

LESS THAN IDEAL HUSBANDS AND WIVES:
SATIRIC AND SERIOUS MARRIAGE THEMES IN THE WORKS OF
JANE AUSTEN AND OSCAR WILDE

by

SVETLANA BOCHMAN

A dissertation submitted to the Graduate Faculty in English
in partial fulfillment of the requirements for the degree of
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Abstract

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Advisor: Professor Donald Stone

Despite differences in gender, chosen genre, intended audience and comic purpose, Jane Austen and Oscar Wilde are more similar than different in their modes of subversive humor and in the themes they employ to satirize marriage. Analyzing their works allowed me to explore British marriage satire at the nineteenth century's beginning and end. Looking at Austen from a feminist perspective and relying on critical writing on drama for Wilde, I read both authors' works closely, attempting to find hidden meanings behind characters' actions. After establishing stylistic parallels, I focus on recurring themes: seduction and courtship, mercenary marriage and single mothers, concentrating on Wilde's *Importance of Being Earnest*, *Ideal Husband*, *Lady Windermere's Fan*, *Woman of No Importance* and *Picture of Dorian Gray* and Austen's *Sense and Sensibility*, *Pride and Prejudice*, *Mansfield Park*, *Emma*, *Northanger Abbey*, *Persuasion*, *Lady Susan* and juvenilia.

In dissecting humorous texts to look at social critique hidden behind wit, I found that what words lose in humor, they gained in acquiring alternate meanings. The authors diverge in comic philosophy, in their view of the individual and marriage's social role. Austen criticizes certain *aspects* of marriage but does not denigrate marriage itself. She

wishes to educate, giving examples of good marriages and people. When Wilde attacks his time's social vices and follies, he does so *amorally*, without attempting to educate. Despite his cynicism, he respects those who courageously retain individuality in a conformist society. Wilde thinks one should attempt self-development and self-understanding despite social strictures. Austen believes self-understanding is important only in allowing one to better judge others and be a good member of society. Her positively portrayed characters, after some comic trial and error, surrender some individual views to become integrated parts of society through marriage. Wilde's wittiest characters, (none are "positive" or "negative"), fail to conform to social strictures, even after marriage.

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I would also like to thank the faculty in the English Program at the CUNY Graduate Center, particularly my committee members. I am lucky to have found a group of people who genuinely cared about the success of this project and were united in helping me to understand my subject matter. In Donald Stone I found the rare combination of a professional mentor who is also a kind and supportive person. Prof. Stone encouraged me to develop my own ideas and not use others' thoughts as a crutch. He was consistent in monitoring my progress, even when on leave in China. Most importantly, he encouraged me to keep writing.

This project would not have been possible without the rest of my committee: Norman Kelvin challenged me to see various levels of meaning in my subject matter and encouraged me to be more assertive, both in this project and in the program in general, Richard Kaye was also very kind and supportive and Talia Schaffer came on board at the eleventh hour to complete the committee.

This project is dedicated to the memory of my daughter

Sarah Elizabeth Bochman

(died April 24, 2004)

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Introduction

Analyzing Jane Austen and Oscar Wilde's Marriage Texts

Analyzing Jane Austen and Oscar Wilde's Marriage Texts

"The comic spirit, Wilde told Arthur Roberts, is a necessity in life, as a purge to all human vanity."

- Richard Ellmann (*Oscar Wilde* 411)

"I dearly love a laugh...Follies and nonsense, whims and inconsistencies *do* divert me, I own, and I laugh at them whenever I can."

- Jane Austen (*Pride and Prejudice* 57)

Despite differences in gender, chosen genre, intended audience and comic¹ purpose, Jane Austen and Oscar Wilde are more similar than different in their modes of subversive humor² and in the themes they draw on to satirize marriage. These are funny writers who are also profound social critics. They comment upon marriage both seriously and satirically. Despite defending the status quo, Jane Austen is critical of her society; despite going against the status quo, Oscar Wilde draws on dramatic and comic elements familiar to his audiences. There are correlations between Austen and Wilde's writing; a dialogue can be read between the two, especially when they employ the comic tool of wit. They have a similar comic spirit³ when dealing with marriage, but while Wilde employs the

¹ I employ "comic/comedy" and "humorous/humor" interchangeably; both have to do with that which causes laughter or amusement.

² I employ "humor" and "wit" interchangeably because it is difficult to make a distinction between them. Perhaps wit is more intellectual because it has to do with the ability to perceive similarities in things that seem dissimilar. Wit is expressed through skillful phrases, epigrams, plays upon words, paradoxes and surprising contrasts. By "humor," I mean that which deals with incongruities, mistakes and flaws found in human nature.

comic spirit to dissect marriage, Austen employs the satire⁴ constructively, rather than destructively, to show that marriage can be a positive instrument in a flawed society. Analyzing their works together allowed me to explore British marriage satire⁵ at the beginning and end of the nineteenth century.

Looking at Austen from a feminist perspective and relying on critical writing on drama to examine Wilde, I read both authors' plots closely, attempting to find hidden meanings behind characters' actions. I studied both better and lesser-known texts, concentrating on Wilde's *The Importance of Being Earnest* (1895), *An Ideal Husband* (1895), *Lady Windermere's Fan* (1892), *A Woman of No Importance* (1893) and *The Picture of Dorian Gray* (1891) and Austen's *Sense and Sensibility* (1811), *Pride and Prejudice* (1813), *Mansfield Park* (1814), *Emma* (1816), *Northanger Abbey* (1817), *Persuasion* (1818), *Lady Susan* (1803) and juvenilia. Each chapter focuses on similarities in the writers, particularly on the way in which they employ subversive humor in their works. Both authors understood the power humor has to sway audiences.

In my first chapter, I establish stylistic parallels. I believe that it is important to establish similarities in style first because then one can better observe affinities between the writers' themes. As I studied Austen and Wilde's writing on marriage, I found that their satire had many comic elements in common. Many nineteenth-century writers

³ I draw on George Meredith's definition of the "comic spirit" as intellectual humor that is against stupidity and "folly," is directed at the middle class and requires a "seriousness of mind" from the author ("An Essay on Comedy and the Uses of the Comic Spirit").

⁴ By "satire," I mean a comic method that employs humor and wit to criticize. A satirist usually wants his or her criticism to improve some aspect of humanity.

⁵ By "marriage satire," I mean satiric writing on the subject of marriage.

address marriage in a satirical way, however, Austen and Wilde are distinctive in the brilliance with which they draw on irony⁶ and wit to focus on this topic.

Lionel Trilling describes Austen's writing style in a way that can also be attributed to Wilde. According to Trilling, her irony "is a method of comprehension. It perceives the world through an awareness of its contradictions, paradoxes and anomalies" (*The Moral Obligation To Be Intelligent* 27). Both writers are sensitive to what is wrong in their respective worlds and employ irony and wit to criticize such social defects as:

"vulgarity... smallness of mind, insufficiency of awareness, assertive self-esteem" (ibid).

The authors approach marriage humor through similar comic methods. Austen's main comic instrument is irony while Wilde's is paradox. Both employ the marriage plot, writing about courtship and matrimony. They also draw on both situational and dramatic irony as well as ironic word-play in their dialogue.

The next three chapters focus on recurring themes in their work. Chapter 2 deals with seduction and courtship, Chapter 3 with mercenary marriage and Chapter 4 with single mothers. The chapter themes follow a progression from events leading up to marriage, to marriage itself, to motherhood. In addition, all these themes have to do with women's issues. In exploring them, I draw a picture of women's lives in nineteenth-century Britain.

My second chapter concentrates on how the authors create comedy and address serious themes through their portrayal of the seductions and courtships that lead up to (or fail to lead up to) marriage. Wilde's treatment of the subject shows that when it comes

⁶ By "irony," I mean the literary device characterized by indirectness, in which the author shows a recognition of incongruity by expressing his or her real intention in words that actually mean the reverse.

to courtship and marriage, he believes the wishes of the individual to be more important than those of society. Meanwhile Austen shows that a “prudent” match is one that primarily follows social dictates, although like Elizabeth, the heroine may step on some toes in the process. On the other hand, she attempts to show that although restraint in emotion and action is prudent, one should not be *too* restrained when dealing with affairs of the heart. Although both treat the theme satirically, each defines it differently. Austen sees “acceptable” courtship as one in which the parties are “well suited” to each other and one that leads to marriage. “Dangerous” seduction and courtship occurs when courtship is initiated by the “wrong” person. Such a person is often sexually or financially motivated. Wilde also writes about such “dangerous” persons, but his view of seduction and courtship allows for sexuality. His characters see courtship (and marriage) as a “game,” therefore, courtship ending in marriage does not necessarily merit a “success” in Wilde’s eyes. This playful element to courtship is not as evident in Austen, who takes marriage more seriously. Looking at the authors’ treatment of these themes shows the limited options nineteenth-century women had when choosing not only a life-long mate, but in choosing a husband, in effect, choosing the future lives they are to lead.

My third chapter shows the ways in which the two humorists critique mercenary marriage. While Austen sees mercenary marriage as an unfortunate (though sometimes necessary) part of society, Wilde sees it as empty and ridiculous. For example, Jane Austen wishes to work “within the system.” She believes that marriage is a positive social phenomenon and therefore treats it seriously for the most part.⁷ Wilde on the other hand thinks that since getting married is silly and that deception is necessary to sustain a

⁷ She only treats it irreverently in her juvenilia.

marriage, that marriage itself is full of lies. Unlike Austen, who provides examples of instances in which mercenary marriage is acceptable, Wilde believes that it is never acceptable to marry for money. In this chapter, I also look at the phenomena I term “marriage market mammas” or mothers who arrange mercenary marriages for their children. Although Austen’s novels and Wilde’s plays look down upon purely mercenary marriages, I read slightly against the authors intentions here, employing a feminist point of view to show that it is possible to read the mercenary endeavors of their female characters as socially inevitable.

My final chapter discusses various types of what I term “single” mothers in the authors’ works. My definition of a single mother includes any woman who is raising children without help. This includes the accepted definition of “single mother”: an unwed mother or widow, as well as women whose husbands are “absent” in spirit if not physically. I have also included women who take care of siblings because of “absentee” parents in this definition. In Austen, such women are the heroines of her novels. This chapter is most feminist in tone, explaining the plight of women who are forced to raise small children, marry off grown children and take care of their household, all effectively alone. The problems these mothers face is the culmination of problems that begin with the limited options women have during courtship. Lack of life options force them to opt for mercenary marriages. In the nineteenth century, marriage often leaves even women who have husbands alone in raising children and taking care of households. In Chapter 4, I also talk about the financial and social difficulties of unwed mothers and of widows whose husbands do not provide for them after their deaths.

