealing the negative consequences of limiting possibilities of women. One method of imposing limits upon women is ensuring they were unable to act upon their own desires. Henry Tilney tells Catherine, “man has the advantage of choice, woman only the power of refusal” (*Northanger Abbey* 95). Theresa Braunschneider expands upon this concept when she writes, “the noun ‘choice’ in eighteenth-century English widely functioned to name a woman’s elected spouse” (97). Braunschneider elaborates that restriction of women’s desires are at play here: “the synonymity of ‘choice’ and ‘husband’ elides all of women’s options and decisions outside of the matrimonial realm” (98). These outside options were restricted out of a fear that if women were allowed legitimate choice, “women might not choose marriage – an institution that demands permanent, exclusive, other-gender-oriented desire” (Braunschneider 13). This requirement of “other-gender-oriented desire” reveals another possibility that would induce a woman to refuse marriage. Women might not desire men. Whether that means they desire other women or solely possess what I call heterosexual apathy, it is still a potential that must be eliminated to ensure marriage is still in the realm of the possible.

Austen represents this restriction and redirection of female desire in favor of the heteronormativity provided by marriage with a “failure of narrative authority” (Galperin 139). The narrator is “biased and opinionated” throughout the novel, and Austen drives this bias through Gothic parody (Galperin 11). Austen creates a narrator that explicitly draws attention to Gothic tropes and expectations (while parodying them in the process), and this culminates with the insistence that if Catherine is a Gothic heroine, “something must and will happen to throw a hero in her way” (*Northanger Abbey* 41). This statement shapes the narrative’s driving focus, limiting all possibilities down into only one probable result: heterosexual courtship. In doing so,
Austen creates ignorance in her narrator, which results in narrative silencing and eliding of the actual desires being expressed by the female characters throughout the text of *Northanger Abbey*. This silencing also reflects a phenomena that Valerie Traub has termed the “chaste femme” (230). In discussing female-female desire and homosexuality in early modern England, Traub sets up that the only female-loving women that created an uproar in society were ones that transgressed gender boundaries. The chaste femme lover, however, managed to convey homoerotic desire for other women while often going undetected because her gender expression aligns with female gender role expectations; since no one expected a feminine woman to transgress sexual boundaries then, any relationship she has with another woman “generally fails to signify, and thus solicits silence rather than censure” (Traub 230, emphasis mine). This silence, which Galperin also asserts is also part of Austen’s overarching narrative style, appears throughout *Northanger Abbey* whenever the narrator is presented with any evidence that results in the possibility that the desire of the female characters is not aligning with heteronormative expectations, either due to heterosexual apathy or female-female desire (22). Ignorance, then, is what allows these desires to exist within the text.

Discussion of same-sex relationships within Austen’s novels is not new; Claudia L. Johnson has recorded historical critical debates of Emma Woodhouse’s sexuality from over fifty years ago that align with concepts with which I focus my discussion of *Northanger Abbey*. Johnson states that critics “were fixated on Emma’s lack of heterosexual feeling to such a degree that Emma’s supposed coldness became the central question of the novel: was Emma responsive to men? could she ever really give herself in love, and thus give up trying to control other people’s lives? would marriage ‘cure’ her?” (193). Johnson’s description of “lack” is crucial for informing my discussion of desire in Austen’s narratives, though I will pursue them from a
different angle than trying to determine the “lesbianism” of characters. Like Johnson, scholars such as Terry Castle, D. A. Miller, Eve Kosofsky Sedgwick, and William Galperin have focused on characters throughout Austen’s works who defy expectations of heteronormativity. I will build upon those previous studies by not only focusing on the female-female desire present, but by incorporating further research in historical studies of gender and sexuality and how the inclusion of the marital plot reflects complex shifts in defining marriage and sexuality in Austen’s moment in history.

In this chapter, I argue that heterosexual apathy and female-female desire shown in Catherine and Isabella are elided by the narrator as Austen’s technique for navigating the complex and shifting attitudes of (homo)sexuality during eighteenth- and early-nineteenth century England. I also assert that this is Austen’s method for displaying how the enforced expectation of marriage silences women’s desires. I will focus this analysis through close readings of Northanger Abbey and provide evidence of heterosexual apathy within these two characters, why they go after the men they do despite this apathy, and the prioritization of other women over any men in their lives.

Before I begin, I want to clarify that heterosexual apathy is not a sexual orientation, because it does not describe who women are attracted to, nor does it insist upon a complete lack of sexual attraction, serving instead to describe a lack of attraction or interest in men and heterosexual courtship. Heterosexual apathy reflects a woman’s assertion – active or passive, consciously or unconsciously – of her desires that are repressed by the imposed social norm of monogamous, heterosexual relationships. Desire, for the purposes of my discussion, encompasses two different but entangled concepts. First, desire can be used to describe a level of erotic attraction towards another person. By erotic, I refer to a connection that is a stronger
pull than solely platonic or romantic affection but does not breach into the explicitly sexual and can perhaps not be registered on the same level of self-awareness as romantic attraction is. Secondly, desire can be described as a general wish or yearning for something. Heterosexual apathy then navigates itself between these levels of desire, revealing the priorities of what women actually want versus what they are expected to want. I use “heterosexual apathy” and “female-female desire” in my thesis to present my claims without imposing anachronistic linguistic assumptions or connotations.

While Austen satirizes heteronormative structures such as marriage, and her characters do display desire (or lack of desire) that could be labeled as queer, to explicitly define their sexualities in modern idioms is both problematic and unproductive. Valerie Traub, discussing this problematizing effect for her own work, defines “lesbian” as a term that “not only implies a coherent and stable erotic orientation, but the achievement of this orientation through the developmental process of increasing self-awareness and self-expression” (13-14). To be a lesbian in this sense is to be a woman who defines herself by her exclusive attraction to other women, and while Austen’s characters can be aware of these feelings and desires, they do not label themselves based upon it. During the eighteenth-century, the word “lesbian” still primarily referred to people from the island Lesbos, the Oxford English Dictionary records one of the first uses of “lesbian” to refer to homosexual women in 1732, yet the word is in the entry is paired with another key term for understanding how female-attracted women were understood in the era: “Chief of the Tribades or Lesbians” (“lesbian, n.2”). Primarily recorded during the early modern period, Traub uses David Halperin’s definition of “tribadism” that states it is “the sexual penetration of women (and men) by other women, by means of either a dildo or a fantastically large clitoris” (17). A visible marker of anatomical difference defines the tribade and reveals the
sexual activities of these women. This further leads to the silencing effect that the chaste femme produces, because there is nothing physical to mark her as a sexual anomaly. It is also key to think about how the words to describe female-female sexuality are focused explicitly on the physical act of sex. Sharon Marcus writes about how “the lesbian was not a distinct social type” during the Victorian period and that “in the eighteenth century, it was possible to name the sapphist or tribade as an explicit object of satire,” further highlighting how the terminology and awareness of women who desired other women was constantly shifting throughout the era Austen wrote and even beyond then (6). There is no word to describe what it means when a woman desires another woman romantically and erotically except for friendship to subsume this role: “‘friends’ was used to describe women who were lovers and women who were not” by the Victorian era (Marcus 50). This blurring and confusion of terminology adds to the relative invisibility surrounding the chaste femme as well as Austen’s narrative silence when presented with the desires and non-desires of Catherine and Isabella.

Austen from the onset of the Northanger Abbey elides Catherine’s non-desires, her heterosexual apathy, away from the narrator, and she does this by immediately framing Catherine’s life in terms of the Gothic novel. The opening sentences set up this generic framework: “No one who had ever seen Catherine Morland in her infancy, would have supposed her to be born an heroine. Her situation in life, the character of her father and mother, her own person and disposition, were all equally against her” (Northanger Abbey 37). The reader becomes informed that Catherine does not have the troubled past, such as dead parents or abandonment, that would be expected of the heroine of a Radcliffean Gothic novel, yet by introducing Catherine in this way, she is still presented as a heroine, atypical as she may be. As Austen parodies the Gothic by creating a heroine so dissimilar from reader’s (and narrative)
expectations, there is trait of the heroine that is kept firmly in place: “Something must and will happen to throw a hero in her way” (Northanger Abbey 41). The anticipation that Catherine will find her hero – in Gothic terms, her future husband – sets up an expectation for the reader that this element of the Gothic will remain despite the subversions of repeated tropes presented so far. Finding a hero is not presented in an active manner on Catherine’s part, though. Life will “throw a hero” at Catherine. A double meaning is created in this piece of narration. The first is indicative of a woman’s role in courtship where she is the one to refuse and not the one to choose, putting her in the passive position to man’s active one. The second is that Catherine Morland will not be searching for her hero in the first place.

Catherine’s role in the anticipated marriage plot is passive, but this passivity falls more in the realm of her own choice than any societal dictate. The hero of Catherine’s story must find her himself because Catherine displays heterosexual apathy and is not interested in looking for a husband. Prior to this declaration of a hero to match her heroine status, the narrative informs the reader how “she had reached the age of seventeen, without having seen one admirable youth who could call forth her sensibility; without having inspired one real passion, and without having excited even any admiration but what was very moderate and very transient. This was strange indeed!” (Northanger Abbey 41). A value judgement suddenly interrupts the informational flow of this passage, presenting Catherine’s lack of interest – and the lack of interest she fails to invoke in men – throughout the entirety of her life as “strange.” These circumstances are suspicious, but the narration provides an alternative explanation. Catherine, the Gothic heroine, does not live near any men, such as a “lord” or “baronet,” that fit the Gothic ideal (Northanger Abbey 41). The blame is not on Catherine’s own behavior, but instead with her neighborhood. The only men worth having are those that come out of the pages of the novels Catherine reads
and allows to shape her interpretation of reality. These unobtainable standards, though, only further prove Catherine’s heterosexual apathy instead of avoiding the issue, as the rhetoric of the narrative tries to do. If no men can fit the paradigm of a Gothic hero, then there are no men worth having or desiring.

The closest man to a Gothic hero that comes along is Henry Tilney. According to the narration, Catherine needs a man, and Catherine accepts Mr. Tilney as her hero for reasons that have nothing to do with desire for him, but for desire of things he represents. The first aspect he represents is a feminine persona. Henry Tilney is an expert on muslins, has an intimate knowledge of young women’s diaries, and is an avid reader of the Gothic himself, a genre with a predominantly female readership. Catherine’s interest in Mr. Tilney can be contrasted with her antipathy toward Mr. Thorpe, whose swearing and drinking represent a coarse and rowdy masculine temperament that is incompatible with Catherine’s desires. Another one of Catherine’s desires throughout the novel is to immerse herself within the fantasy of the Gothic novel; when she is offered to stay with the Tilneys, the most exciting aspect of the prospect is where she’ll be staying: “Northanger Abbey! – These were thrilling words, and wound up Catherine’s feelings to the highest point of extasy” (Northanger Abbey 146). The Gothic inspires more passion in her than any man has. Her thoughts of Mr. Tilney, though, become shaped by this sudden connection between himself and the life of Gothic characters: “castles and abbies made usually the charm of those reveries which his image did not fill” (Northanger Abbey 147). In accepting the attentions of Mr. Tilney, Catherine reflects a trend documented by Theresa Braunschneider when she recaps a Spectator piece in which a woman’s heart was a thermometer that went up and down based upon the appearance of a man: “this description might seem to refer to coquettes’ attraction to well-dressed men and disdain for ill-dressed ones. But it
quite pointedly leaves men out of the equation altogether. The coquette’s heart is attracted or repelled not by men but by their hats, coats, gloves, wigs – that is, not by people but by things” (48-49). While the coquette subject that Braunschneider’s work focuses on is primarily framed as a woman who is so interested in men she refuses to choose between them, this analysis can also apply to heterosexual apathy. A woman who possesses no attraction toward a man might “choose” – as loosely as that term can be used – her husband based upon traits that have little to do with the man himself. Catherine seems to accept Mr. Tilney because of his femininity and connections to the Gothic as opposed to liking the man himself.

Further proving that Catherine’s interest in Mr. Tilney is based upon these surface details, Catherine displays signs that she still possesses an uneasiness about any serious commitment with Mr. Tilney that further reflect how heterosexual apathy works even when a woman decides to enter a potential relationship with a man anyways. Firstly, after the initial meeting of Catherine and Henry Tilney, the narrator explains that “Whether she thought of him so much…as to dream of him…cannot be ascertained” (Northanger Abbey 52). Austen creates a moment of narrative uncertainty, not allowing the narrator to know what Catherine actually could be thinking in this moment. Austen creates a position for the narrator to display the difference between probability and possibility as Galperin outlines. Galperin asserts that Austen operates within “an horizon of possibility rooted in the oppositional practices of the everyday,” with the “everyday” aspect allowing Austen to keep her texts rooted enough with in probability for a readership that expects realism (89). Yet, what is “probable” and what is “possible” can simultaneously be just as real. The narrator in this moments represents the probable, stating how “it must be very improper that a young lady should dream of a gentleman before the gentleman is first known to have dreamt of her,” just how a woman should not fall in love first (Northanger
Abbey 52). It glosses over the possible, the concept that the potential for Catherine to not have dreamt of Mr. Tilney is a sign of her being incapable of loving him at all.

Another sign that Catherine is uncomfortable about committing herself on a serious level to Mr. Tilney is her reaction to having her potential feelings pointed out to her by Isabella. Catherine “coloured, and disclaimed” at the idea that Mr. Tilney or any other man could have feelings for her, and she also insisted that “I do not pretend to say that I was not very much pleased with him; but while I have Udolpho to read, I feel as if nobody could make me miserable” (Northanger Abbey 63). Catherine prioritizes her books over any potential heartbreak. She desires more to know what is behind the black veil in The Mysteries of Udolpho than whether Mr. Tilney will stay in Bath much longer. The final sign of her heterosexual apathy emerges in a dialogue between Catherine and Mr. Tilney during a dance. Mr. Tilney insists that a dance is as important as marriage, and Catherine recoils from this comparison: “People that marry can never part, but must go and keep house together. People that dance, only stand opposite each other in a long room for half an hour” (Northanger Abbey 95). Catherine asserts here what agreeing to a dance with Mr. Tilney, or anyone else, signifies to her. It is a temporary commitment; it does not indicate that she thinks of Mr. Tilney as seriously as he insists she should. Mr. Tilney is then concerned that “if any other gentleman were to address you, there would be nothing to restrain you from conversing with him as long as you choose,” thinking of her in this moment as coquette-ish (Northanger Abbey 96). Catherine’s response, though, should not be as reassuring to Henry as he takes it to be: “I do not want to talk to any body” (Northanger Abbey 96). She has placated Mr. Tilney, but barely hides her own heterosexual apathy in the process. She is not interested in any other men, period. Since this statement can be interpreted as an interest in heterosexual monogamy, it creates another conflict
between the “probable” and the “possible.” Catherine’s true intentions behind this statement are lost within societal expectations.

If Catherine’s interest in Mr. Tilney is misinterpreted as being more romantic than what it is, then her interest in his sister, Eleanor Tilney, is downplayed by the narrative. The direction of Catherine’s desire after meeting Eleanor transitions onto her, and it is her interest in Miss Tilney that cements her acceptance of Mr. Tilney. Catherine chooses to get to know Eleanor during a ball, because she is “interested at once by her appearance and her relationship to Mr Tilney” (Northanger Abbey 77). While part of it is motivated by the fact she is Henry Tilney’s sister – it makes sense to become acquainted with the family of a man she is talking to – it is Eleanor’s appearance and the impression Catherine forms of her based upon her looks that is prioritized by this sentence. Eleanor displays “a good figure, a pretty face, and a very agreeable countenance” that all manage to captivate Catherine, but what also impresses Catherine is how “she seemed capable of being young, attractive, and at a ball, without wanting to fix the attention of every man near her” (Northanger Abbey 77). Catherine admires how Eleanor seems disinterested in the men at the ball, or, at the very least, that she is not being active in pursuit of men. This detail stands out in her interpretation of Miss Tilney because of how it aligns with Catherine’s own inability to truly engage in proper courtship herself – at least until Mr. Tilney came along, and even then, as I detailed, how she becomes involved with him is atypical. It’s a point of similarity between the two young women that sets up their close bond throughout the rest of the novel.

This first impression contributes to how quickly Catherine’s attraction towards Eleanor becomes her top priority. As Catherine and Eleanor spend more time together, the narrator describes one of their conversations: “though in all probability not an observation was made, nor an expression used by either which had not been made and used some thousands of times before,
under that roof, in every Bath season, yet the merit of their being spoken with simplicity and
truth, and without personal conceit, might be something uncommon” (Northanger Abbey 91).
The narration verges into an important observation about their conversations, but as its
“uncommon” nature is revealed, the narration disappears and Catherine and Eleanor speak for
themselves: “‘How well your brother dances!’ was an artless exclamation of Catherine’s towards
the close of their conversation’” (Northanger Abbey 91). The crucial aspect of Austen bringing
in direct discourse here is that she could choose any aspect of the conversation to make this
switch. Austen has her narrator aware of what the conversation has been like so far between the
two budding friends, but she skips over most of the conversation and has the narration guide the
reader to the moment in which Catherine “artlessly” brings up the Tilney brother. It creates a
sense of discomfort from the narration to let Catherine and Eleanor speak for themselves unless
discussion of Henry Tilney is involved. There is something “uncommon” in their discussion,
despite the narrator placating this by stating how “in all probability” that much of their
conversation was nothing more than commonplace staples of discussions held in Bath. Austen
narrates this scene using a slight uncertainty in language. The narrator cannot fully confirm that
their discussions are just simple niceties. Even if “probability,” as Galperin writes about it, is
what one expects, the use of the word in this passage hints at other possibilities. They most
likely are talking like any two female friends, but the “uncommon” method of communication
raises suspicion.

This moment ties back into Valerie Traub’s statement that love between chaste femme
lovers “solicits silence rather than censure” (Traub 230), due to the silencing effect that the
narration has over the majority of Catherine and Eleanor’s conversation. The narration cannot
fully comment upon what is made “uncommon” about their conversation, and so it becomes
glossed over and made silent. It was “only when women’s erotic relations with one another threaten to become exclusive and thus endanger the fulfillment of their marital and reproductive duties…are cultural injections levied against” the chaste femme (Traub 181). By the eighteenth century, concepts of sexuality morphed enough that it “called into question behaviors, such as kisses and embraces, that previously had been indices of feminine virtue” (Traub 231). The chaste femme figure was now under suspicion of not being as chaste as previously assumed. The parameters of heterosexual desire were shifting, with the concept of domestic heterosexuality arising and insisting that “erotic desire for a domestic partner” was a requirement for a happy marital partnership (Traub 265). To ensure this model of domesticity, women must show erotic desire toward men. Such aspects of female-female friendship that resembled signs of heterosexual desire created the fear that “chaste femme love became a potential threat to marital bonds” (Traub 265). This creates an environment that prevents the same invisibility of the chaste femme figure that existed prior. When examining the deep relationship and desire between Catherine and Eleanor, though, it remains undetected by the narration because, despite the unusual nature of their bond, it does not possess any danger to prohibiting the union of Catherine and Henry. Instead, the relationship between Catherine and Eleanor can be subsumed under the relationship of sisters via Catherine’s marriage to Henry Tilney. Sharon Marcus even elaborates that women would express their “desire for other women by extravagantly combining incompatible terms such as mother, lover, sister, friend, wife, and idol,” so taking on a sisterly label would still be compatible to how their desire truly manifests (46). Despite how female-female homoerotic desire is perceived as oppositional towards heterosexual desire, in this instance the two can co-inhabit because there is no sign that Catherine’s desire for Eleanor will
completely override the probability that Catherine will marry Henry; it increases it by giving Catherine more incentive into marrying into the Tilney family.

Since the status quo of heterosexual marriage still seems guaranteed for Catherine, the narrative can continue along as if there are no more red flags, even though Catherine prioritizes Eleanor over Henry in later events. When Catherine travels with the Thorpes to Blaize Castle instead of waiting for the Tilneys to visit like she initially wanted to, driving past the Tilneys forces her to shout out “Pray, pray stop, Mr Thorpe. – I cannot go on. – I will not go on. – I must go back to Miss Tilney” (Northanger Abbey 104). Catherine passes by both siblings, but it is only Eleanor that she focuses on returning to, which reveals which Tilney matters more to her. While this scene is also meant to parody kidnappings of heroines in the Gothic novel, Austen imbues it with another meaning. As Mr. Thorpe is deaf to the cries to her return to Eleanor Tilney, it creates a situation that produces actual horror for Catherine. Even though Catherine has been trying to warm up to Mr. Thorpe based upon recommendations from her brother and Isabella, she eventually realizes that she had “to resist such high authority, and to distrust his powers of giving universal pleasure” (Northanger Abbey 87). Catherine’s regard for Mr. Thorpe goes beyond heterosexual apathy and crosses into a clearer antipathy. This parody scene produces true horror, then, by placing Catherine in a position to be stolen away by a man she has absolutely no interest in from the woman that she both prioritizes and desires to be with.

Eleanor is the woman that Catherine prioritizes above all else. She prioritizes her above Henry Tilney, but also above her other dearest friend in the book, Isabella Thorpe. This instance with the carriage was the first time she tried to deny the Thorpes a chance for social interaction, and it was not the last. I switch my focus over to Isabella’s perspective here because Isabella is another key example of how heterosexual apathy and female-female desire are expressed within
Northanger Abbey. The second time Catherine insists upon keeping her engagements with the Tilneys, Isabella pleads with Catherine with the utmost pathos, trying to garner Catherine’s affections back in Isabella’s favor by admitting the strength of how she feels for her best friend: “I cannot help being jealous, Catherine, when I see myself slighted for strangers, I, who love you so excessively! When once my affections are placed, it is not in the power of any thing to change them. But I believe my feelings are stronger than any body’s; I am sure they are too strong for my own peace” (Northanger Abbey 113). While affectionate language was often used between female friends, Marcus Sharon notes that “rhetorical techniques of intensification and accumulation” were used to express unrequited desires, and these techniques often manifested as “an intensity, exclusivity, and volatility…absent from most accounts of female friendship” (Marcus 46, 47). Isabella’s pleas display these traits, as she believes that her love is “stronger than any body’s” (exclusivity, intensity), that Isabella loves Catherine “so excessively” (intensity), and that they are “too strong for my own peace” (intensity, volatility). These expressions go beyond the typical declaration of platonic affection. Isabella is admitting that she desires her friend.

The result of Isabella’s declaration, though, is for Catherine to react negatively: “Catherine thought this reproach equally strange and unkind. Was it the part of a friend thus to expose her feelings to the notice of others? Isabella appeared to her ungenerous and selfish, regardless of every thing but her own gratification” (Northanger Abbey 113). These three sentences play with the concept previously introduced by Traub about female-female attraction “soliciting silence rather than censure,” but only because it “fails to signify” (230). For Catherine, it does not fail. Catherine is the only one who can comment upon exactly what Isabella is saying. Even though it does not register for anyone else around them – or even within
the narration itself – Catherine thinks that Isabella is willing to “expose her feelings to the notice of others.” There is a fear that Isabella is publicly overstepping the boundaries in place between platonic and homosocial/homoerotic desire. After all, if the chaste femme lover’s strength is in its very invisibility, then taking way that invisibility brings the relationship into scrutiny and censure. Additionally, not all female-female erotic relationships expressed their love through words. By the Victorian era, “respectability required lovers and spouses to avoid public signs” of their desire (Marcus 58). While Austen wrote decades earlier, Catherine could still easily align with this mindset, that overly public declarations of affection are off-putting.

Isabella being censured for her desire does not stop with this moment from Catherine. The narrative of _Northanger Abbey_ sets up Isabella as a foil to Catherine; she is an example of what happens when a woman tries to take choice into her own hands. Austen uses Isabella as an example not because she agrees that Isabella should be punished, but because this character reflects the realities for women. One strategy for showing the boundaries that women are trapped within is to display the negative consequences that ensue when a woman tries to break them. When creating Isabella as her example, Austen first makes Isabella’s heterosexual apathy come across clearer in her dialogue than even Catherine’s. Isabella does not shy from expressing how little she scares for the male gender: “I make it a rule never to mind what they say. They are very often amazingly impertinent if you do not treat them with spirit, and make them keep their distance,” and “Oh! they give themselves such airs. They are the most conceited creatures in the world, and think themselves of so much importance!” are only two instances on one page alone (_Northanger Abbey_ 64). Isabella sees men as self-centered, always in need of attention, and as becoming rude if ignored. Even around men that she is supposed to be courting, Isabella expresses not only disdain, but she pushes Mr. Morland away to spend more time with Catherine,
telling him “Mr Morland, you are not to listen” (Northanger Abbey 78). Isabella creates a space in this moment of the ball for two women, Catherine and herself, to be alone and to talk about subjects privately, and she attempts to keep the power in her favor, keeping him held back long enough even when he attempts to rejoin her for another dance.

Isabella’s ability to control the scene here can be contrasted with Henry Tilney interrupting the discussion between Catherine and Eleanor during their walk together. Whereas Isabella can keep her communication with Catherine relatively their own, Catherine and Eleanor are unable to prevent Henry from fixing the misunderstandings they appear to be having: “Come, shall I make you understand each other, or leave you to puzzle out an explanation as you can? No – I will be noble. I will prove myself a man, no less by the generosity of my soul than the clearness of my head” (Northanger Abbey 126). Mr. Tilney sees his corrective intrusion as part of his duties as a man and as an act of kindness for them. Instead of leaving Eleanor and Catherine to their discussion – and Eleanor tries to tell Catherine, “do not mind what he says” to keep their conversation going as normal – he cannot stand by without saying a word (Northanger Abbey 126). His effect does not make their conversation better; instead, it makes Catherine “grave” and Eleanor chastises her brother by insisting to “clear you character handsomely before her. Tell her that you think very highly of the understanding of women” (Northanger Abbey 127). All that Eleanor can coerce out of her brother is a mocking half-apology, and the current train of conversation is given up. The difference between this scene and Isabella’s ability to keep Mr. Morland out of conversation is crucial in understanding the difference in the fates of Isabella and Catherine. Henry Tilney is keenly aware of the status quo, even as he cynically satirizes it. One example of this is Catherine asking why he reacts with surprise, and he responds with “Why, indeed!...but some emotion must appear to be raised by your reply, and surprize is
more easily assumed, and not less reasonable than any other” (*Northanger Abbey* 49). Despite this mocking attitude, he still actively abides by societal customs, and it is these small correctives that serve as enforcers for Catherine’s development throughout *Northanger Abbey*, leading to her learning to trade Gothic fantasy for domestic reality. Isabella, though, does not have anyone to keep her in line since she is determined to wield her own power instead.

The power Isabella most wants to hold is the ability to marry the man of her choice, and for two reasons that have little to do with the man himself. The first reason is the one the narrative buys into, that Isabella is only entering marriage for its financial prospects. The second reason is that Isabella wants to marry into the same family as Catherine. If she cannot be truly public with her affections for Catherine, she can at least try to settle for marrying her through proxy, again invoking Marcus’s point about how female-female lovers used many various labels to subsume their relationships and true feelings under. Isabella attempts to hide that she is dissatisfied with the financial prospects of her future marriage to Mr. Morland, but there is one crucial scene that occurs before she fully enters a courtship with Captain Tilney. In this passage, Isabella has been hoping that Catherine would want to marry her brother, Mr. Thorpe, but Catherine rejects him: “you know very well that if I could think of one man more than another – *he* is not the person” (*Northanger Abbey* 150). As an aside, Catherine’s wording here provides further instance of her own heterosexuality, that it is “if” she could ever actually prioritize one man over another, even with Mr. Tilney courting her by this point. Isabella has already been made aware of her apparent preference for Henry Tilney, and when Catherine states “we shall still be sisters,” with her thinking specifically of how Isabella is to marry James, Isabella instead jumps to a new plan: “there are more ways than one of our being sisters” (*Northanger Abbey* 150-151). This other way is for Isabella and Catherine to both marry Tilneys. It is after this
scene that Isabella stops trying to put up some resemblance of resistance, as she did with Captain Tilney’s prior attentions, and openly flirts with and courts him. Isabella is only able to abandon one marital prospect for another after a realization that she can have both objects of her desire: a rich spouse and a marital connection that draws her closer to Catherine. She does not have to stay with Mr. Morland to maintain a future in which she can be Catherine’s sister.

Despite Isabella possessing two desires, the narrative is only aware of her desire for a rich husband. This narrative ignorance is twofold. The first reasoning is that it repeats the theme of blurring the possible and the probable that occurs with female-female relationships due to the ambiguity of their natures. On the surface, a woman desiring to be sisters with another woman does not seem indicative of romantic or erotic affections. These levels come to the surface through looking at how this is one half of what fuels Isabella to swap Mr. Morland out for Captain Tilney. This is not a secondary benefit of being able to marry either of these men, instead it is a primary deciding factor behind accepting these men’s attentions for as long as she does. The second reason for the narrative ignorance is rooted in how Catherine perceives the situation. As Isabella’s attentions toward Captain Tilney become more overt, Catherine is primarily focused on how this will affect her brother. Concern for a brother that is very dear to her deserves to be prioritized in Catherine’s mind. The outrage that Catherine expresses toward Isabella’s scandalous behavior also works to effect in providing the level of realism that Austen is conveying through Isabella’s character. If Isabella is supposed to be an example of what happens to women when they attempt taking on the power of choice themselves, then for the heroine to find something wrong in her behavior is necessary. Catherine’s disgust for Isabella’s behavior, though, is not because Isabella is trying to connect them as sisters, since Catherine
even encourages this opportunity for them. It is because Catherine sees how Isabella’s choices can hurt people that turns her against her friend.