In dissecting humorous texts to look at social critique hidden behind witty words, I found that what the words lost in humor, they gained in acquiring alternate meanings. The authors diverge in comic philosophy, in their view of marriage's social role. They see the individual differently. Austen criticizes certain *aspects* of marriage but does not denigrate marriage itself. Like most satirists, she wishes to educate, giving examples of good marriages and good people. Wilde also attacks social vices and exposes his time's follies, although he does so *amorally*, without attempting to educate. Despite his cynicism, he respects those who courageously retain individuality in a conformist society. Wilde thinks one should attempt self-development and self-understanding despite social strictures. Austen believes self-understanding is important only in allowing one to better judge others and be a good member of society. Her positively portrayed characters, after some comic trial and error, surrender some individual views to become integrated parts of society through marriage. Wilde's wittiest characters, (none are "positive" or "negative"), fail to conform to social strictures, even after marriage.

I chose the project of looking at Austen and Wilde's work on marriage because I believe that in general, today's studies of nineteenth-century literature have not given humor the critical attention it deserves.⁸ This comes from a general lack of attention paid

⁸ Harold Orel and Jennifer Wagner-Lawlor's studies on the subject are notable exceptions.

to comedy in literary criticism.⁹ I therefore chose to write about Austen and Wilde because in my mind they are the best comic representatives of their time. I also chose these particular authors because their comic writings have never, to the best of my knowledge, been compared at full length. It is vital to look at their humor because it is through humor that these authors reach their audience. Humor allows Austen and Wilde's respective audiences to digest their often serious social commentary. It is especially important to discuss the way these authors write about marriage themes.¹⁰ By addressing such themes satirically, Austen and Wilde challenge cultural codes. While talking about marriage, they employ aspects of humor such as paradox and irony to reveal how ideas about women in their society are biased and illogical.

Austen and Wilde are among the best known writers who *concentrated* on marriage themes. A number of critics have been useful in explaining either Austen or Wilde's individual style and the possible motives behind their humor. Although much has been written about marriage in Austen's work, there is room to expand critically on the ways in which she *satirizes* the subject. Most critics rightly concentrate on Austen's feminism in portraying marriage, or discuss how she employs marriage as a major part of her

⁹ Leo Damrosch states that "Literary criticism has always been more comfortable with high-minded theories of tragedy than with trying to explain comedy. It's tragedy whose existence is easy to explain and laughter that seems mysterious" ([www.news.harvard.edu/gazette/2002/08.22/10-wit.html]). This agrees with Wilde's philosophy that "The world has always laughed at its own tragedies...whatever the world has treated seriously belongs to the comedy side of things" (*A Woman of No Importance* 462).

¹⁰ I take as a "marriage theme" anything relating to the subject of marriage, including the process of courtship, reasons for marrying, the status of the unmarried, adultery and parent-child relations.

plots.¹¹ I believe that both a feminist and plot-driven critique is vital for a study of Austen. In addition to these approaches, I look at the way in which she draws on humor to deal with the subject of marriage. Almost as much has been written on Wilde as on Austen. Although all of Wilde's plays center on marriage, I did not come across a single scholarly text devoted to the way Wilde satirizes the subject in his works.¹² In studying Wilde, I found that queer theory, although important, was not as useful as theater criticism (critical writing on drama/theater) and plot analysis¹³ when looking at his marriage satire. I agree with Wendell Stacy Johnson, who asserts that "It may well be that the serious critical consideration of this one major Victorian dramatist (as well as the great wit of the age) is now in its beginnings" ("Fallen Women, Lost Children: Wilde and the Theatre of the Nineties" 211, note 6).¹⁴ By comparing such outwardly dissimilar writers, the former a strong advocate of marriage, the latter a staunch opponent, we can see what an important theme marriage was in the nineteenth century.

When I began researching how both writers draw on humor to address the subject of marriage, I found that it was impossible to read Austen and Wilde's marriage satires

¹¹ Audrey Bilger, Eileen Gillooly and Regina Barreca have recently made feminist studies of subversive satire in Austen's novels. Marilyn Butler's historicist work is also useful as is Robert Polhemus' classic study of Austen within a larger comic literary tradition. Polhemus also discusses the social purpose of Austen's comedy.

¹² Richard Ellmann, Sos Eltis, Kerry Powell, Melissa Knox, Neil Sammells and Dariusz Pestka's studies of Wilde's society comedies gave me a general framework upon which to build my analysis.

¹³ not plot synopsis, but close reading of the plot in order to make conclusions about hidden meanings behind the characters' actions and perhaps say something about the author's motives

¹⁴ Johnson said this in 1984; Wilde has since entered the literary canon, though with a lesser status than Austen.

without coming up against serious issues dealing with women's place in nineteenth-century British society. In both Austen and Wilde it is women who seem most concerned with marriage topics. In Austen, the subject of marriage belongs almost wholly to women, while in Wilde it is the province of both men and women, although women seem to be in charge of arranging marriages. My analysis of how Austen and Wilde deal with the subjects of sexuality, courtship, marriage, family and children ended by having as much as to do with the way the authors treat these subjects satirically as encompassing the grim reality of women's tenuous financial and social situation in nineteenth-century Britain.

Though Austen and Wilde's marriage satire shares a comic style, each author has a different comic purpose: Austen puts characters into social context while Wilde detaches them from social context. As a result, Austen's characters are rich and many-sided. It is possible to imagine them as real people. Wilde's characters are symbolic, not meant to be taken for real persons. This difference in characterization rests on how each author sees major societal establishments such as marriage. It is possible for Austen to put her characters into social context because she views societal establishments like marriage as viable. Wilde on the other hand, sensed that strong marital unions as experienced by country yeomen described at the end of Austen's early nineteenth-century novels such as *Pride and Prejudice* and *Sense and Sensibility* were no longer viable for the alienated men and women of fin-de-siecle London.

It is difficult to speak of Austen's feminism or Wilde's anti-marital sentiments without addressing the brilliance of their comic writing. I realize that there is an inherent contradiction between the levity of the authors' humor and the seriousness, even

grimness with which I address its subtext. This speaks to the difficulty inherent in any humor criticism: one often resorts to a “humorless” tone in discussing literature’s funniest excerpts.

Comparison Feasibility

Though I believe it is feasible to compare Austen and Wilde’s humor despite generic differences, I would like to address the challenge of analyzing works of narrative fiction alongside works for the theater.¹⁵ One challenge lies in the fact that narrative fiction is meant for a reading audience, one who obtains all the information they need from the text. Works written for theater on the other hand are meant for a viewing audience, one that takes in the play’s dialogue as only part of a whole, the rest of which is composed of actors’ interpretation, as well as effects provided by scenery, lighting, costumes, make-up, etc. The authors’ choice of genre affects the way their comedy is formed.¹⁶ Austen employs a narrator that contributes to her marriage humor. Since narrative is geared towards individual persons and allows a reader to reflect upon the material, Austen uses the form to educate her reader along with her characters. Wilde’s marriage satires lack narration. There is no time for individual reflection as one is caught up in the entertainment. With Wilde work, reflection comes later, when audience members digest the titillating plot and outrageous dialogue.

¹⁵ Though Wilde is the author of a novel, *The Picture of Dorian Gray*, I concentrate on comparing Wilde’s plays to Austen’s novels.

¹⁶ As do their different audiences. Wilde wrote for an intelligent, sophisticated audience; Austen wrote for unsophisticated, uneducated young women – younger versions of Mrs. Bennet.

In comparing Wilde's plays to Austen's novels, I analyze Wilde's texts as if they were written to be read, rather than viewed, addressing in each play only the dramatic text and any stage directions he provides. In analyzing only Wilde's words on the page I realize that I address a "bare bones" version of his text, for Wilde, like many playwrights, was quite concerned about staging and casting. The fact that Austen's works are composed of much dialogue that is vital to the narrative allows her novels to be compared to Wilde's dramatic texts. Her dramatic dialogue often takes center stage, making long descriptions and narration less necessary. Main traits of characters' personalities as well as major plot changes are often revealed through dialogue rather than narration or description.¹⁷ In fact, both authors employ dialogue in order to reveal character traits.

An additional issue when comparing Austen and Wilde is the approximately eighty years between them. Although technically Austen wrote during the Romantic period, she defies easy classification. Although she wrote prior to the Victorian period, Austen is Victorian in her social awareness and modernity. Like the writing of Wilde's period, her novels concentrate on individual characters, social gatherings and family structure. As a late-Victorian writer, Wilde critiques Victorian values. I therefore feel it is possible to make comparisons between one whose writing on marriage topics looks forward to the Victorian period and one whose writing looks back upon the same period.

¹⁷ For this reason Austen's novels have often been dramatized in the twentieth century.

Chapter 1

The Comic Spirit:

Shared Comic Style and Theme in Jane Austen and Oscar Wilde

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Shared Comic Style and Theme in Jane Austen and Oscar Wilde

“Seldom, very seldom does complete truth belong to any human disclosure...”

- Jane Austen (*Emma* 437)

“The truth [about marriage] is rarely pure and never simple”

- Oscar Wilde (*The Importance of Being Earnest* 326)

In attempting to answer what Austen and Wilde’s marriage satire consists of stylistically, I will address how the writers employ irony, wit, paradox and comic characterization. Their use of parody and sometimes contempt for the objects of their satire will also be addressed. Articulating the unique nature of Austen and Wilde’s satire will allow me to also state the inherent similarity in their satiric styles - in doing so I hope to shed light on both of the authors.

PART A. “Divorces are Made in Heaven”: Wilde’s Use of Comic Paradox

Even though Austen and Wilde share a comic spirit and draw on similar comic themes, they differ in their major comic technique. Paradox is Wilde’s major comic technique and at the heart of his wit. In this way he differs from Austen, whose major comic technique is irony. In “The Truth In Masks” he states that “A truth in art is that whose contradictory is also true” (99). The fact that paradox is central to Wilde’s comedy is no surprise because paradox, with its ability to draw attention and place emphasis, is a common tool in epigrammatic writing. Dariusz Pestka defines paradoxical

writing as writing that employs “the irony of reversal” where “the statement itself carries a context which contradicts [its] words” (176). Wilde thrives on the seemingly self-contradictory or absurd statement that usually contains a truth contrary to received opinion. Each of his witty paradoxical statements “is achieved by the fitting of the absurd word into the [normal] context” (ibid 181). In fact, most of the witty remarks in his plays are paradoxes, giving the feeling of the absurd to his works. For example, on the subject of love and marriage, Wilde asserts that “divorces are made in heaven” (*The Importance of Being Earnest* 323) and that love is easily killed (*Lady Windermere’s Fan* 427) but “To love oneself is the beginning of a lifelong romance” (*An Ideal Husband* 522). These hilarious paradoxical sayings are epigrammatic in that they convey their message with concise clarity and pointed polish.

Neil Sammells asserts that “Wilde’s reversals and paradoxes do not simply preserve the dominant ideological terms he engages with, but they deconstruct them” (2). Wilde preserves his society’s ideology by writing his comedies in a popular style that combines comedy with melodrama. He deconstructs this same ideology through social satire. Wilde employs paradox to satirize marriage in several ways. One way is by creating a discrepancy between the moral tone of an epigram and amoral treatment of the subject: “The amount of women in London who flirt with their own husbands is perfectly scandalous. It looks so bad. It is simply washing one’s clean linen in public” (*The Importance of Being Earnest* 327). Wilde also reverses proverbs and clichés for a paradoxically humorous effect, as in “washing one’s *clean* linen in public” or when Lady Bracknell asserts that “The General was essentially a man of peace, except in his domestic life” (ibid 382). There is a double paradox here: one reverses the cliché of a

man of war being gentle when at home; the second reverses the usual belief about soldiers, who Lady Bracknell describes as essentially peaceful. Here, and throughout the play, Lady Bracknell, in attempting to support social conventions, ends by compromising them.

Another type of Wildean paradox shocks “with the unexpected contradiction, embodied in a traditionally respected concept”:

LADY BRACKNELL. I was obliged to call on dear Lady Harbury. I hadn't been there since her poor husband's death. I never saw a woman so altered. She looks quite twenty years younger.

ALGERNON. I heard her hair has turned quite gold from grief. (ibid 328)

Here Lady Bracknell's first three sentences give a clichéd description of a woman's reaction to the death of her husband, with the paradox appearing in the fourth sentence. Algernon's response is paradoxical more briefly.

Wilde also employs oxymoron when structuring his paradoxes. Oxymoron is suited to Wilde's paradoxical expression because it merges contradictory ideas quite concisely. When Lady Bracknell refuses to consent to Jack and Gwendolyn's marriage, Jack states that he will not consent to Algernon and Cecily's union, asserting that “*a passionate celibacy* is all that any of us can look forward to” (ibid 377 emphasis added).

Wilde's wit, his expert phraseology expressed through paradoxes that include surprising comparisons and contrasts is evident in practically every line of his plays. Countless examples abound and many of his characters, both male and female, are identified as “wits.” These wits are intelligent people who are able to form skillful plays upon words. Wilde employs wit to satirize marriage many times. For example, when

Lord Goring, the “reformed” rake, proposes, he vows to be “an ideal husband;” his lady pertly answers: “An ideal husband!...Oh, I don’t think I should like that. It sounds like something in the next world” (*An Ideal Husband* 551). In *A Woman of No Importance* the women wittily decide that an “ideal husband” is one who “is to do nothing but pay bills and compliments” (447).

Paradoxically, almost every character contradicts him or herself through word or deed, making it impossible to take any character seriously. Characters perform for each other in Wilde’s comedies. He gives the sense that human beings are mostly superficial, hence his “flat” characters; he is self-reflexive, writing stylized dialogue. For example, in an early draft of *Lady Windermere’s Fan* Mrs. Erlynne dismisses Lord Windermere’s disapproval of her unmarried lifestyle: “I suppose, Windermere, you would like me to retire into a convent, or become a hospital nurse, or something of that kind, as people do in silly modern novels and silly French plays” (qtd. in Powell 26). Here Wilde’s character is self-reflexively referring to the melodramatic novels and plays that Wilde drew from for his work. In the final edition of the play a comment is made that Mrs. Erlynne is “like an *édition de luxe* of a wicked French novel, meant specially for the English market” (ibid), a comment that can be attributed to the play itself. Sammells notices that Wilde’s comedy shows “a self-reflective concern with its own surfaces...and a pervasive fascination with presenting identity as surface – hence indeterminate, slippery, reversible” (4). Austen on the other hand, is not usually self-reflexive. She does not purposely draw attention to the fictional nature of her work because she wants the audience to believe in the realism of what her characters are saying.

PART B. Conforming Rebels and Rebellious Conformists: Austen and Wilde's Marriage Satire Through Ironic Characterization

Wilde's major comic technique is paradox, but he employs irony as well. Irony is Austen's major comic technique. In fact, within the marriage plot, both authors employ irony¹⁸ in order to show the difference between what is and what may or should be. One way Austen and Wilde do this is through ironic characterization. By having irony as her major comic technique, Austen follows her favorite influence, Samuel Johnson. She makes humorous, understated pronouncements on the condition of humankind, such as when she asserts that "It is a truth universally acknowledged that a man in possession of a good fortune must be in want of a wife" (*Pride and Prejudice* 1).

Austen and Wilde's work includes characters who defy social mores, although they may seem to initially conform to them. For example, as a dutiful daughter, sister and neighbor, Elizabeth proves defiant by refusing Mr. Collins, although she has no other prospects in sight. By having one of her most attractive heroines insist on marrying for love, Austen, like many writers who followed her, including Wilde, is quite modern in placing individual wishes over those of family and community despite the fact that marriage itself is a conventional comic ending. Austen gives her readers a happy ending culminating in marriage, in which the heroine seems to conform to social mores by giving up some of her independence in becoming a wife. On the other hand, Elizabeth holds out for a love match, disregarding her mother's wishes and those of a materialistic

¹⁸ I follow Gillooly's definition of irony as humor that incorporates emotional distance (*Smile of Discontent*).

society. Instead of marrying for convenience, she risks spinsterhood in order to adhere to her personal belief that one should marry for love.

Austen's comedies climax with the protagonist's internal recognition, a dialogue with the self in which self-understanding is (usually ironically) reached. In all of Austen's novels, the protagonists must come to self-realization before they can understand others' motives, facilitate change within themselves and be worthy of marriage. For example, in *Emma*, unlike Austen's other novels, all social obstacles to marriage and happiness are within the heroine herself. Emma must change before she marries Mr. Knightley. This happens in a climactic scene depicted in highly emotional, dramatic language. In the carriage after the ball, Emma realizes that without self-knowledge there cannot be a knowledge of others. Only when she humorously "realized that Mr. Knightley must marry no one but herself" (*Emma* 414) does Emma understand how wrong she had been regarding others' attachments - that of Harriet and Jane Fairfax and her own with Frank Churchill. When Mr. Knightley reprimands her for insulting Miss Bates, Emma realizes that she is not a pampered exception but a part of a larger community.

Just as Elizabeth Bennet is an example of Austen's ironic characterization, within Wilde's ironic characterization, Lady Windermere is a prime example of a character who initially seems to conform to social mores. She is morally upright and loyal to her husband, looking down upon the likes of Mrs. Erlynne. Yet when her faith in her husband is tested, she is ready to defy society, abandon her child and run away with Lord Darlington. She returns to her husband, but keeps her former plan secret. As for Mrs. Erlynne, she is seen as evidence of Wilde's modernity. Powell sees Wilde's radicalness in the fact that Mrs. Erlynne is never morally punished for the mistakes she made in

youth (*Wilde and the Theatre of the 1890s*), while Sammells sees her as a feminist figure because

As a female dandy she effects a reversal of gender power-relations (on the public stage of the ball, her re-entrance into “respectable” society, she tells Lord Windermere that she can manage the men, though confesses to being afraid of the women). By refusing the role of mother and escaping to Europe with a rich husband she achieves a victory of sorts, for “cleverness” over morality and the sexual double-standard in particular.

(89)

Here Wilde is employing ironic characterization to satirize marriage. Lady Windermere, the “good” wife is revealed as a hypocritical puritan. Wilde shows her ideals of a marriage based upon complete honesty as not viable, even in her own home. And although Mrs. Erlynne is punished at the end of the play and notwithstanding her status as “fallen” woman and “bad” wife, her witty bon mots give the audience more pleasure than Lady Windermere’s melodramatic speeches.

1. Ironic Truths Universally Acknowledged: Marriage Satire’s Ironic and Often Irreverent Observation

Irony in the form of reversal of expectations occurs in the ironic and often irreverent observations Austen and Wilde’s characters make, which sometimes surprises the audience with an unexpected reversal at the end of a seemingly clichéd phrase. In *Northanger Abbey* for example, Austen humorously parodies eighteenth-century conduct books when her narrator states that “imbecility in females is a great enhancement of their

personal charms” and that “A woman especially, if she have the misfortune of knowing anything, should conceal it as well as she can...I will only add in justice to men [that]... there is a portion of them too reasonable and well informed themselves to desire anything more in a woman than ignorance.” With regard to marriage “a good-looking girl with...a very ignorant mind, cannot fail of attracting a clever young man...” (99). In *Lady Susan*, Lady Susan wishes her daughter to dislike school, for “...to be mistress of French, Italian, German, music, singing, and drawing, etc., will gain a woman some applause, but will not add one lover to her list...” (*Lady Susan* 253). There is more than mere ironic word-play at issue here, for in both statements Austen satirizes the concept that education and/or intelligence in a woman is not an asset on the marriage market.

Austen’s most ironic comments on human nature have the feeling of off-hand comic observation, such as: “Artlessness will never do in love matters...” (*Lady Susan* 274)¹⁹ and “...a single man in possession of a good fortune, must be in want of a wife” (*Pride and Prejudice* 1). The “universal truth” of *Pride and Prejudice*’s first line is therefore only “true” for those who, like Mrs. Bennet see everything as pertaining to the marriage market.

Irreverent observation on the subject of education is evident in the following scene in *The Importance of Being Earnest*, in which a dowager interviews a young man as a possible mate for her daughter:

¹⁹ A remark that looks forward to Wilde’s view of “earnestness” as artificial, especially regarding courtship and marriage.

LADY BRACKNELL. I have always been of opinion that a man who desires to get married should know either everything or nothing. Which do you know?

JACK. (After some hesitation). I know nothing, Lady Bracknell.

LADY BRACKNELL. I am pleased to hear it. I do not approve of anything that tampers with natural ignorance... Fortunately in England, at any rate, education produces no effect whatsoever. (332)

Austen's narrator speaks of ignorance in women, Wilde's character refers to men's education. In both examples instead of the usual concealment of ignorance an embracement of ignorance is recommended. Austen is being humorously ironical in her recommendation, implying that men prefer ignorant women as mates in order to feel superior and that intelligent women have no choice but to act out this part because in the early nineteenth century "The rare women who had shared their brothers' lessons... who found these studies of interest, were advised to keep quiet about it" (Myer 41). In Wilde's case, a silly woman's comments are a dig at the aristocracy as well as a critique of education.