William Galperin discusses at length how Austen’s novels present an oppositionality to the “real”: “It amounts now to a series of unreadable details that sooner or later disclose an otherness, something hitherto ‘unthinkable,’ where change or some other possibility is uncannily lodged…giving readers with no particular stake in resistance…occasion to pause, which for Austen is a means, perhaps the only means, to change” (34). Austen imbues her realistic storytelling with various possibilities hidden outside of the realm of the narration, and these possibilities hold her greatest critiques. *Northanger Abbey* is still a didactic text, but the lesson learned is not that women need to give up their (Gothic) fantasies in exchange for the mundanity of domesticity. Austen instead writes a novel in which female desire is ignored, unable to express itself, controlled, and ultimately tamed into fitting the status quo of society. Other novels of Austen’s, such as *Mansfield Park* and *Emma*, also explore the complexities of what women desire within a gentry society that tries to mold them into fitting the social mores of Regency England. Women do not have to desire men, and they can even desire women instead, but the environment around them makes it difficult to express these desires. In *Northanger Abbey*, Austen’s use of Gothic parody creates a metaphor for being ignorant of female desire and trying to control it. The narration glosses over moments that reveal strong female-female attractions in an act that simultaneously proves Catherine’s lesson correct; trying to place the events of real life into a narrative fails, because it will never have the consistency and logic needed to fit one. The narrator may seem to have succeeded in creating a Gothic novel, but there is more happening underneath the surface of narrative events that writing cannot contain. It is
the possible lurking underneath the probable, and in studying texts in this way, more possibilities can exist for reclaiming the silenced desires of women.
CHAPTER II

“NO, INDEED, I CANNOT ACT”: PLAYING AT GENDER

ROLES AND HETEROSEXUALITY IN MANSFIELD PARK

If *Northanger Abbey* is the novel in which Catherine ultimately learns to settle into the heteronormative domestic sphere despite her heterosexual apathy, *Mansfield Park* is Austen’s deeper analysis of how society forces all who belong to it into strict codes of behavior. The protagonist, Fanny Price, earns her “happy ending” – or, at least, what she believes is her happy ending – because she actively reads and understands the society around her. Fanny’s shyness and behaviors create the impression that she is little more than a passive vessel, but that role is exactly what Fanny needs to embody to thrive in a society vastly different than the one in which she was initially raised. Fanny possesses a keen awareness of what women are expected to be and do, and her navigation of this pre-determined societal role or script proves successful enough that readers have constantly misinterpreted the agency of her character. This misreading is to be expected, though, when the narration throughout *Mansfield Park* leads the reader to believe that Fanny does not have a driving force to act in the same manner other characters throughout the novel do. Her desires are not seen by the narrator and thus are not initially obvious to the reader, but Fanny does desire as any human being does. The major difference is that she is primarily an observer of behavior with the goal of collecting information to ensure security in the actions she does take. Fanny’s major acts, then, are not forceful, but subtle. In her observations, she can determine that there are roles that must be played within this society, and she learns they need to be upheld very carefully. This is how she becomes positioned by the end of the novel in a better social status than the other women in her age group. Her adherence to societal roles thus creates a conflict within Fanny that she struggles to be properly aware of. Fanny knows that she needs a
man to marry her, but it is in her interactions with Edmund Bertram, Henry Crawford, and Mary Crawford that demonstrate the role she must play does not align with her true desires, creating a dissonance. Fanny Price is another Austen heroine dealing with the consequences of heterosexual apathy.

Fanny’s attachment to the idea of marrying Edmund Bertram aligns with the reasoning that allows him to settle for Fanny at the end of the novel, which is significant because it reflects the conditioning that Fanny internalizes during her years growing up at Mansfield Park. The narrator explains that “loving, guiding, protecting her, as he had been doing ever since her being ten years old, her mind in so great a degree formed by his care, and her comfort depending on his kindness,” is what makes Edmund accept the idea of Fanny as his wife, but it is also what draws Fanny to Edmund in the first place. (Mansfield Park 465). As a child, she relies upon Edmund when she is sent off to Mansfield Park to live with her aunt and uncle. In the process, Sir Bertram expresses that one of the difficulties in raising Fanny is that “they cannot be equals. Their rank, fortune, rights, and expectations will always be different” (Mansfield Park 42). The Bertrams and the Prices may be family, but family ties are not stronger than the stratification of class and rank. For even a ten-year-old, this difference in treatment is palpable, and Fanny’s role within the large, unfamiliar confines of Mansfield Park is met with despair. The only person within this family that treats Fanny without coolness, distance, or distaste is Edmund, and as a result, “She felt that she had a friend, and the kindness of her cousin Edmund gave her better spirits with everybody else. The place became less strange, and the people less formidable; and if there were some amongst them whom she could not cease to fear, she began at least to know their ways, and to catch the best manner of conforming to them” (Mansfield Park 47). This state
of acceptance and calm that occurs within Edmund’s presence allows Fanny to trust him, which leads to opening her mind to his guidance for living in Mansfield Park.

Edmund’s instruction of Fanny delves into the role she must play, which not only shapes her understanding of what women should desire – such as marrying husbands that will care for them – but also forms her understanding of femininity as passivity. When Fanny is first presented with the possibility (which never comes to fruition) that she could be sent to live with Mrs. Norris, she appeals to Edmund for help. Her language to Edmund reveals the type of conditioning and emotional regulation she has been taught by him: “something is going to happen which I do not like at all; and though you have often persuaded me into being reconciled to things that I disliked at first, you will not be able to do it now” (Mansfield Park 55). Despite her insistence at rebellion in this passage, it reveals how Edmund has taught her via persuasion to accept situations that go against Fanny’s desires. Her true thoughts and feelings are meant to be kept to herself, and she must live with events as they come to her. It is a conditioning that emphasizes passivity within women, but also enforces for Fanny that there are many events in life – such as marriage – that are inevitable for her and must be met with no protest. Within this same conversation with Edmund, Fanny also reveals how effectively the Bertrams have made their “othering” of Miss Price clear: “I can never be important to anyone,” and her reasons for why are “everything – my situation – my foolishness and awkwardness” (Mansfield Park 56). By this time, she is fifteen, and the five years that have passed at Mansfield Park have taught Fanny to view herself in a negative light as compared to everyone else there. This “othering” from the rest of the Bertrams further instills in Fanny a sense of her true role, which is to be quiet and unassuming. This becomes clear when Fanny’s horse dies and instead of vocalizing her desire for another horse as a replacement, she only waits for the Miss Bertrams to finish riding
their horses. It is Edmund who must step up on Fanny’s behalf and be the voice to the proper lack in her exercise. These acts allow Fanny to view Edmund in a positive light: “She regarded her cousin as an example of everything good and great, as possessing worth which no one but herself could ever appreciate, and as entitled to such gratitude from her as no feelings could be strong enough to pay. Her sentiments towards him were compounded of all that was respectful, grateful, confiding, and tender” (*Mansfield Park* 66). If women are meant to marry men that can provide and care for them, then Edmund’s behaviors fall in line with this expectation for husbands. Fanny’s desire to marry Edmund stems from him fitting the role that a husband is meant to fulfill.

Fanny’s feelings for Edmund initially belonged to a realm of adoration and affection that is befitting that of a younger cousin who owes much of her happiness and comfort to a family member, but the transition from viewing him as family to seeing him as a potential husband in does not begin until Mary Crawford enters the picture. Miss Crawford places herself in between Fanny and Edmund’s bond, and it triggers a desire for Fanny to cling further onto Edmund. The first major incident that puts Fanny on the defensive regarding Miss Crawford also involves horse-riding. Edmund offers Mary the chance to learn how to ride, and each passage describing this pastime is suddenly shot with a sexual, erotic charge:

Active and fearless, and, though rather small, strongly made, she seemed formed for a horsewoman; and to the pure genuine pleasure of the exercise, something was probably added in Edmund’s attendance and instructions, and something more in the conviction of very much surpassing her sex in general by her early progress, to make her unwilling to dismount. (*Mansfield Park* 93)
The eroticism within this passage begins with the detailed focus on Miss Crawford’s body, emphasizing her petite stature and her physicality. The act of horse-riding is described as a “pleasure” for Mary, and this pleasure is heightened specifically because Edmund guides her through it. This is not a solo act but rather an event of two people working together. Her natural ease at horse riding places her above other women, but especially Fanny, which is an important metaphor in terms of Fanny’s own sexuality. Finally, even the act of dismounting takes on an innuendo, considering the act of sex can often involve straddling a partner akin to how a person straddles a horse. This type of intimacy continues when the narrative focus narrows further in on Fanny’s vantage point of Edmund’s and Mary’s horse riding adventures: “After a few minutes, they stopped entirely, Edmund was close to her; he was speaking to her, he was evidently directing her management of the bridle, he had hold of her hand; she saw it, or the imagination supplied what the eye could not reach” (Mansfield Park 94). Even though Fanny tries to convince herself that this is just Edmund “making himself useful, and proving his good-nature by anyone,” she knows that there is more to this excursion than just general kindness (Mansfield Park 94). Fanny finds herself insecure in the face of such intimate acts of hand holding, the observed pleasure it brings to Mary, and the time it detracts from Fanny’s own ability to exercise with the horse alongside Edmund.

To add to this insecurity, it is noted in the narration that Mary’s “merit in being gifted by nature with strength and courage was fully appreciated by the Miss Bertrams; her delight in riding was like their own; her early excellence in it was like their own, and they had great pleasure in praising it” (Mansfield Park 95). Once more it is echoed that Mary is a natural talent at horse-riding, but now there is an added layer that both of the Bertram sisters are also skilled at it. Compare this to Fanny, who had struggled herself with learning how to ride a horse. This
contrast illuminates how much harder Fanny must work to secure a place within Mansfield Park and gentry society. She not only is slow to grasp what her cousins and Mary are able to learn so quickly, but with the act of horse riding standing in as an innuendo, then it is indicative of Fanny’s heterosexual apathy – or perhaps even a rejection or resentment of heterosexuality. She fears riding the horse at first, just as she fears sexually-charged male attraction (as I will elaborate later in a discussion of Mr. Crawford’s courtship of Fanny). While she eventually learns to become competent enough with horse riding, it takes more time. Fanny is not a natural at the act, just as she is not a natural when it comes to developing a true romantic relationship with any man. Within this society, one that already judges her from her lowly beginnings and who her parents are, Fanny cannot afford to be further ostracized in this manner. Her attachment to Edmund, fostered by a good eight years of familial affection, is in direct response to this challenge to her status. Fanny is “othered” enough as it is, and she cannot afford to fall further behind.

As much as Fanny chooses Edmund as the recipient of her focus for marital success, it takes until the very end of the novel for him to reciprocate that intent and to stop pursuing Mary Crawford. This switch is impersonal in nature, though, with the narrator sharing Edmund’s thoughts that “what was there now to add, but that he should learn to prefer soft light eyes to sparkling dark ones” and that he could not help but be won over by Fanny with “his feelings exactly in that favourable state which a recent disappointment gives” (Mansfield Park 465). Fanny is little more than a substitute to placate his newly broken heart, and she is a substitute that, as previously quoted, suits Edmund because she is molded by him and has been dependent upon her for happiness for so long. He does not even believe that Fanny loves him romantically, that he must undergo “an hopeful undertaking to persuade her that her warm and sisterly regard
for him would be foundation enough for wedded love” (*Mansfield Park* 465). “Warm and sisterly regard” has been enough for Fanny throughout the course of the novel to view Edmund as the perfect marital object. Combined with Edmund’s own familial love, this is as close to a heteronormative marital arrangement that Fanny can be happy with. Any stronger form of male attention and attraction is instead overbearing and frightening – and ultimately undesired.

Fanny’s rejection of heterosexual courtship manifests intensely as Henry Crawford becomes involved throughout her life. Mr. Crawford places Fanny in a position that she has not yet been forced to endure herself under, which is to be the sole focus of one man’s attraction. Before he ever sets his sights upon Fanny Price, Mr. Crawford already draws her disdain as he first aims his flirtations at the Bertram sisters in an act that Fanny cannot tolerate. Henry Crawford’s family directs him that Julia Bertram would be a great choice for him to place his affections, but Henry lets his impulse and feelings guide him where he may. Henry tells his sister that “[Maria] has the advantage in every feature, and I prefer her countenance – but I like Julia best. Miss Bertram is certainly the handsomest, and I have found her the most agreeable, but I shall always like Julia best, because you order me” (*Mansfield Park* 73). Henry is playfully sarcastic about preferring Julia as he makes it known that Maria is the better sister, regardless of her engagement to Mr. Rushworth and the matchmaking efforts of his family. From the start, Mr. Crawford’s actions disturb the status quo of the Bertram family.

Of everyone residing at Mansfield Park, the true nature of Mr. Crawford’s attentions toward Maria is only observed by Fanny Price, and she is too aware of how unacceptable the situation is. As stated before, Fanny is not as passive as the role she is made to play asks her to be. On the contrary, Fanny is an active reader and observer: “Her own thoughts and reflections were habitually her best companions; and in observing the appearance of the country, the
bearings of the roads, the difference of the soil, the state of the harvest, the cottages, the cattle, the children, she found entertainment” (Mansfield Park 106). She views the landscape of the passing countryside not with passive, languid eyes, but is keenly attentive to the smallest details. Fanny’s powers of observation do not stop with natural sights, but transfer neatly over to analysis and understanding of human behavior. Thus, when Maria Bertram bemoans how “that iron gate, that ha-ha, give me a feeling of restraint and hardship,” and Mr. Crawford responds by saying “you would not get out without the key and without Mr Rushworth’s authority and protection” before suggesting they could “pass round the edge of the gate” together, Fanny knows there is more to their conversation than physical barriers (Mansfield Park 123). She has observed these two for long enough to know that Maria is expressing unhappiness at the prospect of marrying Mr. Rushworth and that Mr. Crawford is offering himself to her to lighten her spirits. Fanny may possess heterosexual apathy, but she also possesses an understanding of the roles everyone must play, and Maria is defying her role in being engaged to Mr. Rushworth. Running off without waiting for him and with a different man in his stead is improper behavior, but Fanny can also only do so much. Not only has Mr. Crawford indirectly commanded that she must wait – “Miss Price will be so good as to tell him that he will find us near that knoll” – she was also asked to wait there by Edmund and Miss Crawford earlier, and part of the role she plays is that she cannot disobey what others tell her (Mansfield Park 123). Thus, “Fanny, feeling all this to be wrong, could not help making an effort to prevent it,” but can only make an effort by saying, “You will hurt yourself, Miss Bertram…you will certainly hurt yourself against those spikes” (Mansfield Park 123). She cannot speak explicitly about the true danger she senses Maria entering, due to the impropriety of the situation itself, but Fanny speaks up about a physical danger that is probable and is just as real, which is an act of great significance for her
considering her inclination to keep quiet. Her commandment to stay where she is prevents her from doing much more than vocalizing her wish for Miss Bertram and Mr. Crawford to stay and wait for Mr. Rushworth, but in this moment, Fanny is the only person who knows what is happening and the only one who can put forth an effort to stop these two from stepping into behavior that is outside of their societal roles.

Fanny’s position as moral compass and protector of roles, along with further reason to detest Mr. Crawford, comes into greater focus when a different roleplaying scenario begins: the at-home theatre. Performing a play is initially met with opposition from Edmund and Fanny, with Edmund’s concern being that “In a general light, private theatricals are open to some objections, but as we are circumstanced, I think it would be highly injudicious, and more than injudicious to attempt any thing of the kind…and it would be imprudent, I think, with regard to Maria, whose situation is a very delicate one, considering every thing, extremely delicate” (*Mansfield Park* 147). The remaining Bertram siblings see no problem as long as it remains a private theatrical performance, though Edmund’s concern over Maria’s involvement is met with agreement by one sibling: “Julia did seem inclined to admit Maria’s situation might require particular caution and delicacy – but that could not extend to her – she was at liberty” (*Mansfield Park* 150). Maria’s engagement to Mr. Rushworth makes the concept of her as an actress enter the realm of scandalous behavior.

The narration does not initially give explanation as to why acting would place Maria in a delicate situation, but Mr. Crawford’s involvement in the play and Fanny’s silent, astute observations of what is truly happening under the guise of acting shows how this pastime compromises Maria. Firstly, when determining which part each person should be, Mr. Crawford picks Maria over Julia to play the part of Agatha, one of the primary roles. The narration dips
into Julia’s thoughts in this moment: “She saw a glance at Maria, which confirmed the injury to herself; it was a scheme – a trick; she was slighted, Maria was preferred; the smile of triumph which Maria was trying to suppress shewed how well it was understood” (*Mansfield Park* 155). The rest of the party is too focused upon the actual situation at hand, assigning roles, to realize Julia’s true feelings about this act. When Julia storms off in anger, it creates “awkward feelings” and “small compassion” in everyone “except Fanny, who had been a quiet auditor of the whole, and who could not think of her as under the agitations of jealousy without great pity” (*Mansfield Park* 157). Fanny, by being undistracted, is able to read the room accurately and once again see the larger implications of Mr. Crawford’s actions. He is once again choosing to be closer to Maria Bertram, who should not even be acting in the first place. Fanny has already “looked on and listened, not unamused to observe the selfishness which, more or less disguised, seemed to govern them all, and wondering how it would end. For her own gratification she could have wished that something might be acted, for she had never seen even half a play, but every thing of higher consequence was against it” (*Mansfield Park* 153). Fanny is aware that this play is a result of everyone’s own selfish desires. Even Edmund loses his resolve against the play once he knows Mary Crawford wants to participate. If Edmund can drop his convictions due to his feelings, there is little stopping Henry Crawford and the Bertram sisters from acting on theirs. Yet, as the passage also shows, Fanny can resist desire. As much as she would love the chance to see a play, it is not her wants that matter. Her role means that she must put societal morals first. It is ironic when Fanny is requested to play a part in *Lovers’ Vows* and she responds, “Indeed you must excuse me. I could not act any thing if you were to give me the world. No, indeed, I cannot act,” because Fanny is continuously acting (*Mansfield Park* 166). Fanny acts the role of feminine virtue and passivity, pushing down any authentic desires for the sake of
embodying the person she needs to be. Her refusal to participate in the play is part of this act, this role of not taking action, but it is also a reflection of what this play is. Instead of it being a realm of pure fantasy, where the actors don words and personalities that are not their own, Fanny sees it as a realm where true desire can be freely expressed via the illusion of fantasy. Fanny prefers, then, to embody the societal role she is given than to use the environment of the play to possibly confront her own desires and act upon them.