Wilde's ironic and irreverent observations on the subject of marriage usually occur in epigrammatic phrases. Knox calls Wilde "willfully self-contradictory" (*Oscar Wilde in the 1990s*). For example, one of Wilde's characters laments that "The world has grown so suspicious of anything that looks like a happy married life" (*Lady Windermere's Fan* 400) another, referring to wives, wittily asserts that "It takes a thoroughly good woman to do a thoroughly stupid thing" (ibid 403).

Many writers in the nineteenth century wrote in a style that incorporated ironic and irreverent observations, but Austen and Wilde are special in that they fill seemingly off-hand observations with deeper meanings and seemingly profound observations with irreverent meaning:

ALGERNON. If ever I get married, I'll certainly try to forget the fact.

JACK. ...The Divorce Court was specially invented for people whose memories are so curiously constituted. (*The Importance of Being Earnest* 323)

Here Wilde is commenting on what he believes to be the dissipated state of late nineteenth-century marriage through Algernon's glibness and Jack's more serious warning. Algernon's seemingly off-hand comment is an ironic epigram in itself. He wittily proclaims that he will try to continue all of the pleasures of his bachelor existence once he marries. Through Algernon's comment, Wilde refers to those who do not take marriage seriously. Through Jack's comment, Wilde refers to those whose lack of respect for marriage allows them to commit adultery. Jack purposely misunderstands Algernon's comment, implying that those who "forget" their spouses, by committing adultery or seriously neglecting them, are taken by their aggrieved spouses to divorce court. The Divorce Law for the first time allowed spouses to dissolve marriages. Although controversial, it allowed people to end unhappy marriages, something much more difficult to do in Austen's time. The off-hand way that Wilde refers to divorce in his comedies shows how far late-Victorian society's ideas of marriage had come since Austen's time, for although she refers to dissolved marriages in her juvenilia, Austen makes no mention of such marriages in novels intended for publication.

PART C. The Importance of Being Ironic: Situational and Dramatic Irony and the Audience's Superior Understanding

In addition to ironic and often irreverent observations, both authors also employ ironic situations and dramatic irony when satirizing marriage, allowing the audience to know more than the characters. Austen is a master at allowing her audience to see what her characters cannot, employing free indirect discourse to describe people and events from a seemingly third-person omniscient perspective, but in the way that a particular character sees and understands them. This type of narrator allows the reader to sense the righteousness of the heroine's emotions while being made to understand when she is wrong. Austen's novels are dramatic in this sense, with the reader sympathizing for or against certain characters, especially in matters of love.

Barreca deems *Northanger Abbey*, *Pride and Prejudice* and *Emma* "ironic comedies" (*Last Laughs* 7). I believe this can be seen in *Emma* where we know, despite Emma's ignorance, that she and Mr. Knightley are meant for each other, as are Elizabeth and Darcy in *Pride and Prejudice* and Catherine and Henry in *Northanger Abbey*. We can also quickly see that Marianne and Willoughby are not meant for each other in *Sense and Sensibility*, despite Marianne's love for the young man. In *Mansfield Park* we understand that of all the household, Fanny is the most worthy of love and happiness, despite her initially lowly position and her own self-doubt. Such self-doubt also plagues Elinor in *Sense and Sensibility* even though the reader knows that Edward favors her over Lucy Steele.

Wilde also employs dramatic irony when addressing the subject of marriage in his plays. In *A Woman of No Importance*, the audience is allowed to know Gerald's parentage before the young man is informed of it, allowing for greater sympathy towards Mrs. Arbuthnot. Similarly, in *Lady Windermere's Fan* the audience is privy to Mrs. Erlynne's past, while Lady Windermere remains in the dark. She never knows that Mrs. Erlynne is her mother, giving a greater poignancy to the older woman's speech urging Lady Windermere to, at all costs, "remain with her child" for Mrs. Erlynne regrets giving up her daughter and urges her now not to give up the right to her own child by becoming a "fallen woman" like herself.

As for ironic situation, Wilde's works are full of them, especially dramatic, often melodramatic, irony. *The Importance of Being Earnest* can be called an "ironic comedy."²⁰ Here comic ironies abound as Jack's "brother" Earnest appears in the form of Algernon after Jack has "killed" him. Another irony occurs when the avowed bachelor Algernon becomes engaged. More hilarious ironies abound as Cecily and Gwendolyn seem to be engaged to the same man, Lady Bracknell accepts Cecily for her nephew after discovering Cecily's "worth" and Miss Prism is revealed as little Jack's nanny. In addition, Jack is revealed as Lady Bracknell's nephew, Gwendolyn's cousin and Algernon's brother. The final humorous irony in the play occurs when Jack discovers that he was born with the name "Ernest" after all and both men find out that they "had been telling the truth all along" (*The Importance of Being Earnest* 384).

Dramatic irony also plays a role in *An Ideal Husband* when Lady Chiltern, who has heretofore expected impeccable moral conduct from her husband, is forced to hide from

²⁰ See Barecca's discussion of Austen.

him behind a door at Lord Goring's apartment as well as reveal that she has written a compromising note to Lord Goring. The "villain" of the play, Mrs. Cheveley, who has spent the comedy attempting to ensnare other characters for her own purposes, is metaphorically caught in a bejeweled wrist cuff, from which she cannot escape unless she renounces her evil schemes. The cuff symbolizes both her greed and her punishment.

A similar level of dramatic irony ensues in *Lady Windermere's Fan*, when the morally impeccable Lady Windermere is almost compromised when she leaves her fan at Lord Darlington's residence. It is known that Lord Darlington has been pining for her. Mrs. Erlynne then compromises herself in order to save her daughter and Lady Windermere is forced to admit her mistaken notions of morality.

Austen's works also contain many humorous situational ironies. Several appear in *Emma* alone. Mr. Elton's proposal to Emma *not* Harriet is one, as is Harriet's love for Mr. Knightley rather than for Frank Churchill as Emma thought. Frank's love for Jane rather than herself as the heroine misguidedly thought and Knightley's love for Emma rather than Jane – Emma is wrong once more. In *Sense and Sensibility*, the situation in which Robert Ferrars marries Lucy Steele after his brother was disinherited because he was engaged to Lucy is a plot twist worthy of the later Wilde. Dramatic irony occurs in *Pride and Prejudice* when Elizabeth is unsure whether Darcy will propose again after she had refused him, unaware that Darcy helped Lydia for her sake. It is also ironic that Darcy becomes interested in Elizabeth only when she refuses to dance with him because she does not act the toady like others in classes below him.

PART D. An Over-eager Sense and an Overblown Sensibility: Austen's Use of Parody

In addition to her main comic device of irony, Austen employs parody. She parodies the prevalent literary styles of her time, mocking the over-blown romantic, gothic and epistolary styles of the eighteenth century. Broad parody can be also be found in her juvenilia, where she mimics not only the form of earlier writing, but the sycophantic tone found in dedications to patrons. She volubly dedicates most of her earlier writing to her sister. In her later novels such as *Sense and Sensibility*, Austen parodies sentimental and gothic novels, especially in the melodramatic character of Marianne. By contrast, Catherine, the heroine in *Northanger Abbey* is also a parody of a romantic heroine in her very anti-romanticism. For example, she is not melodramatically devastated when a man she admires fails to attend a ball; she eats normally and sleeps well that night, forgetting all about him. Growing up, Catherine was a tomboy, "noisy and wild, hated confinement and cleanliness, and loved nothing so well in the world as rolling down the green slope at the back of the house" (*Northanger Abbey* 6). Although she believes herself destined to be a romantic heroine on account of obsessive reading of novels such as *The Mysteries of Udolpho*, Catherine is in fact an ordinary young woman from a common-place background who began life as plain-looking. In *Northanger Abbey* Austen spends the second half of the novel parodying gothic novels such as Ann Radcliffe's *The Romance of the Forest* (1791). This novel's influence is seen in the scene where Catherine is thrilled to discover, stuffed into the back of a closet, what she believes to be a secret manuscript detailing villainous crimes of her beloved's father, only to see that it is a collection of old laundry bills. In addition, Catherine's suspicions that General Tilney murdered his wife is a reference to Radcliffe's *Sicilian Romance* (1790).

PART E. The Importance of Being Witty: Wit as Used in Marriage Satire

Another similarity in the authors' styles is their use of wit to satirize marriage. I take "wit" to mean "an intelligent, natural ability to perceive and understand as well as express in an ingeniously humorous manner the relationship between seemingly incongruous or disparate things" (*Webster's Dictionary*).²¹ Such expression of incongruities often causes surprise. Austen and Wilde both have acute perception and an eye for the absurd in life. In her novels Austen's wit is of a much quieter variety than Wilde's but her juvenilia, letters and *Lady Susan* show a penetrating wit every bit as lively as that which Wilde later develops. For example, in *Lady Susan* the title character humorously confides to her friend of the "discreet" life she has led since her husband's death: "...my being only four months a widow...I have admitted no one's attentions but Manwaring's" (224). Lady Susan states that she "cannot easily resolve on anything so serious as marriage, especially as I am not at present in want of money..." (257), a comment worthy of Wilde's later dandies. Lady Susan is wittily described as a woman who "does not confine herself to that honest flirtation which satisfies most people, but aspires to the more delicious gratification of making a whole family miserable" (248).

Both authors employ satire to bring down the status quo, employing wit to highlight social instabilities, and both wrote in eras rife with change. In satirizing marriage, Austen revised the rules of the gender game from within her novels by laughing at men, showing that they are not superior creatures after all. Wilde ridiculed aristocrats for the same purpose. According to Marilyn Butler's definition, a common complaint from

²¹ I am not considering "metaphoric wit," as in George Eliot or Samuel Johnson's definition.

critics is that Austen ignores events of her time, that her novels seemingly revel in safety and ease, while the threat of revolution occupied England.²² Butler sees Austen as someone very much concerned with events of her time. I agree with this view because Austen laughs at everything in her juvenilia - "literary conventions, social mores, history, love, death -- with a wild abandon" (Bilger). This is what Wilde does in his plays. The instability of the late eighteenth century can be seen in Austen's early work, which is quite irreverent. In it she proceeds to

deal flippantly with sibling rivalry, drunkenness, adultery, seduction, illegitimacy, destitution, suicide, mercenary marriage, murder, prison, the gallows, deformity, speech impediment, galloping consumption, steel mantraps, physical injury. (Myer 8)²³

Myer explains that "The squirearchy among whom the young Jane Austen moved was less stable than one might think from...her novels. If one reads between her lines, one finds an exploration of social tensions, social and economic change" (4).²⁴

Austen employs wit to highlight societal instabilities, especially those that can be seen in marriage. Wilde employs the comic technique of wit for the same purpose. This

²² Invasion from France was feared throughout most of Austen's life. England itself was unsafe, with poor roads harboring highwaymen and 100,000 criminals in London alone (see Myer 4).