Valerie Traub discusses this concept in chapter 4 of *The Renaissance of Lesbianism in Early Modern England*, primarily in regard to the expression of love between female characters, but it applies as a whole to *Mansfield Park* and its tension between the authentic self and the societal self – between acting upon true desire and acquiescing to societal morality and conduct. Traub analyzes *The Convent of Pleasure* by Margaret Cavendish, observing how,

Pastoral in this play does not promote an elegiac distancing of homoerotic bonds, but further enables transitive gender and erotic exploration through playing the parts…It is while she is costumed as a shepherd that the foreign Princess,…begins to woo Lady Happy, herself dressed as a shepherdess. The amorous freedom associated with pastoral, combined with the gender fluidity of transvestism, lead to an expression of love. (178)

Unlike other instances of women usurping masculinity and engaging in homoerotic desire, the roleplaying aspect creates a bubble of safety for their affections to exist in, because no one observing the scene would believe the love exchanged is real. They are playing at being a shepherd and shepherdess, speaking a script, thus there is no present danger to societal norms. This is exactly what enables the flirtation between Henry Crawford and Maria Bertram to grow. As Fanny observes how “poor Mr Rushworth could seldom get any body to rehearse with him…and so decided to her eye was her cousin Maria’s avoidance of him, and so needlessly
often the rehearsal of the first scene between her and Mr Crawford,” the same effect is in place (Mansfield Park 183). If Maria associating with Mr. Crawford over Mr. Rushworth does not signify to anyone else involved, it is because rehearsing the play creates a realm in which the typical societal rules of courtship and male-female interaction are circumvented momentarily.

There is another instance within the novel of acting and roleplaying revealing true desires that are hidden under the surface, specifically between Fanny and Mary Crawford, but before I discuss this scene and how female-female desire operates in this novel, I must conclude my discussion of Mr. Crawford and how he relates to Fanny’s heterosexual apathy. My term “apathy,” however, may be too neutral of a word to describe her exact reactions to Henry Crawford’s attraction to her. Antipathy better takes its place, because Fanny Price is adamantly against any possibility of marrying Mr. Crawford. She has already, via the examples I have provided of Fanny’s obedience to roles, found herself deeply uncomfortable with the overt expression of heterosexual desire that Maria and Julia give to and receive from Mr. Crawford. When his attention shifts away from the Bertram sisters and upon herself, the revelation of his feelings for Fanny take a while to fully process for her, but “when she did understand it, however, and found herself expected to believe that she had created sensations which his heart had never known before…she was exceedingly distressed, and for some moments unable to speak” (Mansfield Park 307). Fanny does place the locus of the attraction upon herself, and when thinking about this proposal later on, part of her distress stems from how “everything natural, probable, reasonable was against it; all their habits and ways of thinking, and all her own demerits” (Mansfield Park 312). Fanny knows that she is not the type of person that any man of his standing should ever fall in love with. Her role in society cannot allow for such attachments to form, but Mr. Crawford is insisting that this is indeed true.
Her complete distress at Mr. Crawford’s proposal to her allows for Fanny to suddenly act upon what she had previously denied herself – and wanted everyone else to deny themselves – for so long: her desires. Rather, Fanny acts less upon what it is that she wants and more upon what it is she does not want. This is heterosexual apathy at its pinnacle. As I have defined it, it is a disinterest in the male gender and an act of defining what it is that women do not want. Fanny does not want Mr. Crawford, no matter how much she is aware that the societal role she plays demands her to agree to his proposal. Edmund echoes this societal demand when he pleads, “let him succeed at last, Fanny, let him succeed at last. You have proved yourself upright and disinterested, prove yourself grateful and tender-hearted, and then you will be the perfect model of a woman, which I have always believed you born for” (*Mansfield Park* 352). Up to this moment, Fanny’s rejection of Mr. Crawford can pass by without being too much of an anomaly, because women were not supposed to be active in courtship or too eager too soon. In *Pride and Prejudice*, this is echoed in Mr. Collins’s proposal to Elizabeth Bennet, with his insistence that “it is usual with young ladies to reject the addresses of the man whom they secretly mean to accept, when he first applies for their favour; and that sometimes the refusal is repeated a second or even a third time” (138). Reticence in commitment is a reflection of shifting parameters of gender roles and their expression in romantic and sexual behavior. During the sixteenth century, women were dominantly positioned, setting up an “ideology of female voraciousness and male victimization to female lust,” but by the late eighteenth century, this shifted to an “ideology of female passiveness, idealized masculinity, and male sexual predation” (Traub 268). In asserting this shift, this resulted in the demonization of behavior that placed women’s desires in the forefront. If a woman denied the initial proposal, it reflected passivity rather than active desire of another man, thus repressing the previous conception of woman as
seductress. However, prolonging this agreement to marriage too long indicates disinterest rather than passiveness, and this disinterest in heterosexual norms is equally as detrimental to a woman’s status.

Thus, women do need to agree to marriage eventually, but Fanny’s choice to continue refusing Mr. Crawford fights against the expectations set up for women and for marriage. Fanny, however, has been curating the perfect image of femininity, so when she continues to resist Mr. Crawford, it is to the shock of both those around her and herself: “Oh! never, never, never; he never will succeed with me” (*Mansfield Park* 352). In this moment, she breaks character. The real Fanny Price is revealed, hidden for so long under a shy, obedient role. She immediately senses the line she has crossed as she adds, “I mean…that I think I never shall, as far as the future can be answered for – I think I never shall return his regard,” using the word “think” as a way to express that there is a small possibility she could be swayed. (*Mansfield Park* 352). It is too late to fully save her image, however. Fanny is adamant that she is opposed to marrying Mr. Crawford. As mentioned in the previous chapter, Valerie Traub discusses the emergence of domestic heterosexuality by the late eighteenth-century, asserting that “erotic desire for a domestic partner, in addition to desire for a reproductive, status-appropriate mate, became a *requirement* for (not just a happy byproduct of) the bonds between a husband and wife” (265). Fanny’s repulsion from the heterosexual desire Mr. Crawford focuses on her is in opposition of this requirement. Fanny could never possess erotic desire for Mr. Crawford in return, and her continuous refusal of marriage reflects this. Fanny cannot and will not enter a marriage built upon heterosexual (with emphasis on sexual) attraction.

Heterosexuality proves to be out of the realm for Fanny’s desires despite her best efforts at assimilating to the expectations before her by seeking out Edmund as her potential husband,
but female-female desire also lies hidden under her the surface. Even before Mr. Crawford produced a reaction of fear in her, and before he disturbed the status quo of Mansfield Park, he was never in Fanny’s high regard and instead held her attention very little as compared to the magnetism his sister held for Fanny. When being introduced to the two siblings, Mr. Crawford produced little impression while Miss Crawford stood out: “Few young ladies of eighteen could be less called on to speak their opinion than Fanny. In a quiet way, very little attended to, she paid her tribute of admiration to Miss Crawford’s beauty; but as she still continued to think Mr Crawford very plain, in spite of her two cousins having repeatedly proved the contrary, she never mentioned him” (Mansfield Park 76). Mr. Crawford does not signify in Fanny’s mind, but Miss Crawford’s looks captivate her instead. There is a clear preference, a stronger pull of interest and curiosity for Fanny, in the female sibling over the male one. Her positive impression continues after this first meeting when Edmund seeks Fanny’s opinion about Miss Crawford. She answers saying that she liked her “Very well – very much. I like to hear her talk. She entertains me; and she is so extremely pretty, that I have great pleasure in looking at her” (Mansfield Park 90). As discussed prior, “pleasure” is a loaded word, containing innocent and erotic meaning within it, so for Fanny to express “pleasure” while observing Mary’s looks, it conveys that Mary’s prettiness evokes a greater attraction than simple appreciation of a woman’s beauty usually does. It is not until Edmund specifically asks the question, “But was there nothing in her conversation that struck you, Fanny, as not quite right?” that Fanny comments upon Miss Crawford’s negative speech about her uncle (Mansfield Park 90). Edmund asks this question of Fanny because he wants confirmation that his developing feelings for Mary can continue in good conscience despite her flaws. He specifically turns to Fanny because, “Having formed her mind and gained her affections, he had a good chance of her thinking like him;
though at this period, and on this subject, there began now to be some danger of dissimilarity, for he was in a line of admiration of Miss Crawford, which might lead him where Fanny could not follow” (Mansfield Park 91). While Edmund receives the confirmation he needs, the narration is also correct that Fanny and Edmund will have different opinions of Mary going forward. With Edmund’s preoccupation of Mary’s flaws being at the forefront of his conversation, Fanny becomes confused by his later choice to increase his attentions: “She was a little surprised that he could spend so many hours with Miss Crawford, and not see more of the sort of fault which he had already observed, and of which she was almost always reminded by a something of the same nature whenever she was in her company” (Mansfield Park 92). Edmund made Fanny aware of Mary’s flaws, and a dislike of Miss Crawford is solidified after the horse riding begins.

This initial positive first impression of Mary Crawford became replaced by the introduction of a heterosexual love triangle, with Mary and Fanny both competing for the attentions of Edmund. Miss Crawford desires Edmund because wants to marry one of the Bertram brothers for her advancement, and Fanny believes she has the true claim to Edmund’s affections due to eight years of being doted upon. The third side of the triangle, a positive bond between Mary and Fanny, becomes weakened because of this competition, but there is a possibility presented at the start of their interactions that perhaps if Edmund was not a factor for either of them, maybe Fanny could have thought of Mary Crawford positively for much longer. It cannot be confirmed, but the order of events leads to the type of speculation that drives Adrienne Rich’s essay “Compulsory Heterosexuality and Lesbian Existence.” Rich’s essay brings up the possibility that “for women heterosexuality may not be a ‘preference’ at all but something that has had to be imposed, managed, organized, propagandized, and maintained by force” (Rich 648). The force she focuses on is that of “male power,” and that each strand of it
“adds to the cluster of forces within which women have been convinced that marriage, and sexual orientation toward men, are inevitable, even if unsatisfying or oppressive components of their lives” (Rich 640). It follows then that this desire to keep women within only the realm of the “male right of physical, economical, and emotional access” means that there is “the denial of reality and visibility to women’s passion for women, women’s choice of women as allies, life companions, and community” (Rich 647). My comparison of this article to the Fanny-Edmund-Mary triangle is not to insist that Edmund is purposely breaking apart any connection that Fanny and Mary could develop. Instead, I wish to show that this incident is indicative of a larger societal effect of heteronormative structures.

Fanny belongs to a society that forces her to believe that she must marry another man. Since none of the traditional markers of marriage are present with their expectations – i.e. heterosexual desire and procreation – Edmund becomes the only man she feels comfortable with due to his familial and nurturing nature. It then follows that Mary and Edmund’s budding courtship frightens Fanny. She cannot live life alone and unmarried, and her refusal of Mr. Crawford reveals the strength of her repulsion of male attraction being centered on her. Losing the one man that she could feel comfortable marrying places Fanny in a scary predicament. No first impression of Miss Crawford can stay solidified when her future is this precarious. Mary is, without realizing it, standing in the way of Fanny’s only option to fulfill her role. Mary’s attempts to win over Fanny, to draw her into her confidences, inevitably fall short because the connection that would allow these two women to properly bond has been effectively severed before it was given a chance to grow.

Mary has her moments of genuine concern and affection toward Fanny that give glimpses into the possibility of what a friendship – or other deeper connection – could look like if it was
given a chance to blossom. When Fanny is being chastised for not participating in the play
despite being requested to, Mary is the one that comes to her side, as she “moved away her chair
to the opposite side of the table close to Fanny, saying to her in a kind low whisper as she placed
herself, ‘Never mind, my dear Miss Price – this is a cross evening, – everybody is cross and
teasing – but do not let us mind them’” (Mansfield Park 167). Mary’s attempts at comforting
Fanny do work to an extent: “Fanny did not love Miss Crawford; but she felt very much obliged
to her for her present kindness…she could not help admitting it to be very agreeable flattery, or
help listening, and answering with more animation than she intended” (Mansfield Park 167-168).
This moment creates a glimpse at what genuine female affection could do for Fanny if she was
able to let Mary in and if the demands of heterosexuality did not exist to splinter their bond.

Mary’s attentions toward Fanny also slip into the roleplaying and acting to be found
between Mr. Crawford and Maria Bertram. Some of Mary’s most desirous and erotic moments
with Fanny happen because she is subsuming a different kind of role, the one that creates safety
in its presumed fictionality. The first of these incidents occurs when Mary needs help going over
her lines for the play: “I came here to-day intending to rehearse it with Edmund – by ourselves –
against the evening, but he is not in the way; and if he were, I do not think I could go through it
with him,” Mary says, also pointing out, “There, look at that speech, and that, and that. How am
I ever to look him in the face and say such things?” (Mansfield Park 187). Throughout the
novel, Mary is outspoken and bold in her speech, not afraid to state her thoughts and opinions,
yet these lines in the play become too much for her. Mary seeks out Fanny so that “I may fancy
you him, and get on by degrees. You have a look of his sometimes” (Mansfield Park 187).
Fanny serves as a stand in for the heterosexual affection that Mary does not have the courage to
express. Fanny has already established that she is unable to act, but in this moment, there is little
resistance upon her part to sit opposite Mary and receive the statements of love that should be orated to Edmund. Fanny’s comfort level with acting suddenly grows, despite acting being the event that causes people to break their social roles and let their desires loose. If that is what acting does over the course of this novel, then the pattern follows that Fanny’s willingness to help Mary reflects her actual desire. Mary’s actual desire is also expressed in this moment. Despite Fanny being “so truly feminine as to be no very good picture of a man” it is easy for her to deliver lines that she struggles to imagine saying to another man (*Mansfield Park* 188). Thus it follows that Mary is much more comfortable and at ease expressing these romantic sentiments to women.

There is one other instance in which Mary dons a different role to express what she might actually think of Fanny. When Fanny is to have her coming out ball, Miss Crawford offers her a choice of necklace. Even though this act is to help Henry out during his attempts to court Fanny, there is a level of self-indulgence of Mary’s own feelings toward Fanny during this scene. There is an intimacy present as Mary “hastened to complete the gift by putting the necklace round her and making her see how well it looked,” stepping into very close proximity with Fanny and trying to make her see herself the way Mary does (*Mansfield Park* 269). When Fanny learns that this was a gift from Mr. Crawford to begin with, Mary suggests that perhaps the reason Fanny is so upset about it is that “are you imagining he would be too much flattered by seeing round your lovely throat an ornament which his money three years ago, before he knew there was such a throat in the world?” (*Mansfield Park* 269-270). In making this guess, Mary places herself in the role of her brother. She expresses how beautiful Fanny looks – and specifically her throat, a highly erotic spot – but through the distancing effect of saying it would be her brother’s
response. Mary has already tried to direct Fanny into seeing her beauty, so the reader already knows Mary finds something captivating in Fanny. This is of Mary’s own thoughts.