²³ Austen laughed at all of these subjects, and her readers laughed with her, grateful to read a romantic comedy that laughed at more than lovers' foibles.

²⁴ Butler, who sees Austen as politically conservative, also addresses such social tension in the author's work, comparing it to the "anti-Jacobin or conservative novels of the late 1790's, [written] when England seemed in danger of losing the war against a revolutionized France. This last conservative genre, which includes *Northanger*... domestic, home-bound and village-bound novels by women like Jane West, appeared in the very years when Jane Austen wrote..." (xiv).

can be seen in *Lady Windermere's Fan* when Lord Darlington sees marriage as “a game,” one “that is going out of fashion” (389). Wilde draws on this type of witty tone in order to satirize marriage in all of his comic works. The tone is purposely exaggerated and flippant, creating often abrupt wit. Wilde also creates wit of a greater subtlety: “I assure you I was horribly deceived in Ernest” (*A Woman of No Importance* 445). Here a female wit comments on her husband's character simply by mentioning his name.

Both Austen and Wilde draw upon witty dialogue when satirizing marriage. Austen's humorous dialogue has double and triple meanings, with the reader having to decode subtexts of seemingly casual interactions. Austen and Wilde endow their characters with skill in repartee and allow them to express themselves in their own words. Lady Susan says that “If I am vain of anything, it is of my eloquence” (268). But in Austen, it is sometimes dangerous to be *too* witty, too skilled in repartee. Although some of Austen's heroines and their mates are well-spoken, such as Elizabeth and Darcy in *Pride and Prejudice*, Anne and Wentworth in *Persuasion* and Emma and Knightley, being well-spoken can also conceal negative traits, as in the case of Wickham in *Pride and Prejudice*, Mary and Henry Crawford in *Mansfield Park* and Lady Susan. These characters' immorality is revealed through their joking dialogue, despite the sparkling wit of their remarks. Wilde's amoral men-about-town, Algernon in *The Importance of Being Earnest*, Lord Darlington in *Lady Windermere's Fan*, Lord Goring in *A Woman of No Importance* and Lord Henry Wotton in *Dorian Gray*, employ wit and repartee to elude familial and social responsibilities such as courtship and marriage.

While it is impossible for a character to be too witty in Wilde's plays, in Austen, even well-meaning characters run into trouble through an “excess” of wit and what Robert

Polhemus calls a dangerous talent for comedy (*Comic Faith*). This happens to Emma when she hurts the feelings of her neighbor. By causing everyone to laugh at Miss Bates, Emma temporarily loses Mr. Knightley's respect. It also happens to Frank Churchill when he unintentionally hurts his fiancé by making witty remarks that put her reputation into question. Elizabeth suffers when, like Emma, her ability to satirize those around her sometimes forces her into judging too quickly. She misjudges both Darcy and Wickham. When Elizabeth tells Darcy: "neither of us perform before strangers, we are very much alike" (*Pride and Prejudice* 122), her reassurance is important. Unlike Wilde's characters, who "perform" for each other within his plays and "perform before strangers" onstage, Austen's heroines and heroes attempt the very honesty and "earnestness" Wilde satirizes. Unlike Mr. Collins and Lady Catherine who put on a show for the sake of others, Elizabeth and Darcy are alike in their sincerity.

PART F. Comic Sense and Contemptuous Sensibility: Contempt in Austen and Wilde

A contrast between Austen and Wilde is that in her marriage satires, Austen moves from parody to realism. It is unclear as he moves from melodrama to satire, whether Wilde is parodying theatrical Victorian melodrama or drawing upon it for his marriage-related comedies. In his satires, Wilde seeks to create contempt for the object being satirized. Austen is often viewed as a "gentle" writer, yet she frequently arouses contempt for her characters as well. Like Wilde, she is a master of cutting comments. Virginia Woolf said that

One after another she creates her fools, her prigs, her worldlings, her Mr. Collinses, her Sir Walter Elliotts, her Mrs. Bennets. She encircles them

with the lash of a whip-like phrase which, as it runs round them, cuts out their silhouettes for ever. But there they remain; no excuse is found for them and no mercy shown them...Sometimes it seems as if her creatures were born merely to give Jane Austen the supreme delight of slicing their heads off. (*The Common Reader* 48)

In *Regulated Hatred in Jane Austen* D. W. Harding also sees Austen as someone who aggressively ridicules not only her society but her very readers: “her books are, as she meant them to be, read and enjoyed by precisely the sort of people whom she disliked; she is a literary classic of the society which attitudes like hers, held widely enough, would undermine” (6). Like Wilde, Austen laughs at her society as well as her audience; like Wilde she is “concern[ed] with the survival of the sensitive and penetrating individual in a society of conforming mediocrity” (ibid).

Like Austen, Wilde also created contempt for the objects of his marriage satire; Sammells calls it a “delicate relationship of affection and contempt” (89), a phrase that I believe can be applied to Austen in relation to her characters and to the society she mocks. Both writers ridicule hypocritical moralists in their marriage satire. For example, in commenting on “puritans” in a letter to Leonard Smithers, Wilde says that he “never came across anyone in whom the moral sense was dominant who was not heartless, cruel, vindictive, log-stupid, and entirely lacking in the smallest sense of humanity” (*Letters* 996).

PART G: Women (and Men) of Some Importance: Minor Characters Used to Satirize Marriage

In characterization, both writers will sometimes employ caricature for minor characters, always having one or two oblivious characters who are constantly surprised by turns of events obvious to everyone else.²⁵ In *Pride and Prejudice* Mrs. Bennett, “a woman of high temper and little understanding” (5), is unaware of the complexity of the relationships forming between her daughters and men in the vicinity. Lydia is a smaller version of her mother and is desperate to marry. She and Kitty are caricatures of soldier-crazed young women, while Mary is a caricature of a pedant whose marriage prospects look equally dim.

Other caricatures include Mr. Collins in *Pride and Prejudice*, who is blindly convinced of his importance and personal attractions as a marriage prospect. In *Mansfield Park* Rushworth is an empty-minded buffoon whose status as a fiancé is secured only by his wealth, while Lady Bertram is an ineffectual hypochondriac. Caricatures in *Sense and Sensibility* include the weak-minded John Dashwood who is controlled by his wife, the dandy Robert Ferrars who ends by marrying Lucy Steele and the Palmers, which include a cynical husband and a silly wife. In general, Austen’s antagonists are often money-grubbing caricatures.

Wilde also employs caricature for minor characters. In *Lady Windermere’s Fan*, Lady Agatha lacks personal will. A caricature of a dutiful daughter, this “little

²⁵ In “Character and Caricature in Jane Austen” Harding explains that “the technique of caricature allows Jane Austen to express what a person of her acute insight must always feel - astonishment at the way the most outrageously deformed personalities are allowed an effective part in society, because society attaches enormous importance to its own self-rationalization” (90).

chatterbox” answers only with “Yes mamma” and submits to whatever her mother asks, including marriage. Meanwhile, Lord “Tuppy” Augustus is an “old boy,” ridiculous as a dandy, stupid and oblivious as a suitor. He is eventually fooled into marrying Mrs. Erlynne, despite her past and his previously bad luck with wives. Wilde often shows the obliviousness of his caricatures by placing them in a conversation where the oblivious character completely misunderstands the point of the discussion and confidently comments on a completely different subject. These are usually laughed at by the wits in the room.

Austen’s minor characters are sometimes exaggerations or minimizations of major characters. They also serve as foils or antitheses to the main characters. In *Emma*, both Jane Fairfax and Miss Bates can be seen as minimizations of or foils for Emma. Without her wealth, Emma’s unmarried lot would be that of Jane and in later years that of Miss Bates.

Wilde also excels in satire through exaggeration. If Austen satirizes manners, Wilde ridicules them, having characters put forth purposely silly statements. In the following exchange a woman interviews a young man as a possible husband for her daughter:

LADY BRACKNELL. Do you smoke?

JACK. Well, yes, I must admit I smoke.

LADY BRACKNELL. I am glad to hear it. A man should always have an occupation of some kind. (*The Importance of Being Earnest* 332)

At times the authors’ penchant for exaggeration veers towards the absurd. I take “absurd” to be defined as something ridiculously incongruous or unreasonable. Austen and Wilde employ absurdity in both characterization and plot development in their

marriage satire. In *The Importance of Being Earnest*, Wilde's deep insights into marriage and the social life of the aristocracy show London society at its most absurd. The play abounds with ridiculous complications and misunderstandings regarding courtships and coincidences that lead to pat resolutions of barriers to marriage. Wilde's Lady Bracknell's self-importance and absurdity may be compared to Austen's Lady Catherine de Bourgh's in *Pride and Prejudice*.

As in all satires of marriage, Austen and Wilde describe friction between in-laws and relatives. Ineffectual parents and spoiled children are also included in the marriage satire. "Demmed nuisance, relations!" says one of Wilde's dandies, "But they make one so demmed respectable" (*Lady Windermere's Fan* 399). Austen satirizes in-laws with wry humor in novels such as *Persuasion*. Relatives, such as Mr. Collins in *Pride and Prejudice* and Mrs. Dashwood's brother in *Sense and Sensibility*, are often usurpers of what is sensed to rightfully belong to the heroine and her family. The patronage of relations, such as the Bertrams in *Mansfield Park* is also seen as means towards betterment and therefore the peculiarities of the relations themselves and their officious, tyrannizing behavior, must be borne with good humor.

In addition, parents in Austen and Wilde are subjects of comedy. Wilde's old-fashioned Lord Caversham in *An Ideal Husband* has little control over his modern, dandy son, Lord Goring. Caversham's advice, ironically, is for Goring to model his life on Sir Robert Chiltern's, but Goring knows the problems that lie under the veneer of Chiltern's successful marriage and career. In the figure of Isabella Woodhouse, Austen shows mothering as unintellectual. Emma's sister has five children and is stereotypically feminine: silly, soft-hearted and dependent. In Austen, parents are usually negative role

models for both small and grown children. For example, in *Pride and Prejudice* Mrs. Bennett does more harm than good in promoting mercenary matches for her daughters while Mr. Bennett enjoys irritating his wife into hysterics and withdraws from his family and the world at large. He indulges Lydia and is ineffectual when she runs away, having provided her with little discipline. In *Emma*, Mr. Woodhouse also provides his daughter with little guidance, imagining her perfect in every way and wishing her never to marry.