The necklace provides one final indication that Fanny, if given the chance to properly express herself, might have been able to bond with Mary beyond transient moments of occasional care and attention. When she is deciding what to do about the necklaces given to her and the cross, all from Edmund, Mary, and her brother William, it turns out that she cannot use Mary’s necklace with the cross. Once Fanny has the excuse to wear “those memorials of the two most beloved of her heart…and seen and felt how full of William and Edmund they were, she was able, without an effort, to resolve on wearing Miss Crawford’s necklace too. She acknowledged it to be right. Miss Crawford had a claim” (*Mansfield Park* 280). Once Fanny can express familial love, she can then add to it with the affectionate gift of Mary’s, to let the “claim” that Mary has on her be shown. Fanny does not think of the necklace as belonging to both Crawfords, only as emblematic of Mary. Fanny wants to do right by Miss Crawford, even though she is also (rightfully) suspicious of her actions. The pull of affection between women is too strong to fully ignore, even though the narrative pulls them apart as the heteronormative society continues to impose itself.

By the end of the novel, *Mansfield Park* shows how important it is for Fanny to have played the predetermined role society gave her. Her perceived passivity, her obedience and patience allow her to marry Edmund by the end. Maria Bertram becomes a societal example of what happens when a woman chooses to follow her desires rather than what is determined for her. Fanny’s desires are shaped by society, and they are so deeply molded for her that she is left unaware of where her true desires lie. She believes she desires Edmund, but Fanny rather desires social stability and acceptance, and marrying Edmund is the only option she will accept. She had
the opportunity to marry another man, but she is repelled from Mr. Crawford, expressing this repulsion through an accidental and unconscious outburst. Fanny does not want marriage to a man that actively expresses attraction to her, further supporting that her reasons for wanting to marry Edmund are for fulfilling societal expectations as opposed to truly desiring a companionate marriage. Finally, Fanny displays moments throughout the novel where she could begin to explore and realize her potential to desire other women via Miss Crawford, but any chance of connecting to Mary is severed by the conflict of personal desire and societal acceptance and advancement. Fanny’s upbringing shapes her to prioritize her status rather than act upon her own wants, and thus Mary becomes competition instead of companion. The phenomenon of compulsory heterosexuality is outlined throughout Austen’s novel before it was even coined as a term. Fanny’s heterosexual apathy exists, but the societal pressure to conform via marriage masks it from herself and from most of her actions. Fanny marries Edmund, and it appears to be a happy enough ending from her perspective, but Austen provides enough detail to show that Fanny’s marriage is not a sweeping, romantic ending. It is rather a story of a woman successfully conforming to expectation at the expense of her own agency.
CHAPTER III

“TOO PALPABLY DESIRABLE, NATURAL, AND PROBABLE”:
MISUNDERSTANDING DESIRE AND THE ROLE OF SOCIAL STATUS IN EMMA

Fanny Price struggles to understand her true desires because the role she plays prohibits her from exploring them. Fanny is not passive, but she actively participates in a society that wants her to be and adjusts accordingly. She also belongs to a society that continues to stress heterosexual courtship as leading to a marriage that often had less to do with romantic and sexual attraction to a partner and more to do with creating financial stability for both partners involved. Fanny sat at a tipping point, close to crossing the threshold that would allow her to ascend class levels, and she did what she could to ensure that outcome for herself. The inverse of this construct of marriage-as-necessity occurs with the titular character of Emma Woodhouse in Austen’s novel, Emma.

Austen writes Emma as a female character positioned in society – and contrasted against all the other women around her, such as Miss Bates and Jane Fairfax – as possessing the luxury of choice. Emma states it herself that “I have none of the usual inducements of women to marry… I am sure I should be a fool to change such a situation as mine. Fortune I do not want; employment I do not want; consequence I do not want: I believe few married women are half as much mistress of their husband’s house as I am of Hartfield” (Emma 116-117). Emma possess no material need for marriage. She is not in danger of losing her wealth, she is expected to keep possession of Hartfield after her father’s death, and there is an independence granted her in her current position that marriage would only stifle. Emma continues to justify that it is her financial and social standing that allow her to make this choice: “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” (*Emma* 117). This is Emma’s perception of her situation, her understanding of what society must think of unmarried women, and how she is the exception to the rule. She is not entirely correct in assuming that everyone approves of continuing her perpetually single state. For example, people such as Mr. Elton try to court her regardless of her position on marriage. Mr. Knightley also wishes deeply that Emma could find someone: “She always declares that she will never marry, which of course, means just nothing at all. But I have no idea that she has yet ever seen a man she cared for. It would not be a bad thing for her to be very much in love with a proper object. I should like to see Emma in love, and in some doubt of a return; it would do her some good” (*Emma* 82). Mr. Knightley does not take Emma’s denial of entering marriage seriously and believes a husband would help mature her. Throughout the novel, Mr. Knightley condemns behaviors in Emma, such as her matchmaking skills and lack of discipline. He discusses the latter with Mrs. Weston, stating that “she will never submit to any thing requiring industry and patience, and a subjection of the fancy to the understanding. Where Miss Taylor failed to stimulate, I may safely affirm that Harriet Smith will do nothing” (*Emma* 79). Mr. Knightley does not trust a woman to teach Emma about diligence and other traits needed to mature her, especially when instead, Emma is positioned as the dominant one in her relationships to other women. Mr. Knightley also elaborates on how “submitting your own will, and doing as you were bid” are traits women cultivate for marriage, and this is the lesson Mr. Knightley wants Emma to learn (*Emma* 80). She needs discipline, and submission to another person can teach that. Thus, marriage would teach Emma. However, his understanding of the situation is that Emma would have to find a man she loves to change her mind on marriage. Mr. Knightley’s belief that Emma’s assertion on marriage “means just
nothing at all” indicates that he believes that as long as she finds someone to love, it will be an easily retracted denial.

Mr. Knightley understands Emma’s intentions well, for she echoes this sentiment in her conversation about marriage to Harriet: “Were I to fall in love, indeed, it would be a different thing!” (Emma 116). Where Mr. Knightley’s assumptions are wrong is that Emma is not nearly as swayed by heterosexual love as he thinks she is. Emma’s understanding of herself is that “I must see somebody very superior to any one I have seen yet, to be tempted…and I do not wish to see any such person. I would rather not be tempted. I cannot really change for the better,” and that “I have never been in love; it is not my way, or my nature; and I do not think I ever shall” (Emma 116). Emma is adamant that she does not want the temptation of falling in love with another man and believes herself incapable of it additionally. This is another manifestation of heterosexual apathy. Austen writes Emma as a character disinterested in men and places her in a position where this apathy can express itself more freely. Emma can say no without fear to her own situation in life, which up to this point in Austen’s works is a very rare position for a woman to be in.

For much of the novel, there is only one character that approaches near the standard that Emma sets for herself about male suitors, that they must be superior to anyone she knows in Highbury: Frank Churchill. Not even he is able to change Emma’s mind about marriage, however. When Mr. Churchill is rumored to arrive in Highbury, Emma finds herself imagining what a union between them could be like:

She could not but suppose it to be a match that every body who knew them must think of…though not meaning to be induced by him, or by any body else, to give up a situation which she believed more replete with good than any she could change it for, she had a
great curiosity to see him, a decided intention of finding him pleasant, of being liked by him to a certain degree, and a sort of pleasure in the idea of their being coupled in their friends’ imaginations. (*Emma* 141)

What is paramount in this passage is that Emma’s interest in Mr. Churchill has no basis in her having any sort of romantic or sexual attraction to him. She pictures them together not from her vantage point, but rather from the outside looking in as she envisions what Highbury would think of them together. Her interest in strengthening her relationship with Mr. Churchill is focused upon her reputation and not heterosexual desire. Emma also still reiterates in her mind that she does not want to lose her independence and her hold upon Hartfield. She wants to spark conversation about herself and Mr. Churchill among the neighborhood, but Emma does not view him as the man with whom she could fall in love. As Emma meets Frank Churchill and develops an acquaintance with him, this perception stays consistent: “there was nothing to denote him unworthy of the distinguished honour which her imagination had given him; the honour, if not of being really in love with her, of being at least very near it, and saved only by her own indifference – (for still her resolution held of never marrying) – the honour, in short, of being marked out for her by all their joint acquaintance” (*Emma* 202). Emma focuses clearly on “honour,” one that is bestowed upon him for being within her social circle. She perceives their relationship as one that will mutually raise each other’s reputations, but there is nothing more to it. Emma is still not interested in marriage, and in her imagination, she never lets Mr. Churchill fully love her. Instead, Emma imagines that they can never enter courtship or marriage because he knows that she possesses “indifference,” or apathy, toward the idea. Emma enjoys imagining the status that their relations would bring, but she still cannot envision Mr. Churchill as an actual suitor for her.
This assumption that everyone must think of herself and Mr. Churchill as lovers reflects one of Emma’s primary traits, to continuously assert, privately or publicly, that she knows all the inner, intimate details of the residents of Highbury. Emma thinks she has a grasp on people’s thoughts and, most significantly, their desires. Emma’s role as matchmaker throughout the novel stems specifically from this belief that she knows best. This mentality is fostered for a few reasons. Firstly, her position in Highbury is lofty and significant: “The Woodhouses were first in consequence there. All looked up to them” (Emma 56-57). Emma was born into a family and an estate that has held preeminence over Highbury for generations, and she feels ensured that her position of wealth and power will never change in her lifetime. She is by virtue of birth superior over Highbury, and that vantage point places her in a position to look out for and observe the lives of her townspeople. Secondly, Emma was raised in such a lax manner, with Miss Taylor’s governess duties failing in certain respects because, as the narrator states, “the mildness of her temper had hardly allowed her to impose any restraint, (Emma 55). This is also reinforced by Mr. Knightley’s opinions of Emma that I quoted previously. Emma’s inclination toward independent and uncontrolled behavior was never softened. If her authority figures cannot impose said authority over Emma, it feeds into the superiority complex of her birth position. This all develops Emma into a character that desires to exercise her lofty role as the head of Highbury society. She is not only born into a position that allows her to assert greater levels of responsibility, but her natural inclination toward acting on her own impulses and free will suit this role and become channeled into her efforts of doing what she believes will improve Highbury. Emma does not want to marry because that entails relinquishing this position of authority. Instead she prefers to pair together others to marry, both out of a sense that because she is at the top of Highbury society that she is the most qualified to do so, but also because
Emma truly desires to use her position to do good for others. When discussing Miss Taylor’s marriage to Mr. Weston, Mr. Knightley speaks on Emma’s behalf, stating, “But she knows how much the marriage is to Miss Taylor’s advantage; she knows how very acceptable it must be at Miss Taylor’s time of life to be settled in a home of her own, and how important to her to be secure of a comfortable provision” (*Emma* 59-60). This is stated because prior to her marriage, Miss Taylor lived with the Woodhouses, and she could have stayed with them for as long as possible, but instead Emma determined to make a match for her former governess and friend to elevate her to better living conditions. She uses her perceived omniscience to improve the lives of those she cares about.

Emma’s knowledge is just that, though: perceived. She was correct in pairing together Miss Taylor and Mr. Weston, but throughout the rest of the novel, Emma will never find success in her predictions again. This is because Emma does not understand heterosexual desire due to how apathetic she is to it. Her misunderstandings cause her to misinterpret motivations ranging from affection to greed, especially when processing the intentions of men. Her perceived ability to predict matches is an illusion of knowledge that her position in society feeds into. Emma as a character comes closest to embodying the typical traits of Austen’s narrators, the ignorance discussed prior with *Northanger Abbey*. Emma can only perceive what she understands to be most probable, without realizing that other possibilities exist. Mrs. Weston’s attempt to dabble in match prediction herself reveals this limitation in her thinking. Mrs. Weston states that she is discussing “merely its probability” regarding Mr. Knightley marrying Jane Fairfax, and Emma responds that “I see no probability in it, unless you have any better foundation than what you mention” (*Emma* 216). Even though Mrs. Weston is a dear friend, Emma cannot accept her judgement in this situation. Since it does not fall under the range of what Emma thinks is
probable, it cannot happen. While Mrs. Weston’s prediction never comes close to fruition and Emma is correct as to its improbability, this moment still reveals the rigidity of Emma’s intuition.

Emma’s belief in her judgement and predictions being correct, though instead they are often misguided, and place her in a social position that can be usefully explicated via a Lacanian triad. In Lacan’s *Seminar on “The Purloined Letter”*, there are three positions that the characters in Poe’s short story fall into: “The first is a glance that sees nothing…The second, a glance which sees that the first sees nothing and deludes itself as to the secrecy of what it hides…The third sees that the first two glances leave what should be hidden exposed to whomever would seize it” (44). Emma often falls in the second position of this triad, and she believes the rest of Highbury to occupy the first. She is of the belief that she sees what the rest of the townspeople cannot see, so she must interfere and guide these people to their true husbands or wives because they are unable to find their true love on their own. The issue is that Emma is wrong. She thinks she possesses all the knowledge, but except for predicting the marriage between Miss Taylor and Mr. Weston, she knows almost nothing. Within the paradigmatic Lacanian example of a game of evens and odds, Emma would lose. The game within *Emma* is that of marriage, and Emma fails at it because she is apathetic to heterosexuality. The circulation of desires is too foreign to her. The true knowledge, the third glance that can notice the details that Emma misses completely, belongs to the reader. This glance also belongs to Mr. Knightley, whose predictions throughout the novel, such as stating that Harriet “will grow just refined enough to be uncomfortable with those among whom birth and circumstances have placed her home,” foreshadow the ending (*Emma* 80-81). Austen provides readers with enough details that it is indeed possible to determine the real objects of desire for each character. These
details are subsumed by the narration, which is clouded, warped, and made biased by Emma’s own ignorance and limited perspective. Emma’s thoughts combined with the rest of the narration color the details, such as character’s dialogue and actions, that are left for the reader, so similarly to reading *Northanger Abbey*, it is imperative to separate from the narrative bias. The reader must be a Fanny Price, constantly asking what is actually happening as opposed to what Emma and the narrator think is occurring.

The first match that Emma fails at making is that of Harriet Smith with Mr. Elton, and Harriet is a special case for Emma. As Mr. Knightley elaborates, “She is the natural daughter of nobody knows whom, with probably no settled provision at all, and certainly no respectable relations” (*Emma* 97). If Harriet did have an elevated lineage, she likely would not have been sent into parlour-boarder life and likely would possess more fortune. The end of the novel informs that Mr. Knightley was correct in playing down Harriet Smith’s parentage, for “She proved to be the daughter of a tradesman…. – Such was the blood of gentility which Emma had formerly been so ready to vouch for!...what a connexion she had been preparing for Mr. Knightley – or for the Churchills – or even for Mr. Elton! – The stain of illegitimacy, unbleached by nobility or wealth, would have been a stain indeed” (*Emma* 403-404). This discovery reveals that Emma was not only wrong about Harriet’s lineage, but it serves as the final confirmation to end her matchmaking schemes. Even if Emma had been correct in assuming these three men loved Harriet, she would have been condemning them to marriage with a woman far below their station, making none of these fitting matches. Emma wants to marry Harriet off well because, as Mr. Knightley states it best, “Emma, your infatuation about that girl blinds you” (*Emma* 97). Infatuation indeed, for Emma’s first impression of Miss Smith wins her over immediately: “She was a very pretty girl, and her beauty happened to be of a sort which Emma particularly admired.
She was short, plump, and fair, with a fine bloom, blue eyes, light hair, regular features, and a look of great sweetness…so artlessly impressed by the appearance of every thing in so superior a style to what she had been used to, that she must have good sense” (Emma 69). Emma’s first opinion of Harriet is that of beauty and refinement, and in her mind anyone this beautiful and refined could only have a gentry lineage – a romantic, aristocratic notion. Emma believes that “those soft blue eyes and all those natural graces should not be wasted on the inferior society of Highbury and its connections. The acquaintance she had already formed were unworthy of her” (Emma 69). Emma takes Harriet under her wing due to this initial attraction. Also, since Harriet’s situation places her at Mrs. Goddard’s school as a parlour-boarder, it gives Emma even more motivation to use her position in Highbury to ensure that Harriet can be elevated to a status and comfort level that she believes is Miss Smith’s rightful state. Emma even tells Harriet that “The misfortune of your birth ought to make you particularly careful as to your associates. There can be no doubt of your being a gentleman’s daughter, and you must support your claim to that station by every thing within your own power, or there will be plenty of people who would take pleasure in degrading you” (Emma 74-75). Harriet needs help to maintain the social status of which Emma perceives her to be deserving. Emma is insistent upon helping her because she cannot realize – even after being prompted about it – that she is distracted by an attraction to Harriet to think more prudently.

There is also another, potentially more selfish motive as to why Emma needs to keep Harriet’s social status elevated. Harriet serves as a replacement for the closest female connection that Emma had in her life, Miss Taylor. Miss Taylor had lived with Emma for sixteen years, and while initially she served as Emma’s governess, when those duties were over, “they had been living together as friend and friend very mutually attached” and “between them it was more the
intimacy of sisters” (*Emma* 55). As discussed in chapter 1, the status of “sisters” elevates female-female relations outside of the realm of friendship. In *Northanger Abbey*, sisters served as a proxy for marriage, allowing women who desired to be together to become closer while also maintaining the status quo of heterosexual marriage. In this instance, sisters reflect a similar connection. For the narrator to correct the description of their relationship from being friends to being “more” like sisters, it places their connection closer to the female-female eroticism of Catherine with Isabella and Eleanor. Instead of culminating this relationship through a similar marital arrangement, Emma feeds into the dictates of heterosexual marriage in finding Miss Taylor a husband that would improve her social status and bring her happiness. Despite being the one to make Miss Taylor’s match, Emma was still disappointed to lose the proximity to and priority from her closest companion. Emma needs someone to replace the void that now exists in her life. The newly married Mrs. Weston confirms this need while defending the friendship between Emma and Harriet: “perhaps no man can be a good judge of the comfort a woman feels in the society of her own sex, after being used to it all her life” (*Emma* 79). Harriet is necessary to Emma’s happiness currently in her life. Ironically, finding Miss Smith a suitor is what Emma needs to do to keep Harriet in the same social circle. Leaving Harriet to her own devices about romance only leads her to Mr. Martin, and to marry him in Emma’s perspective means that “You would have thrown yourself out of all good society. I must have given you up” (*Emma* 92). Emma wants to provide for Harriet’s security and wealth while also keeping her close. Emma needs Harriet to be matched with an appropriate suitor because a third party is the only possible method to lock Harriet’s social status in place, especially without anyone truly knowing what Miss Smith’s lineage is. Emma’s dominion over Highbury may be akin to patriarchal rule, but Emma can only extend the masculine role so far. If the possibility for her to existed, Emma
likely would marry Harriet herself. Since Emma cannot marry her, a husband for Harriet is needed.

As Emma attempts to match Harriet with Mr. Elton, the Lacanian triad explained makes itself visible. Emma interprets all of Mr. Elton’s actions as that of a man who must be in love with Harriet, yet she ultimately misinterprets these signs, because they are instead hints about Mr. Elton’s desire to marry Emma. Choosing Mr. Elton as Harriet’s future husband is “only too palpably desirable, natural, and probable” in Emma’s eyes, to the point that “She feared it was what every body else must think of and predict” (Emma 78). Since the second position in the triad believes it knows what no one else knows, Emma’s fear that this match is too easy to predict reflects that positioning. She wants to be the only one who can be credited for matching them together and to assert herself as superior matchmaker once more. Emma is so determined to be right in her match that she begins to ignore the little pieces that contradict her prediction. Emma observes such details as “This man is almost too gallant to be in love,” but immediately rationalizes it to herself, stating, “but I suppose that there may be a hundred different ways of being in love” (Emma 88). Emma begins to doubt, but her poor understanding of what is and is not attraction or love causes her to shift her thinking about her initial observation in the wrong way. Mr. Elton is not in love with Harriet, but because Emma desperately needs him to be, she cannot allow for her thinking to change, even if the evidence for it is presenting itself anyways. Plus, Emma thinks of herself as understanding Mr. Elton the best: “Mr. Knightley could not have observed him as she had done, neither with the interest, nor…with the skill of such an observer on such a question as herself…she was able to believe, that he had rather said what he wished resentfully to be true, than what he knew anything about” (Emma 102). Despite Mr. Knightley
possessing sixteen more years of lived experience over Emma, she sees herself as the superior interpreter of human character, emotion, and action.

There is one misreading that fully exemplifies Emma’s lack of understanding of heterosexual desire – combined with her blind infatuation with Harriet – and that is the charade gifted to her. In this situation, Emma misinterprets the information given to her and fails to see what is hidden in plain sight. Mr. Elton arrives at Hartfield calling on Emma, and when he gives her the charade he claims his friend wrote, he states, “I do not offer it for Miss Smith’s collection…but perhaps you may not dislike looking at it” (Emma 105). Despite being directly addressed to, “you” being Emma, and him telling her that it is not for Harriet’s budding charade collection, Emma continues to assume that she is only to be the messenger for Mr. Elton’s attentions toward Harriet. She understands that “the speech was more to Emma than to Harriet,” but believes that Mr. Elton “found it easier to meet her eye than her friend’s,” and is thus too shy to talk to Harriet instead (Emma 105). Emma completely misses the directness of Mr. Elton’s words to her. When she reads the charade with Harriet, Emma is quick to see her companion within each of the lines. One line in particular, “May its approval beam in that soft eye!” makes Emma think, “Harriet exactly. Soft, is the very word for her eye – of all epithets, the justest that could be given” (Emma 106). This is not the first time Emma has associated the word “soft” with Harriet’s eyes: “She was so busy in admiring those soft blue eyes” (Emma 69). It is coincidental that the same word Emma describes Harriet’s eyes with should be used to describe Emma’s eyes in Mr. Elton’s charade, but as a result, Emma can only think of Harriet’s beauty. This charade becomes a reflection not so much of what she thinks Mr. Elton sees in Harriet, but what Emma thinks of her. Emma unconsciously projects her own feelings for Harriet into the charade, which only further clouds her judgement.
When Emma is forced to face the truth of Mr. Elton’s feelings, it becomes more than holding on to her stubborn pride and not wanting to admit she is wrong. Emma is appalled by the insinuation that anyone could be willing to marry her and that she could possibly be attracting him through her own behaviors. In fact, she is ignorant of how her own actions in trying to match Harriet and Mr. Elton could be misinterpreted. Mr. John Knightley has to caution her about Mr. Elton’s feelings, stating, “you will do well to consider whether it is so or not, and to regulate your behavior accordingly. I think your manners to him encouraging. I speak as a friend, Emma. You had better look about you, and ascertain what you do, and what you mean to do” (Emma 136). He warns Emma appropriately that if she wants to keep Mr. Elton at bay that she needs to adjust her actions, but Emma never does. She continues along with her matchmaking scheme until the night that Mr. Elton confesses how he feels. The description of the moment reveals specifically how abhorrent Emma finds this confession: “she found her subject cut up – her hand seized – her attention demanded, and Mr. Elton actually making violent love to her” (Emma 149). Despite the use of the word “love,” the rest of the vocabulary used does not frame this love in gentle, affectionate, or caring terms. Filtered through Emma’s perspective, it is a “violent” act, an attack upon her. Framing Mr. Elton’s actions in this manner reflects how violated Emma feels in the moment. Her whole being feels threatened because one man insists upon confessing that he loves her. This love is not desired. Instead, it is repulsive to her. Emma copes initially by deflecting this attention off herself and continuing to believe in her match: “you forgot yourself – you take me for my friend – any message to Miss Smith I shall be happy to deliver; but no more of this to me if you please” (Emma 149). Emma rationalizes Mr. Elton’s actions as being anything but truthfully directed at her; he mistakes her for Harriet, he is drunk, etc. When Emma is finally convinced that Mr. Elton loves her instead, that all of his
desire is placed upon her and only her, the narration notes that “It would be impossible to say what Emma felt, on hearing this – which of all her unpleasant sensations was uppermost” (Emma 150). “Impossible” is the key word. If probability vs possibility is a strand to be traced in Austen’s novels as Galperin states, then for Emma’s thoughts to be “impossible to say,” especially within a free indirect discourse narrative, indicates that Emma’s reaction goes beyond even her own comprehension. Austen hides Emma’s true feelings to reflect her lack of awareness about desire in others and in herself. The intensity of her reaction against Mr. Elton’s proposal is beyond what Emma is capable of understanding. Though she knows she does not want to be married or tempted into marriage, Emma does not understand the reasoning behind the violation she feels with this proposal.

Despite Emma’s complete failure at matching Harriet to Mr. Elton, she is adamant in trying once more to elevate Harriet’s status via marriage to improve her friend’s life and to be allowed to keep her as a companion. Yet, Frank Churchill being the next suitor of choice for Harriet further emphasizes how-complicatedly flawed Emma’s understanding of desire is and presents an even more complex use of the Lacanian triad. What Emma misses before she even thinks of Mr. Churchill as a possible husband for Harriet is that he has been secretly in love with Jane Fairfax the entire time. Their relationship is meant to be kept secret, but there is also a strategy enacted of hiding in plain sight. Mr. Churchill attempts to mask his love for Jane by speaking of her with comments such as “Miss Fairfax has done her hair in so odd a way – so very odd a way – that I cannot keep my eyes from her. I never saw anything so outré!” (Emma 214). He explains why he keeps looking at Jane Fairfax, an act that could expose himself, by insulting her hair instead of appreciating it. It also gives Mr. Churchill an excuse to talk to her, by insisting he ask why she would style her hair in such a manner. This verbal strategy is then
complimented by his actions: “Emma soon saw him standing before Miss Fairfax, and talking to her; but as to its effect on the young lady he had improvidently placed himself exactly between them, exactly in front of Miss Fairfax, she could absolutely distinguish nothing” (Emma 215). Mr. Churchill works to create a split between perceived actions and true intent. This type of roleplaying would likely be seen through by Fanny Price, but Emma Woodhouse is incapable of that type of shrewd observation. This is because Fanny needed to be observant and capable of understanding others’ actions in order to solidify her social status. Emma’s status is secure, so she never needed to develop this ability, further ensuring that Emma never understands desire.

This hidden-in-plain-sight flirting occurs again involving the piano that Jane finds as a gift one day. As Emma and Mr. Churchill are observing Jane play, he takes up the opportunity to talk freely about his lover but under the guise of Colonel Campbell. Emma has already expressed to Mr. Churchill the rumor that Jane is only visiting Highbury because of an attempted affair, and he uses this speculation to his advantage: “Very thoughtful of Col. Campbell, was not it? – He knew Miss Fairfax could have no music here. I honour that part of the attention particularly; it shews it to have been so thoroughly from the heart. Nothing hastily done; nothing incomplete. True affection only could have prompted it” (Emma 229). Mr. Churchill is speaking of his own actions and reasoning for bringing the piano for Jane to Highbury. Emma does not realize this, and thus when looking over at Jane, “when she saw that with all the deep blush of consciousness, there had been a smile of secret delight, she had less scruple in the amusement, and much less compunction with respect to her. This amiable, upright, perfect Jane Fairfax was apparently cherishing very reprehensible feelings” (Emma 229-230). Emma is both right and wrong. Jane is harboring feelings of a nature she cannot share, but they are directed at Mr. Churchill. Emma tries to chastise Mr. Churchill for being too flippant with this rumor,
stating, “You speak too plain. She must understand you,” but Mr. Churchill replies, “I hope she does. I would have her understand me. I am not in the least ashamed of my meaning” (*Emma* 230). While Emma is usually in the second position of the Lacanian triad, here she belongs to the first. Mr. Churchill is the one who knows information that Emma does not, and his flirting with Jane Fairfax is able to pass under the radar without detection. The third position of the triad can still belong to the reader that is cunning enough to see through Mr. Churchill’s deception.

Mr. Churchill does not think himself completely invisible after a certain point, however. Before he is meant to leave Highbury, he starts to express his secret to Emma: “perhaps, Miss Woodhouse – I think you can hardly be quite without suspicion” before stopping himself (*Emma* 242). Mr. Churchill believes that by now, Emma must have caught on to what he and Jane were hiding, but Emma misinterprets this along with the rest of his nervous behavior during this parting meeting: “He stopt again, rose again, and seemed quite embarrassed. – He was more in love with her than Emma had supposed” (*Emma* 242). As I previously stated, Emma has shown prior interest in Mr. Churchill for what their connection could do for their reputations. From that, she has leaped into believing that the only reason he could be flustered speaking to her as he departs Highbury is that he has actually fallen for her during their time together. She does not respond with the same type of unspeakable emotion this time, but that is because Emma has begun to confuse herself as to what it means to be in love: “she could not doubt his having a decidedly warm admiration, a conscious preference of herself; and this persuasion, joined to all the rest, made her think that she must be a little in love with him, in spite of every previous determination of it” (*Emma* 243). She mistakes the feeling of missing his presence, for having “this sensation of listlessness, weariness, stupidity” as a sign that “I must be in love” (*Emma* 243). Instead of focusing on how she feels about Mr. Churchill in his presence, she directs her
attention to how she feels when he is absent. This trinity of listlessness, weariness, and stupidity she feels are not feelings of desire. Desire operates in the present and is actively focused on the individual in question. Emma never shows that focus toward Mr. Churchill when they are together; she only notices a lack when he is gone. She misses Mr. Churchill but when imagining their reunion and picturing what their courtship would look like, Emma quickly realizes that “the conclusion of every imaginary declaration on his side was that she refused him. Their affection was always to subside into friendship. Every thing tender and charming was to mark their parting, but still they were to part. When she became sensible of this, it struck her that she could not be very much in love” (Emma 244). Her heterosexual apathy reasserts itself in her mind once his presence has returned – even in an imaginary format. What she misses is not Frank Churchill, the person, but the attention she receives from Churchill. Attention may be desired by Emma but wanting to be admired and appreciated is not the same as desiring a person, and she does not desire him. Mr. Churchill may love her in her mind, and she may believe that Highbury would think they are a perfect match, but Emma Woodhouse still cannot muster up romantic or erotic feelings for him.

Instead, Emma plans on redirecting attraction Mr. Churchill shows her toward a new recipient, Harriet: “His recollection of Harriet…suggested to her the idea of Harriet’s succeeding her in his affections. Was it impossible? – No…he had been very much struck with the loveliness of her face and the warm simplicity of her manner; and all the probabilities of circumstance and connection were in her favour” (Emma 245-246). Harriet would benefit greatly from being married to someone with that status and wealth of Mr. Churchill, and Emma would no longer have to navigate the tricky circumstances of unrequited heterosexual attraction. When he is to return to Highbury two months later, Emma is deeply concerned about Mr.
Churchill having continued feelings for her: “If a separation of two months should not have cooled him, there were dangers and evils before her: - caution for him and for herself would be necessary. She did not mean to have her own affections entangled again, and it would be incumbent on her to avoid any encouragement of his” (Emma 281). It is imperative that her matchmaking is successful so that Emma can erase the love she perceives Mr. Churchill having for her.