Characterization in Austen and Wilde is made up of characters who inhabit newly-leisured, tightly-knit communities. Austen portrays the rural gentry who used to be working yeomen and wrote primarily for the middle class while Wilde satirizes the London upper-class (formerly the merchant class) and had both upper and middle-class society as his audience.²⁶ Austen underscores the small scope of the community she depicts when she wrote that her writing was like "A little bit (two inches wide) of ivory on which I work with so fine a brush" (*Letters* 323).

Austen and Wilde's humor is particularly suited to formal social settings.²⁷ The settings both authors employed, such as balls and drawing rooms, are symbolic of the often claustrophobic social interactions within these communities. Both writers set most of their "scenes" indoors, drawing on formal social gatherings as settings for dramatic turns of events. Austen's picnics, tea gatherings and carriage rides and Wilde's dinner

²⁶Why did audiences laugh so hard at Wilde's comedies? His plays lampooned the aristocracy but it is the middle class that flocked to see them. By Wilde's time, nineteenth-century aristocracy had lost political power. They were useful as an object of fun, as a mirror for the middle class. "There is no doubt that the aristocracy, when they were being satirized, but the late-Victorian middle-class was so self-satisfied that it could not resist the temptation to laugh at the aristocracy. The middle class simply enjoyed the show."

²⁷ Both were influenced by Restoration settings.

parties are settings where characters are trapped by their environment, often forced to show their true colors.

Austen and Wilde's characterization in their marriage satire is as telling for what it leaves out as for what it consists of. Within their respective tightly knit communities, both authors concentrate on relationships between adults, leaving any children in the background. Nineteenth-century marriages usually resulted in children, with the average often exceeding ten surviving children per family. The fact that these authors concentrate on marriage without taking children into account sets them apart from other nineteenth-century writers. In Wilde, for example, Lady Windermere's infant is hardly mentioned. And although Austen had great affection for her small nieces and nephews, and satirizes Aunt Norris' overly authoritarian training of children in *Mansfield Park*, she believed that children required strict education and that they should not be indulged, as the spoiled and badly behaved Middleton children are in *Sense and Sensibility*. In *Emma*, Jane Fairfax compares a life of taking care of children (that of a governess) to slave trade. Describing a toddler in "Lesley Castle," Austen puts a satiric spin on childhood accomplishments while criticizing the infantilization of women by patriarchal society:

The dear creature is just turned two years old – as handsome as though two and twenty, as sensible as though two and thirty, and as prudent as though two and forty...[because] she has a very fine complexion and very pretty features, that she already knows the first two letters of the alphabet and that she never tears her frocks. (79)

Both Austen and Wilde seem paradoxical in their respective writing style. For example, although Austen's novels end with "happy endings" celebrating the marriage of

the heroine: a traditionally conventional way to end a funny story, she does not wholly agree with the traditional values these endings suggest. It is easier to see through Wilde's "happy endings" because they are often rooted in deception. The comic literary elements within the humor of both allow for analogues between the authors. In the chapters that follow, I will discuss specific topics within Jane Austen and Oscar Wilde's comedies: seduction and courtship, marriage and single mothers.

Chapter 2

Sens(ual) Sensibility:

Seduction and Courtship in Austen and Wilde

Sens(ual) Sensibility: Seduction and Courtship in Austen and Wilde

“An engagement should come on a young girl as a surprise, pleasant or unpleasant, as the case may be. It is hardly a matter that she should be allowed to arrange for herself.”

- Oscar Wilde (*The Importance of Being Earnest* 331)

“It was foolish, it was wrong, to take so active a part in bringing any two people together. It was adventuring too far, assuming too much, making light of what ought to be serious—a trick of what ought to be simple.”

- Jane Austen (*Emma* 137)

Within the marriage plot, both Wilde and Austen humorously attack social vices and expose the follies of their time. Although each views marriage differently, both write about love, seduction, courtship, marriage and the consequences of being unmarried. The marriage plot, centered around matrimony, figures prominently in all of Austen's novels as well as in Wilde's comedies. Issues relating to courtship and problems preventing it move the plot towards marriage, while realizations of love serve as dramatic focal points. For example, in all of Wilde's plays except *The Importance of Being Earnest* there is a married couple around whom the action revolves and whose love and marriage is melodramatically tested. Because each views marriage differently, Austen's humor attempts to show how her heroines find their place in society; Wilde's humor points to the impossibility of young couples ever achieving the unrealistic standards set by society.

The way in which Austen and Wilde treat the themes of seduction and courtship often leads to humorous effect. These themes not only shed light on the authors' views of

marriage, but are employed by them for the purpose of social criticism. Austen and Wilde have different ways of defining “seduction” and “courtship,” as well as what constitutes a “successful” or “failed” courtship. I will discuss financially and sexually motivated courtships as well as the themes of sex and adultery (courtship by married people). I will employ a feminist interpretation to discuss seductions incited by women and courtships incited by older, mentor figures. I will also address what happens when women are abandoned by their seducers after mock “engagements.” In addition, although the process of courtship was looked upon as serious business in the nineteenth century, it is often treated as a game in Austen and Wilde’s works. By observing when the authors took courtship seriously and when they did not, we can make some conclusions regarding the authors’ views of marriage and society.

Though Austen and Wilde both treat the subjects of seduction and courtship humorously, each defines the terms differently. Both authors critique a view that sees marriage as a consistently perfect state. There are successful marriages in Austen, although not idyllic ones. She has qualified views about this subject. For example, Elizabeth and Darcy form a perfect union in an imperfect world, but to maintain this union, each party must compromise. Elizabeth’s humor will soften Darcy’s disposition, while his greater knowledge of the world will help her to be more serious. Where they differ is that in Austen’s view “acceptable” courtship always leads to marriage and is not sexually motivated. Instead, the parties are “well-suited” to one another, meaning that they come from the same social background and complement each other’s personalities. Austen provides a foil for Elizabeth and Darcy’s mutual suitability in the Bennets’ marriage. Mr. Bennet:

captivated by youth and beauty, and that appearance of good-humour which youth and beauty generally give, had married a woman whose weak understanding and illiberal mind had very early in their marriage put an end to all real affection for her. Respect, esteem, and confidence had vanished for ever; and all his views of domestic happiness were overthrown... (*Pride and Prejudice* 236)

In effect, Mr. Bennet made a sexually motivated match and is shown to suffer for it.

Austen's hero and heroine may be on par intellectually and equal in wit, but ultimately, once the man proposes, he takes his place as the one in charge even if the heroine has had the upper hand up to this point.²⁸ Austen considers a courtship "dangerous" if it is executed by the wrong "type" of person. She disapproves if the "seducer" is financially or sexually motivated or motivated by some other reason than love, or if one of the courting parties is of too different a social class. Courtships sometimes also fail when one of the parties is not serious enough about love and marriage. In Austen, when these "wrong" courtships fail, they do not lead to marriage and harm the more naïve character, usually the woman.

Wilde's courtships, unlike those of Austen, allow for the possibility of seduction and sexuality. Wilde's courtships are more sexual, just as his marriages are more fraught with peril. The possibility of adultery, an element missing from Austen's marriages, is a reality in Wilde's. Because Wilde sees courtship and marriage itself as a "game," his

²⁸ This is another point on which Austen and Wilde differ. In works such as *The Importance of Being Earnest* and *Salome*, women have superior authority. For example, Lady Bracknell must approve Jack's identity before he can marry her daughter. In some of Austen's works, such as *Pride and Prejudice* and *Northanger Abbey*, the same is allowed to be comic figures, but need male guidance for gravitas.

courtships and seductions have a playful aspect not as evident in Austen, who takes marriage more seriously. In Austen, those who see courtship as a game never make a successful match, while all of Wilde's courtships are playful, sometimes to the point of silliness. Wilde employs paradox and irony to play with the idea of romantic love and the deep and powerful meaning that love is supposed to evoke. For example, Act I of *An Ideal Husband* opens against the background of a Rococo tapestry illustrating the "Triumph of Love," an allegory showing love's conquering power. The tapestry is emblematic because the picture on it symbolizes love's deep meaning and power, a theme played upon in the comedy. Yet despite its theme, the tapestry itself is flat and decorative, merely a backdrop for a dinner party. The way the tapestry "flattens" the idea of love can be compared to the play, which often deals with love in a way that flattens the ideal into mere epigram. In the play, the purpose of flirtatious banter, for example, the back-and-forth between Lord Goring and Mabel, is to show the insubstantiality of romantic love expressed during courtship. And since nineteenth-century courtship's goal was marriage, Wilde's goal is to ultimately show how weak a foundation modern marriage stands upon. Some of Wilde's seductions and courtships lead to marriage, but unlike Austen, he does not consider a courtship "successful" when a marriage is made. Marriage, the conventional "happy" ending in fiction, does not guarantee happiness in Wilde's comedies. Wilde satirizes the idea of happy fictional endings for "three volume novels" in *The Importance of Being Earnest*. Cecily, a budding wit, states "I don't like novels that end happily. They depress me so much." Her pompous, old-fashioned governess replies that in the novel she wrote "The good ended happily, and the bad unhappily. That is what Fiction means" (341). Austen, herself a writer of three volume

novels, follows a different set of conventions than Wilde. In her work, “the good” *do* end happily, making happy marriages. Wilde sees works that end thus as unrealistic, just as he believes that it is unrealistic to expect a “happy” marriage. In his view, a novel with a happy ending “chronicles the things that have never happened, and couldn’t possibly have happened” (ibid).²⁹

As for Austen, since she relies heavily upon the marriage plot, there are many examples of courtships leading to marriage in her works. This theme has been well-researched for more than a century. It is far more interesting, in my opinion, to discuss *failed* courtships and courtships that are not taken as seriously as nineteenth-century society dictated. Such unconventional courtships can be seen throughout both Austen and Wilde’s marriage satires.

PART A. Unpersuaded: Austen and Wilde’s Failed Seductions and Courtships

There are several examples of seductions and courtships that do not end in marriage in the works of both authors. In some cases it is because the man never wished to marry the woman, but only to enjoy her company or sexual favors. In these cases the woman is abandoned after being led to expect a marriage proposal. In addition, seductions and courtships initiated by women are doomed to failure in Austen’s novels, usually because the women are motivated by money.