Emma, however, continues to be a failure at understanding people’s desires, for not only is the truth of Mr. Churchill’s love for Jane a secret to her, but Harriet has her eyes on an entirely different suitor. In a conversation about Harriet’s marital future, Harriet admits that she has fallen for a man that is far above her station: “it is a pleasure to me to admire him at a distance – and to think of his infinite superiority to all the rest of the world, with the gratitude, wonder, and veneration, which are so proper, in me especially” (Emma 300). No names are mentioned at all in this conversation, and it also follows shortly after Harriet’s unfortunate encounter with gypsies. Since Mr. Churchill came to her rescue, Emma assumes she must have fallen in love with him deeply after the event: “The service he rendered you was enough to warm your heart” (Emma 300). Still no names are mentioned, so Harriet agrees with Emma – “Service! oh! it was such an inexpressible obligation!” – despite all along thinking of Mr. Knightley (Emma 301).

Once Emma has to try to break Harriet’s heart gently about the discovery of Frank Churchill and Jane Fairfax’s engagement, Harriet has to make it clear exactly what “obligation” she was thinking of during this conversation:

I was thinking…of Mr. Knightley’s coming up and asking me to dance, when Mr. Elton would not stand up with me; and when there was no other partner in the room. That was the kind action; that was the noble benevolence and generosity; that was the service
which made me begin to feel how superior he was to every other being on earth. (Emma 349)

Emma is unable to comprehend that Harriet, her closest companion, would find someone sticking up for her after being slighted at a ball, around people that she has never fully fit in with due to her circumstances of birth, would find this action more worthy of falling in love with than being saved by some heroics. Emma cannot even understand how the desires of her best friend operates.

This conversation about Harriet’s feelings for Mr. Knightley leads to the most abrupt realization in the entire novel: “Why was it so much worse that Harriet should be in love with Mr. Knightley, than with Frank Churchill? Why was the evil so dreadfully increased by Harriet’s having some hope of a return? It darted through her, with the speed of an arrow, that Mr. Knightley must marry no one but herself!” (Emma 350). After Emma’s insistent and constant disavowal of the prospect of marriage, her intent to have Mr. Knightley marry her is more shocking than either Mr. Elton falling for Emma or Mr. Churchill and Miss Fairfax being engaged. Austen weaved details into the narrative to make those revelations have prior, textual basis. Other than Emma disagreeing that Mr. Knightley could marry Jane – and even in that circumstance, she vouched for Mr. Knightley to be allowed to keep his single status – she gives no signs of ever considering him as a marital partner. Emma can barely understand where this attraction comes from herself: “How long had Mr. Knightley been so dear to her, as every feeling declared him now to be? When had his influence, such influence begun?” (Emma 353). Emma can barely give a satisfactory answer to this question, only able to think that “there had never been a time when she did not consider Mr. Knightley as infinitely the superior, or when his regard for her had not been infinitely the most dear” (Emma 353). The language of her thoughts
is sterile. She thinks of Mr. Knightley as a “superior,” not a lover, and he only is showing “regard” for her, not affection. This sense of superiority that Emma derives from Mr. Knightley stems from his constant presence in her life as someone who challenges her. He is the only character in the novel that is unafraid to tell Emma that she could be wrong, and by this point in the novel, Emma starts realizing how wrong she can be.

Emma stakes her claim on Mr. Knightley not because she is in love with him, but rather because of the one factor that she learns more about throughout the course of the novel: class status. Emma already understands enough of its machinations to set out on her matchmaking schemes in the first place, wanting to ensure that Harriet does not fall lower. This concern for Harriet’s social status is, however, selfish, as previously established. Emma wants to ensure that Harriet can continue to be an acceptable companion for her. Emma thinks of herself as being kind-hearted and generous, but she mostly has little contempt for those of the lower class. When discussing why Emma believes Mr. Martin to originally be unsuitable for Harriet, she explains that “The yeomanry are precisely the order of people with whom I feel I can have nothing to do. A degree or two lower, and a creditable appearance might interest me; I might hope to be useful to their families in some way or other. But a farmer can need none of my help, and is therefore in one sense as much above my notice as in every other he is below it” (Emma 74). While no one reaches Emma’s position in Highbury society, there is a certain threshold of who she can interact with, and unless people are poor enough that she can be moved to pity to help them, there is no need for her to ever reach out. Emma also shows disdain for Miss and Mrs. Bates and their position throughout the whole novel, though her opinions of them are also clouded by her dislike for Miss Bates’s overly chatty nature. However, her shifting opinions of Jane Fairfax also express how class can play a role in her perceptions of people. Emma is initially willing to
create a fresh start with Jane when observing her separately from everyone else. Her thoughts about Jane parallel how she initially thinks about Harriet: “Jane Fairfax was very elegant, remarkably elegant…elegance, which whether of person or mind, she saw so little in Highbury…when she considered what all this elegance was destined to, what she was going to sink from, how she was going to live, it seemed impossible to feel anything but compassion and respect” (*Emma* 174-175). Emma is reminded that Jane Fairfax initially comes from a family of much more worth than the Bates’s who took care of her after she was orphaned. In the company of the Bates’s, though, Emma is suddenly found to switch her opinion of Jane back to that of disdain: “The aunt was tiresome as ever; more tiresome, because anxiety for her health was now added to admiration of her powers…and Jane’s offences rose again” (*Emma* 175). Emma’s limited sympathy for those much lower than her fuels her desire to ensure that Harriet could never reach that low status that Emma cannot tolerate.

Emma needs to be taught to respect those of a lower social standing than her. When Emma steps out of line and insults Miss Bates and her overly talkative ways, Mr. Knightley chastises her for it: “She is poor; she has sunk from the comforts she was born to; and, if she live to old age, must probably sink more. Her situation should secure your compassion” (*Emma* 326). Mr. Knightley’s scolding affects Emma, because she is disappointed in herself for being so rude to someone that has only ever been kind to her. Immediately after this is when Jane asserts her intentions to finally begin her life as a governess, and Emma has only sympathy for her from this point onward: “Her heart had been long growing kinder towards Jane; and this picture of her present sufferings acted as a cure of every former ungenerous suspicion, and left her nothing but pity” (*Emma* 329). Emma’s newfound regret over Miss Bates makes her prior thoughts of Miss Fairfax change. She even compares Jane’s situation to that of other women she knows: “The
contrast between Mrs. Churchill’s importance in the world, and Jane Fairfax’s, struck her; one was every thing, the other nothing – and she sat musing on the difference of woman’s destiny” (Emma 332). Jane should not have been in this situation that she is, but the unfortunate situation of her parents dying has placed her in a lower social status than she belongs.

When Emma asserts that Mr. Knightley needs to marry herself instead of Harriet, it is out of a realization that there is a social order that needs to be maintained. People like Jane may fall out of their positions in society, but that does not meant that people like Harriet must rise to fill those spots. Emma immediately begins to regret the idea of ever trying to raise her influence in society: “Her inferiority, whether of mind or situation, seemed little felt….Who had been at pains to give Harriet notions of self-consequence but herself? – Who but herself had taught her, that she was to elevate herself if possible, and that her claims were great to a high worldly establishment? – If Harriet, from being humble, were grown vain, it was her doing too” (Emma 354-355). This is not the rightful position for Harriet to belong to. The only person in Highbury that could be of compatible status for Mr. Knightley is Emma herself. The wording of her realization adds to this. Emma does not realize that she wants to marry Mr. Knightley, she realizes that he must marry her. It is not desire that drives her, it is societal order.

Emma’s lack of desire is also circumvented by the narrator. When Mr. Knightley confesses his love for Emma, the narration avoids stating Emma’s exact words back to him: “What did she say? – Just what she ought, of course. A lady always does. – She said enough to show there need not be despair – and to invite him to say more himself” (Emma 366-367). Austen’s choice to leave her response left to “just what she ought” turns the reader to assuming the most probable result, that Emma has to say “I love you” back, but it also leaves this moment open to multiple possibilities. Without explicit, textual evidence in this moment, Emma’s
response to Mr. Knightley can never be known by the reader for certain. Austen does not want to solidify Emma’s feelings for him in textual form at this moment, and that absence serves as a chance for what is considered impossible. Emma’s motivations for marrying Mr. Knightley do not have to be motivated by love. She can still be incapable of it as she initially asserts. Austen allows for that to exist within *Emma, Northanger Abbey*, and *Mansfield Park*. Women may find themselves in marriage, but it does not mean that their relationships to men are driven by love and desire. Women can possess heterosexual apathy but find themselves in marriages regardless due to class, security, and other societal expectations. Indeed, as my final chapter explains, even women who do express heterosexual desire may choose to not to marry the men they possess desire for at all.
CHAPTER IV
CODA: THE USE OF FEMALE HETEROSEXUAL DESIRE IN AUSTEN’S NOVELS

Throughout this thesis, I have been arguing that a selection of Austen’s heroines possesses what I have termed heterosexual apathy. Their marriages are formed not out of genuine desire for the men they pursue, but due to outward pressures that make marriage imperative to financial security and social standing. Catherine Morland has to learn that the Gothic novels she reads may reflect certain aspects of the reality around her, but they present an alternative ending for women that lived experience does not allow for. Fanny Price internalizes the role that is thrust upon her, navigating a passivity and meekness at the sacrifice of most of her desires; only when she is threatened with the possibility of marrying Mr. Crawford does she break that character and express her true (lack of) desire. Emma Woodhouse only begins to consider marriage with Mr. Knightley once Harriet threatens Emma’s perceived social stability by wanting to marry Mr. Knightley herself, which would elevate Harriet’s status too high in comparison to Emma. Their marriages occur out of external circumstances rather than desire.

Not all of Austen’s female characters display heterosexual apathy, however. There are female characters that have their desires clearly conveyed, such as Lydia Bennet and her vision of “tenderly flirting with at least six officers at once” in Brighton (Pride and Prejudice 247). Lydia is Austen’s most extreme example of a woman displaying heterosexual desire, but her clear fantasy of entertaining multiple men at once holds no traces of apathy. Lydia’s sexual desire is almost her complete downfall as she becomes entangled with Mr. Wickham, but that is proof of how true and tangible her attraction to men is. She is willing to follow this man regardless of the consequences. Even after Mr. Darcy works to save her reputation, her marriage to Mr. Wickham proves to not be the most beneficial of partnerships, as the narrator elaborates
that “such an income as theirs” is not nearly enough to support the Wickhams, and thus “They were always moving from place to place in quest of a cheap situation” and “His affection for her soon sunk into indifference; her’s lasted a little longer” (Pride and Prejudice 384). For Lydia, she is initially deeply in love with Mr. Wickham, but her impulsive choice to follow him leads her to marrying a man incapable of financially supporting her, and it strains whatever happiness she had sought out with him.

Elizabeth Bennet initially appears to follow a similar pattern as Lydia does, following her emotional impulses rather than seeking out a suitor who can provide for her livelihood. Her refusal of Mr. Collins’s proposal is met with expected disdain and shock from Mrs. Bennet: “But I tell you what, Miss Lizzy, if you take it into your head to go on refusing every offer of marriage in this way, you will never get a husband at all – and I am sure I do not know who is to maintain you when your father is dead. – I shall not be able to keep you” (Pride and Prejudice 143). Mrs. Bennet urges Elizabeth to marry despite lack of attraction to Mr. Collins because their family situation is too precarious. This is only compounded by the knowledge that Mr. Collins is proposing to Elizabeth partially because “being, as I am, to inherit this estate after the death of your honoured father…I could not satisfy myself without resolving to chuse a wife from among his daughters, that the loss to them might be as little as possible” (Pride and Prejudice 137). Elizabeth is given the chance to keep the family estate via marriage, and her denial of this opportunity can thus be read as headstrong, foolish, and even selfish. Mrs. Bennet serves as a reminder that there is more to marriage than attraction and desire, that her daughters must keep in mind their lack of stability without proper husbands to provide for them. Elizabeth at one point in the novel even bitingly states that “since we see every day that where there is affection, young people are seldom withheld by immediate want of fortune, from entering into
engagements with each other, how can I promise to be wiser than so many of my fellow-creatures if I am tempted, or how am I even to know that it would be wisdom to resist?” (Pride and Prejudice 173). Elizabeth understands the power of desire, passion, and attraction when accepting the proposal of a suitor and how it can easily override more common sense concerns such as maintaining an estate or finding an increase in fortunes.

Despite this statement, Elizabeth does not fall for the same trap as Lydia does by the end of the novel, for her marriage to Mr. Darcy proves to be even more financially beneficial than what Mr. Collins could have ever provided for her. What truly arises from looking at Elizabeth’s eventual acceptance of Mr. Darcy is that while she does follow her feelings to an extent, over the course of the novel he is never the man that she most desires in an erotic sense. That man instead is the one who successfully carries away Lydia, Mr. Wickham. Wickham possesses enough powers of attraction to lure in two Bennet sisters, and at the start of the novel, Elizabeth is not immune to his charms. Before attending a ball that she expects Mr. Wickham to be at, it is noted how “she had dressed with more than usual care, and prepared in the highest spirits for the conquest of all that remained unsubdued of his heart, trusting that it was not more than might be won in the course of the evening” (Pride and Prejudice 122). Her attraction to Mr. Wickham takes in all her attention and is simultaneously magnified because of how he confirms Elizabeth’s initial negative impressions of Mr. Darcy. As Mr. Wickham talks about his perceived unfair treatment from Mr. Darcy, “Elizabeth honoured him for such feelings, and thought him handsomer than ever as he expressed them” (Pride and Prejudice 113). This desire for Mr. Wickham, and Elizabeth’s own stubborn insistence upon trusting her first impressions, blinds her to the warnings that other people give her about him. When Jane warns her that “Mr. Wickham is by no means a respectable young man,” Elizabeth follows Jane’s assertions by
stating that Mr. Bingley’s account of the situation is biased because “he is unacquainted with several parts of the story, and has learnt the rest from that friend himself,” that friend being Mr. Darcy (Pride and Prejudice 128). This is hypocritical of her, because Elizabeth has only come to her own conclusion of what occurred between the two men by listening to only Mr. Wickham’s half. Her desire for Mr. Wickham – as well as her initial disdain for Mr. Darcy – drives her to want to believe that Wickham must be a good and truthful person despite multiple voices telling her that he is not. Elizabeth is too infatuated to see beyond the initial charisma that Mr. Wickham possesses.

The spell eventually breaks as it becomes clear that Mr. Wickham has shifted his attentions to a different woman, and while Elizabeth insists that “I am now convinced, my dear aunt, that I have never been much in love; for had I really experienced that pure and elevating passion, I should at present detest his very name, and wish him all manner of evil,” this does not eliminate the infatuation and attraction she felt for him (Pride and Prejudice 177). Love and lust can exist separately on a plane of attraction and desire. This separation of the two is further exhibited when analyzing Elizabeth’s change of heart involving Mr. Darcy. The events that awaken a reconsideration of Mr. Darcy’s character and reputation all involve moments in which he is physically absent. If lust is a desire that is explicitly driven by the image of the body, then the lack of bodily presence by Mr. Darcy in these moments ensures that Elizabeth’s growing desire for him is of a different mode. The first catalyst is the letter, detailing why he suggested Mr. Bingley distance himself from Jane Bennet and also recounting the history between Darcy and Wickham, and it had to be “read, and re-read with the closest attention” before the contents of it affected Elizabeth enough to begin changing her mind (Pride and Prejudice 224). Even at first, Elizabeth had to fight against her visual impression of Mr. Wickham – “She could see him
instantly before her, in every charm of air and address” – and write over it with the contents of Darcy’s letter (Pride and Prejudice 225). Elizabeth eventually admits the strength of her prejudice, but in the process, she has to admit what it was about Wickham that had fooled her: “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, on the very beginning of our acquaintance, I have courted prepossession and ignorance, and driven reason away, where either were concerned” (Pride and Prejudice 227). Elizabeth knows her desire for Wickham is not love, but rather a type of desire fueled by self-gratification and attention. This is contrasted with the thoughts that Elizabeth begins to have about Mr. Darcy: “his disappointed feelings became the object of compassion. His attachment excited gratitude, his general character respect; but she could not approve of him; nor could she for a moment repent her refusal, or feel the slightest inclination ever to see him again” (Pride and Prejudice 230-231). Elizabeth has not fully developed feelings for Mr. Darcy yet, and even though she can admit that his feelings for her spark “gratitude,” she is not won over by his attentions in the same way she was about those of Mr. Wickham. The distance between Elizabeth and Mr. Darcy eliminates the possibility in this moment for the type of physical eroticism that existed with her feelings for Mr. Wickham.

The next step in Elizabeth’s kindling desire for Mr. Darcy is when she first visits Pemberley. Mr. Darcy is absent from the estate, with only his housekeeper as a guide for Elizabeth and her relatives. As Elizabeth takes in all of Pemberley, the grounds and the interior, she comes to bemoan that “And of this place…I might have been mistress! With these rooms I might now have been familiarly acquainted! Instead of viewing them as a stranger, I might have rejoiced in them as my own” (Pride and Prejudice 260). The material benefits to a marital
connection with Mr. Darcy are presented to her in a way that had not been made manifest prior. The visual proof of his affluence is now presented to Elizabeth, and there is an appeal – a desire – to have her own claim over this estate. This desire is simultaneously practical and self-indulgent. It is natural to strive for comfort and stability, but Pemberley also provides a luxury beyond that for Elizabeth. To marry Mr. Darcy would give her an opportunity that she would never have for herself in her current financial situation. This, as well as the housekeeper’s description of him, influences her existing impression of Mr. Darcy as she takes in his painted countenance that she discovers within the house: “There was certainly at this moment, in Elizabeth’s mind, a more gentle sensation towards the original, than she had ever felt in the height of their acquaintance...she thought of his regard with a deeper sentiment of gratitude than it had ever raised before; she remembered its warmth, and softened its impropriety of expression” (Pride and Prejudice 265). Elizabeth properly understands now what Mr. Darcy was offering her in full. Marriage to him is more than the bond of two people, but the extension of all his worth and possession on to her. It is a chance to raise her up out of her current situation and into a life that is far more prosperous.

As Lydia runs away to elope with Mr. Wickham, this only deepens Elizabeth’s sense of how crucial it is to marry the right individual. Before Mr. Darcy even steps in to save Lydia’s reputation, Elizabeth begins to realize that “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 fancy told her she still possessed, of bringing on the renewal of his addresses” (Pride and Prejudice 277). Elizabeth would willingly marry Mr. Darcy, but this realization comes when she fully believes that “it was no longer likely they should meet” due to Lydia’s scandalous behavior (Pride and Prejudice
There is once more a distancing effect at play. This sense of regret and missed opportunity sparks in Elizabeth a realization that not only could she love him, but that a marriage between them would be beneficial for them as people as well as for her own livelihood: “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” (*Pride and Prejudice* 318). This combined with Mr. Darcy’s willingness to put aside his pride and help Lydia and Mr. Wickham allows Elizabeth to respond to his second proposal with agreement. Her desire for Mr. Darcy lies not in the realm of physical lust, but in his character and his status. Her shifting impressions throughout the novel consist of two men that she feels two very different types of desire for. The more erotic passions of Mr. Wickham do not hold up in the end, and she grows to love Mr. Darcy outside of such physical stimuli.

Elizabeth’s choice of husband is reflected in reverse with Maria Bertram in *Mansfield Park*. As discussed in chapter 2, Maria is engaged to Mr. Rushworth, but Fanny’s perceptions allow her to see that Maria is also flirting with Mr. Crawford. The previously discussed scene at the ha-ha gate expresses how unhappy Maria is with the engagement she is in. Mr. Crawford provides Maria with some relief as an outlet to focus her time and attention toward instead of her future husband. She expresses more desire toward him than she does to Mr. Rushworth. Mr. Crawford, however, does not last as a distraction. Mr. Crawford leaves Mansfield Park not very long after Sir Thomas Bertram returns to the residence. He tells Maria he is leaving for Bath with his uncle, and Maria concludes that “he was going – and if not voluntarily going, voluntarily intending to stay away; for, excepting what might be due to his uncle, his engagements were all self-imposed. – He might talk of necessity, but she knew his
independence” (Mansfield Park 209). Maria is hurt by him leaving and believes that he does not desire her the way she desired him. She even feels that “the hand and the heart were alike motionless and passive now” when Mr. Crawford holds her hand to his chest as they part (Mansfield Park 210). Maria feels nothing from him, any passion or life toward her gone.

This leaves Maria with only Mr. Rushworth. Sir Bertram begins to observe that perhaps his eldest daughter is not satisfied with the engagement: “Her behavior to Mr Rushworth was careless and cold. She did not, could not, like him…Mr Rushworth had perhaps been accepted on too short an acquaintance, and on knowing him better she was repenting” (Mansfield Park 216). When Sir Thomas asks her whether his perceptions are correct, Maria insists upon maintaining the engagement to Mr. Rushworth. Sir Thomas decides to take her statement for what it is and believes that “Mr Rushworth must and would improve in good society; and if Maria could now speak so securely of her happiness with him, speaking certainly without the prejudice, the blindness of love, she ought to be believed” (Mansfield Park 216). Despite his growing doubt for Mr. Rushworth’s suitableness for Maria, he believes that the engagement will still provide stability for his daughter, even if it is not necessarily driven by love. Sir Thomas is only partially correct in Maria’s motives for continuing her engagement to Mr. Rushworth. For a few days, Maria was holding out hope for a “symptom of a softened heart” via some form of communication from Mr. Crawford, but when it became clear that he would not return for her, Maria decided that “he should not destroy her credit, her appearance, her prosperity” by letting her broken heart fester and keep her isolated (Mansfield Park 217). She also desires independence, growing to find that “she was less and less able to endure the restraint which her father imposed” (Mansfield Park 217). Maria desires freedom from her parents, as many children eventually do as they grow into adults. Despite the metaphor of the ha-ha gate, that her
engagement to Mr. Rushworth gives her “a feeling of restraint and hardship” and makes her feel trapped, Maria ultimately sees marriage to him as giving her freedom from patriarchal authority (Mansfield Park 123). She makes the choice that many women make, to trade one type of restriction for another. At least marriage to Mr. Rushworth allows her to mingle with London society.

Maria’s happiness within her marriage to Mr. Rushworth is fleeting. Gossip begins to spread, and Fanny learns about a report of “the family of Mr. R of Wimpole Street” being torn apart because the wife ran off with “the well known and captivating Mr. C” (Mansfield Park 438-439). Despite the lack of full names, Fanny knows that the Rushworths live on Wimpole Street, and she remembers too well “his unsettled affections, wavering with his vanity, Maria’s decided attachment, and no sufficient principle on either side” during their time together at Mansfield Park, confirming to her that it had to be Mr. Crawford and Maria who ran off together (Mansfield Park 440). In the end, the passions between herself and Mr. Crawford twist from love to hate, Mr. Rushworth is able to obtain a divorce, and Maria’s fate at the end of the novel is for Mrs. Norris to “devote herself to her unfortunate Maria, and in an establishment being formed for them in another country” (Mansfield Park 461). In Sir Thomas’s eyes, “Maria had destroyed her own character,” and he would not try to “restore what could never be restored,” and thus she became banished not only from London society, but from the majority of her family and her home country (Mansfield Park 460). Being confined to life with Mrs. Norris becomes the ultimate punishment, because Maria’s desire to live freely in society, the reason she even continued her engagement to Mr. Rushworth, is put to an end. Maria’s ostracization echoes Lydia’s elopement with Mr. Whickham, where Mary Bennet chastises her younger sister for her overactive desires by saying, “Unhappy as the event must be for Lydia, we may draw from it this
useful lesson: that loss of virtue in a female is irretrievable – that one false step involves her in endless ruin – that her reputation is no less brittle than it is beautiful, – and that she cannot be too much guarded in her behavior towards the undeserving of the other sex” (Pride and Prejudice 298). Despite how women are supposed to marry men, a woman cannot overstep her bounds in pursuing her desires on her own. If a woman is active in her desires, she is punished for it. While Lydia’s reputation is saved by Mr. Darcy convincing Whickham to marry her, she was close to suffering a similar fate to Maria Bertram’s.

Looking at how heterosexual desire operates within these women, Austen creates a parallel narrative to those female characters that possess heterosexual apathy. Characters such as Catherine Morland, Fanny Price, and Emma Woodhouse explore the avenues in which women find themselves marrying when desire is absent, and while all of their marriages fulfill the need for financial and social stability, there is still a lack to be found or a level of discomfort that Austen creates in the endings of her narratives. This also applies to the fates of Lydia Bennet and Maria Bertram, where their stories do not end in happiness either. Indeed, their stories end even worse. For Lydia, it is explicitly stated how her happiness with Mr. Wickham does not last, and Maria’s reputation has been destroyed with no hope for her to return to the society to which she belonged. The female characters that experience heterosexual desire the strongest become the unhappiest. I believe Austen provides Lydia and Maria as counterpoints to Catherine, Fanny, and Emma because she is capturing in her writing the full range of women’s experiences. Returning throughout all of her novels to the “marriage plot” makes sense when considering that no two women necessarily experience the same fate, but most women in gentry society have the same general expectation of marriage being the priority of their lives. Austen appears to be
saying that the institution of marriage for women can be constraining and restricting no matter if a woman experiences heterosexual desire or not.

I say, “can be,” because it is not always the case. Of the novels and characters I have looked at so far, Elizabeth Bennet is the only one whose ending seems legitimately satisfying. (Perhaps this contributes to why *Pride and Prejudice* is Austen’s most popular and most adapted novel today.) Austen crafts a story for Elizabeth and Darcy in which both parties navigate a desire that takes time to properly develop and express. As I previously stated, the desire between them is not focused upon eroticism, but rather upon mutual respect and understanding for each other’s character by the novel’s end. Then there is the relationship of Anne Elliot and Frederick Wentworth in *Persuasion*, where their happiness also requires time and patience. Initially, their relationship began passionately: “They were gradually acquainted, and when acquainted, rapidly and deeply in love. It would be difficult to say which had seen the highest perfection in the other, or which had been the happiest; she in receiving his declarations and proposals, or he in having them accepted” (*Persuasion* 65). However, Anne is confronted with much opposition from the engagement: “to throw herself away at nineteen…in an engagement with 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, and no connexions to secure even his farther rise in that profession, would be, indeed, a throwing away” (*Persuasion* 66). Anne is convinced to end the engagement with Mr. Wentworth, being persuaded that financial and social stability takes priority over love. Eight years later, when Mr. Wentworth is serendipitously about to re-enter her life, Anne reflects back on her choice, and believes it was likely a mistake: “She was persuaded that under every disadvantage of disapprobation at home, and every anxiety attending his profession, all their probable fears, delays, and disappointments, she should yet have been a
happier woman in maintaining the engagement, than she had been in the sacrifice of it”  
(Persuasion 68). Within those eight years, Mr. Wentworth does elevate his financial and social situation considerably, further adding to Anne’s regret, because they could have spent that gap of time married to each other and have the circumstances turn out fine. Anne spends most of the novel worrying that perhaps she had lost any chance to be with Mr. Wentworth, until he confesses to her how he feels in a letter. When they become engaged once more, the narrator states, “When any two young people take it into their heads to marry, they are pretty sure by perseverance to carry their point, be they ever so poor, or ever so imprudent, or ever so little likely to be necessary to each other’s ultimate comfort. This may be bad morality to conclude with, but I believe it to be truth” (Persuasion 254). This perhaps could be the true thesis of Austen’s stance upon women entering marriage.

I wrote this final chapter because there is more to focus on within the role of marriage in Austen’s novels than solely the exploration of queerness within her texts. This is not to say there is not importance to the main focus of this thesis, especially in regard to reframing how gender and sexuality is understood and represented at the end of the eighteenth century. This study began as an exploration and elaboration upon an interpretation of Austen’s novels that upon my first reading felt obvious – that the bonds between women take priority over the “romances” of the novels – but as I dug into the novels further, it became more than an analysis of how heterosexual apathy manifests in these characters and how the society around them influences how their desires are – or rather, are not – expressed. I began to see a larger picture about marriage as a whole arise. It comes back to Valerie Traub’s definition of domestic heterosexuality: “erotic desire for a domestic partner, in addition to desire for a reproductive, status-appropriate mate, became a requirement for (not just a happy byproduct of) the bonds
between a husband and wife” (265). By the end of the eighteenth century, marriage was beginning to be understood as needing to require a balance between erotic and romantic desire with social and financial necessity. For Catherine, Fanny, and Emma, their heterosexual apathy does not allow them to experience desire for the men they marry, and so the engagements they enter into are poorly chosen because they do not understand that marriage requires more of them. For Lydia and Maria, they let their passions overtake them and do not think about the consequences of social and financial status. Maria’s fate is the worst of these characters because she intersects at the crossroads between each mistake. She allows herself to marry Mr. Rushworth despite the lack of affection toward him for her own material benefit, but when she finds it unsatisfactory, she runs off with Mr. Crawford without regard to how it would affect her social status. Elizabeth and Anne, however, have relationships that possess a stronger balance. Mr. Darcy provides Elizabeth with a home and income that far succeeds what Mr. Collins would have given her if she had married him solely for financial security. Her insistence that love is necessary for marriage allows her to find someone that she is able to properly desire. By avoiding being overeager with Mr. Wickham, she also avoids Lydia’s fate. Mr. Darcy provides the balance necessary for a mutually beneficial partnership. Anne was initially driven by the same impulse of desire that guides Lydia and Maria, but by listening to the guidance of those around her avoids making a mistake. Even though it becomes clear that Anne could have married Mr. Wentworth eight years prior and been happy in the end, it could have been as likely that she married him and their lives would be stuck in poverty. By waiting it out, she is able to marry Mr. Wentworth with a much more confident assertion that even if his military profession puts his life in danger, at least she will be provided for. There is still uncertainty, but her future is less dire looking than what the alternate possibilities could have been.
Austen devotes book after book on the issue of marriage from a woman’s perspective, exploring the various conflicts that arise for women within a society that makes it an imperative to be married. She explores desire – and the lack of it – and pinpoints the issues that make it a difficult institution for women to navigate successfully. The largest issue that looms over these characters is the lack of actual choice in their fate. If women act upon their desires or if they conform to the pressures of society, they can still end with similar fates. However, Austen does provide characters as well that do manage to find happiness for themselves. She does not entirely condone marriage in her writing, but rather works to write accounts that express the realities of women in their myriad of forms. If marriage is more often repressive than a source of happiness, perhaps this reflects a percentage of attitudes toward the institution. Maybe happy marriages were rarer. More research beyond the scope of my thesis would have to be done in order to determine this. Perhaps it is also a reflection of a woman writer who was never married in her life time. Austen, like any writer, has her worldviews and biases, and with so little information about her personal life existing, it is impossible to truly know why she never married, but maybe her reasons lie within her novels. But in writing these novels, Austen provides insight as to why women married, what marriage entailed, but also – most importantly for my thesis – into how female desire operated. Whether that desire is directed at men or at women, Austen’s works tell what happens to female desire within a society that works to control, suppress, and redirect their desires. In denying women the true agency to seek out and choose the people they want to spend their lives with, the reality of the “marriage plot” that women had to live with was to navigate as best as they could within those parameters. Some women found happiness and some did not, but that is also ultimately how life in general works. Marriage is just one aspect of life to explore.


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