²⁹ In his own work, Wilde followed the new realistic school of French writers of the 1890s, whose novels ended unhappily.

1. Less-than-Ideal Husbands (and Wives): Austen's Financially Motivated Courtships

One of the major reasons a courtship fails and is ridiculed in Austen's marriage satires is because the "seducer" is motivated by money. Several "pursuits" fail for this very reason: Mr. Elton's pursuit of Emma, John Thorpe's courtship of Catherine Morland, Isabella Thorpe's hold on James Morland, Mr. Elliot's pursuit of Anne and Maria Bertram's hold over Rushworth. All these insincere wooers pretend to be what they are not. Sometimes the courtship is unlooked for and unwelcome, as in Emma and Catherine's case; at other times it is all but official as in James Morland and Rushworth's engagements. Either way, when their pursuers' true natures are revealed, the pursued are relieved to sever relations with such people.

Austen treats financially motivated courtships comically because she believes that courtship should be simple and unaffected. For example, Mr. Elton's attentions to Emma are rebuffed because they are over-elaborate and unwelcome. They are also insincere. He says he is captivated by Emma's beauty, intelligence and accomplishments, but he is more struck by her wealth. Mr. Elton wishes to be on the same social level as Emma, but in fact is of a lower class. His quick marriage after Emma's refusal shows the shallowness of his "love," while his mistreatment of Harriet at a dance shows his pettiness. He had been cordial to Harriet and even willing to keep her portrait when he thought it would help him win Emma. His proposal is therefore presented as comic and bumbling:

...her hand seized – her attention demanded and Mr. Elton actually making violent love to her...declaring sentiments which must be already well known, hoping-fearing-adoring-ready to die if she refused him; but

flattering himself that his ardent attachment and unequalled love and unexampled passion could not fail of having some effect, and in short, very much resolved on being seriously accepted as soon as possible. (129)

Elton's proposal is humorous because Austen juxtaposes his clichéd romantic professions of "violent love" with his true conceited and pragmatic nature: he "flatter[s] himself" that his love should be returned and sees no reason against a quick engagement. Presented this way, Mr. Elton as a lover becomes as ridiculous to the reader as he must seem to Emma.³⁰ Elton's proposal is reminiscent of Collins' proposal to Elizabeth in that both men are surprised to be misunderstood: Collins is convinced that Elizabeth is merely being coy in refusing him, while Elton believes that he has been encouraged in his attentions. Up to this point, the reader seeing through Emma's eyes, has seen Mr. Elton favorably. After his inappropriate proposal, Mr. Elton's true character is revealed and he and later his wife are satirized throughout the rest of the novel.

Emma misunderstands Mr. Elton through no fault of his own; John Thorpe purposely misleads Catherine with regard to himself. A braggart by nature, Thorpe's every statement is an exaggeration meant to impress. Mr. Elton's pettiness is not revealed until half-way through the novel; John Thorpe's small nature is readily apparent to everyone but Catherine. Like Elton, Thorpe is under a conceited impression that the object of his romantic attention is in love with him and like Emma, Catherine is comically astounded when she realizes she has been proposed to. Thorpe's proposal is even less

³⁰ Elton's "wrong" proposal is meant to later contrast Knightley's "correct" one. Mr. Knightley's proposal is direct and unaffected and the narrator's description of Emma's answer shows a restraint that points to the privacy of the moment: "What did she say? Just what she ought of course, a lady always does" (*Emma* 437).

“appropriate,” in the Austenian sense, than Elton’s. Mr. Thorpe suddenly “bursts out with, ‘A famous good thing this marrying scheme, upon my soul!...What do you think of it, Miss Morland? *I* say it is no bad notion’” (*Northanger Abbey* 122). Thorpe treats courtship, and by implication marriage, as a game or “scheme.” When proposing, he affects the same brash nonchalance he projects when speaking of horse racing or the merits of various carriage types. John and Catherine’s conversation is comic because it employs a device often employed by both Austen and Wilde, of having two characters unknowingly converse upon completely different topics. Humorous misunderstanding follows such conversation. Catherine believes John is merely making polite chit-chat about his sister’s wedding; John believes Catherine has all-but-accepted his proposal.

Thorpe, like Collins and unlike Elton, never mentions love in his proposal. And while Elton is relatively mild in retaliating after his pride has been hurt by rejection, purposely embarrassing Emma’s friend; Thorpe proves malicious when, after being disappointed by Catherine’s refusal as well as her lack of wealth, he spreads the lie that she is very poor.

His sister Isabella is equally duplicitous to both Catherine and James. But while John Thorpe is more obvious in his financially motivated courtship, making overt references to Catherine’s money, Isabella pretends to love James for himself, never mentioning money to her lover. Although Isabella does not actually court James in the novel, she “courts” Catherine in James’ stead. Isabella hopes to win Catherine over and solidify her hold over James, securing what she believes to be a wealthy match. Comedy ensues as Isabella compliments Catherine enthusiastically on qualities the young woman obviously lacks – “penetration” and an “arch eye [that]...sees through every thing” (109). Once

again, Austen employs the comic technique of having two people misunderstand the topic of each other's conversation. Isabella believes that Catherine is complicit in her secret engagement to James, while Catherine has no notion of what her friend truly means about being "sisters."

When Isabella is told she and James will have to wait to be married and that their income will not be as substantial as she thought, she turns to flirting with Frederick Tilney. In doing so, she hopes to keep James as a back-up while setting her sights on a wealthier match. James (and Catherine) realize Isabella's true nature when she attempts to reunite with James after being abandoned by Captain Tilney. In presenting Isabella's flirtation with Captain Tilney, Austen employs humor to show Catherine's naiveté about courtship and love. Catherine assumes that an engagement once made, is unbreakable and that "A woman in love with one man cannot flirt with another" (151). She attempts to have Henry put a stop to his brother's flirtation with her friend, explaining that if Captain Tilney ceases his attentions, Isabella will once more return James' affection. Henry laughingly asks whether Isabella's "good-behaviour, is only to be secured by her seeing nothing of Captain Tilney? Is he [James] safe only in solitude? – or is her heart constant to him only when unsolicited by any one else?" (146) From this episode Catherine learns about the true nature of her friend and about the dangers of inappropriate courtship.

Like *Pride and Prejudice*, *Emma* and *Mansfield Park*, *Persuasion* has an "inappropriate" suitor courting the heroine in order to offset the "correct" suitor who will later ask for her hand. Anne Elliot is not at all interested in Mr. Elliot. Although most people believe him to be a perfect gentleman, Anne is suspicious of his motives. He had

never paid attention to her before and his interest seems quite sudden. Anne later learns that he only wishes to marry her to secure his title to the Kellynch barony. Mr. Elliot is afraid that Sir Walter will marry Mrs. Smith and have an heir whose claims will supersede his. Mr. Elliot is the only one of Austen's financially motivated courtiers who is not made an object of fun. Perhaps it is because he is the only one who incites jealousy from the hero of the novel. In addition, while Mr. Elton and John Thorpe are socially inferior to George Knightley and Henry Tilney, Elliot is actually Wentworth's superior, class-wise. Elton and Thorpe present no obstacle in winning the heroine to Knightley and Tilney, but Wentworth considers Mr. Elliot, with his claim upon Anne's family, a serious rival. Wentworth sees Elliot as a rival not only because he is Anne's equal class-wise, but because he is afraid that Anne may be swayed by her family to marry the polished young man.

Unlike Elton, the Thorpes and Mr. Elliot, Mr. Collins' initial courtship of Elizabeth is not motivated by financial reasons. Yet his pursuit of Elizabeth still fails because it is not motivated by love. Collins wishes to marry Elizabeth because he has decided to marry in order to please his patron, Lady Catherine. He also desires to be a patron himself and enjoys "condescending" to the Bennet family. His courtship is as brief as it is clumsy, consisting of several short conversations with Elizabeth and two dances. Elizabeth's dances with Collins seem to illustrate the idea later expressed in *Northanger Abbey* where Austen implies that dancing is like marriage (*Northanger Abbey* 68-9). The humorous description of Collins' unsuitability as a dance partner: "Mr. Collins, awkward and solemn...often moving wrong without being aware of it, gave her all the shame and

misery which a disagreeable partner...can give" (90), foreshadows how unsuitable he would be as a marriage partner.

Collins' proposal and Elizabeth's refusal constitute one of Austen's funniest scenes. Sure of success and terribly obtuse, Collins becomes ridiculous when he pushes his suit even after he has been repeatedly refused. Collins' rejection by Elizabeth can be read as a feminist victory of sorts, with Collins symbolic of the prevailing patriarchy: an older, professional man with some money and a measure of power, Collins seems to hold all the cards. Yet he is defeated by a young woman who, other than her wit and will, is otherwise socially powerless.³¹ By portraying Elizabeth "besting" Collins, Jane Austen depicts a female fantasy as great as the one she shows at the end of the novel, with the heroine's fairy tale marriage. In both cases, early nineteenth-century female readers may fantasize about achieving a measure of power, however momentary. Meanwhile, today's readers may enjoy it as a kind of David and Goliath fantasy, where the underdog heroine bests a socially weightier foe.

Like Mr. Elton, Mr. Collins loses no time in proposing again after he has been rejected, showing the shallowness of his "affections." Unlike Mr. Elton who, after being rejected found a wife better suited to his personality, (Mrs. Elton is as crass as her husband), Mr. Collins marries someone who is a much better person than he is. Charlotte Lucas forces herself to become Mr. Collins' partner because at twenty-seven, she cannot afford not to marry when an opportunity presents itself.

³¹ Collins' defeat through Elizabeth's intelligence and wit foreshadows a similar defeat by Elizabeth of his patron, Lady Catherine, later in the novel.

Rushworth with his obtuseness and stupid comments is like a smaller version of Collins, providing a measure of comic relief to *Mansfield Park*. Although Maria Bertram and Rushworth are already engaged at the beginning of the novel, her acceptance of his courtship was definitely financially motivated. Maria is only interested in Rushworth's wealth and wishes to marry him in order to marry ahead of her sister. She later abandons her fiancé to run off with Henry Crawford. By choosing sex over money, Maria does not improve in Austen's eyes. In fact, she is doubly disapproved of. While Julia, who also impulsively elopes after a sexually motivated courtship, is eventually accepted back into the family, Maria and Henry remain outcasts. According to Austen, Maria should not have broken her engagement, however wrong her original motive.

Austen takes a grim view on sexual attraction as the main motivation for marriage. Speaking of Wickham and Lydia's union, the narrator states: "...how little of permanent happiness could belong to a couple who were only brought together because their passions were stronger than their virtue, she could easily conjecture" (*Pride and Prejudice* 312). The narrator also comments on "the disappointment" Mr. Bennet feels in his own sexually motivated match, disappointment "which his own imprudence had brought on" (ibid 236).

2. The Lady Seduces: When Women Instigate Seduction and Courtship

When, in the process of seduction and courtship, women are the pursuers instead of their usual nineteenth-century role of the pursued, the result is always negative in Austen and divided in Wilde. In Austen, sexual attractiveness is sometimes coupled with artistic talent and superficial cleverness. This is viewed as a dangerous combination when mixed

with a self-serving personality. In *Mansfield Park* fortune-hunting Mary Crawford almost wins Edmund Bertram as they rehearse for a play. He is attracted not only with to her beauty and wit but to her acting talent.³² Edmund eventually perceives Mary's selfish nature underneath her beautiful exterior and does not propose. He is on the verge of proposing several times, yet something about Mary's too outgoing nature always stops him. Here the trope of an unsuitable suitor setting off a later "correct" suitor is reversed gender-wise. Edmund must realize Mary's unsuitability before he recognizes Fanny's suitability.

Mary's seduction of Edmund fails because her callous nature is revealed. It is also implied that her wittiness, although pleasant, is a dangerous sign pointing to a lack of deeper feeling. Austen seems to be of two minds about such cleverness. On the one hand, some of her novels' most sparkling dialogue and funniest remarks are a product of such "dangerous" wit, such as those produced by Emma Woodhouse and Elizabeth Bennet. Yet such talent for word-play, revered by Wilde, is cautioned against by Austen. When her niece, wary of marrying an "evangelical" man who was not as witty as her family, wrote to Austen for guidance, Austen advised her to marry the man: "Do not be frightened from the connection by your Brothers having most wit. Wisdom is better than Wit, & in the long run will certainly have the laugh on her side" (*Letters* 280). Austen indeed gives preference to "wisdom," in the form of understanding oneself and others, over the ability to be clever and amusing. When wit, cleverness and satirizing others is displayed by the heroine, as in the case of Elizabeth and Emma, it is later revealed that in

³² Other examples of artistic talent employed for seduction in Austen and Wilde are the effect of Willoughby's knowledge of poetry and dramatic readings of Shakespeare on Marianne and the effect of Lord Henry's aesthetic taste on Dorian Gray.

poking fun at others, the heroine misses negative qualities in her own personality. When wit is displayed by a minor character, that character is usually looked down upon if not proved a villain.³³ For example, because they cynically laugh at the world, Mary and Henry Crawford do not treat life, and therefore courtship and marriage, with the seriousness Austen believes these subjects deserve. Fanny sees this about the pair almost immediately; Edmund comes to see it in time.³⁴

Another female initiator of courtship is Mrs. Clay. She slowly edges her way into the bosom of the Elliot family, first through her friendship with Elizabeth, then through her subtle "courtship" of Sir Walter. It is implied that Sir Walter will eventually make Mrs. Clay his wife almost without being aware of the process of seduction and courtship. Unlike Mary Crawford, who attracts with her wit and high spirits, Mrs. Clay appears guileless and submissive, attracting Sir Walter with her passivity. The "courtship" is ironically comic because as he comes closer to proposing to the middle-class widow, Sir Walter's snobby attitude and aristocratic pretensions appear more and more pompous and ridiculous.

Mary Crawford, Maria Bertram and Mrs. Clay are motivated by wealth, but Lady Susan Vernon is even more mercenary. She is also the most blatantly sexual of Austen's female pursuers. She seduces two men, both of whom are suitors for her daughter's

³³ An exception to this is Henry Tilney, whose lively wit complements Catherine's naïve earnestness.

³⁴ Whether wit is displayed by the heroine or by a minor character, Austen is trying to educate her audience. She allows her heroines to be witty because they later learn that "wisdom is better than wit." Her witty minor characters never learn this. They prefer being clever to being a good neighbor and/or treating others fairly and are therefore denigrated.

hand. Reginald de Courcy, her sister-in-law's younger brother is at first as suspicious as his sister of Lady Susan's motives. Intelligent and witty, Reginald thinks she is "the most accomplished coquette in England" (248). He is astounded that she has no qualms of taking even married men for her lovers: "engaging at the same time, and in the same house, the affections of two men, who were neither of them at liberty to bestow them - and all this without the charm of youth!" (ibid) Yet Lady Susan's seductive powers are such that she charms Reginald into almost proposing, despite the fact that he is twelve years her junior and despite the severe disapproval of his family. Lady Susan seems to be punished for her wicked ways when Reginald finds out some of her recent schemes and she is forced to leave her brother's house. Later, Reginald and Lady Susan's daughter Frederica become attached to one another, an attachment that the author condones. Out of spite, Lady Susan stands between the young couple, and continues to attempt to force her daughter to marry Sir James Martin, although this would make Frederica very unhappy. Watching the characters attempt to untie such romantic Gordian knots is part of what make the novel funny.

Lady Susan is a hilarious work not only because the title character is one of Austen's wittiest (anti)heroines, but because of the ridiculous final outcome of the novel, which turns nineteenth-century marriage-market ideals upside-down when Lady Susan wins Sir James away from two much younger women. Prior to being convinced to pursue Frederica, who despises him, Sir James was originally a suitor for Lady Susan's lover's sister. Miss Manwaring, another younger woman, returned Sir James' interest. In addition to Miss Manwaring as a rival, Lady Susan has for her "rival" her own daughter. Frederica is virginal, beautiful, self-effacing and sixteen years old. By rights, she is a far

more marriageable woman than her mother, who is in her late-thirties. Yet Lady Susan convinces the lord to marry herself after Frederica runs away rather than marry him. Unlike Austen's later "lady seducers," who are punished by losing the object of their attention, Lady Susan, although she loses her first choice, makes a "successful" match with her second. When her daughter moves in with her brother and sister-in-law in the country, she symbolically assumes a role of a new childless bride, a role that rightfully belonged to her daughter.

While Austen's female pursuers always fail, Wilde's achieve mixed results. His mercenary-minded Mrs. Erlynne and Mrs. Cheveley, like Austen's Lady Susan, are beautiful, blatantly seductive middle-aged women who are in pursuit of a husband.³⁵ Mrs. Erlynne wins Lord Augustus through sexuality as much as through charm and the force of her personality. Her courtship of the lord is comic in that she makes him believe that he is doing all of the courting. Lord Augustus is a buffoon-like figure who, although either twice married and once divorced or once married and twice divorced (he cannot remember which), is willing to marry again, so captivated is he by Mrs. Erlynne. Like Lady Susan, Mrs. Erlynne convinces her suitor of her virtue even when all evidence points to the contrary, when she is discovered in Lord Darlington's rooms for example. "Tuppy" Augustus symbolizes the old guard of the aristocracy. By showing him wrapped around Mrs. Erlynne's little finger, Wilde not only implies that the woman will

³⁵ It is impossible to talk about seductresses in Wilde without mentioning *Salome*. Though not marriage satire, *Salome* shows a woman who is sexually motivated in her pursuit of love. Though her goal of seducing Jokanaan fails, Salome succeeds in Herod's seduction. Like all of Wilde's female persuers, Salome's "success" achieves mixed results. Herod grants her wish by killing Jokanaan, yet being able to finally kiss the object of her desire does not bring Salome happiness.

soon have society captivated as well, but that society, in accepting this satiric marriage, is as ridiculous and deluded as Lord Augustus. Lady Susan's "success" is of a different type. Austen does not allow her to trick the good-hearted Reginald into marriage. Lady Susan succeeds in finding a wealthy husband, but it must be the ugly Sir James. Although the woman herself considers the match a success, caring only for wealth and power, Austen's readers see that the match is not a good one. Unlike Wilde, the young Austen is not engaging in social commentary by presenting Lady Susan's final "triumph" over society, only showing the lengths to which a cold-hearted character will go in order to make a wealthy marriage.

As for Wilde's women, it is interesting that Mrs. Erlynne is able to win back Lord Augustus, but Mrs. Cheveley is not able to win back Lord Goring. He broke off the engagement when he discovered her affair with another man, although she won a large settlement for breach of promise. An intelligent and witty dandy, Lord Goring is not as easily taken in as the bumbling Tuppy. Goring knows that Mrs. Cheveley comes to him only after her blackmail of Robert Chiltern fails. She attempts to blackmail Goring into marrying her in order to save Chiltern, who refuses to save himself. She has enough of her own wealth, but seems to need the respectability of Goring's name in order to take her place in society: "I am tired of living abroad. I want to come back to London. I want to have a charming house here. I want to have a salon" she says (*An Ideal Husband* 533). In presenting a woman proposing, Wilde reverses gender stereotypes. Here the *lady* professes that despite having broken his heart in the past and ignored him for years, the gentleman was "the only person I had ever cared for" (ibid). Meanwhile, the *gentleman* takes offence at the proposal, knowing its insincerity. In addition, the scene satirizes the

commonplace seduction plot in which a virtuous woman concedes to marry the villain out of “self-sacrifice.” Mrs. Cheveley promises to turn over Robert Chiltern’s compromising letter on their wedding day. The comic denouement is that although the pursuer is worldly, the pursued is more so, and Mrs. Cheveley’s blackmail fails:

MRS. CHEVELEY. I thought you would have risen to some great height of self-sacrifice, Arthur...And the rest of your life you could spend in contemplating your own perfections.

LORD GORING. Oh! I do that as it is. And self-sacrifice is a thing that should be put down by law. (*An Ideal Husband* 533)

The fact that Wilde’s female seducers have mixed results is not surprising, considering that Wilde poses no judgment of his characters’ actions - he simply records them. Mrs. Erlynne and Mrs. Cheveley seem to be “villains” cut from the same cloth, yet the former is rewarded with marriage at the end of the comedy while the latter is “unmasked” and reviled. It can be argued that Mrs. Erlynne “repents” when she defends her daughter, but it can also be argued that she will continue her “wicked” ways after remarrying. While Austen almost always punishes her characters for harboring unsavory intentions, Wilde takes a more realistic approach, only punishing evil sometimes. In presenting her humorous seductions and courtships, Austen shows how it is possible to eventually see wickedness where it lies; Wilde’s “wit implies that evil is in everyone and that it is banal” (Johnson 201). Perhaps by having her female seducers always fail,³⁶ Austen means to express that it is inappropriate for the woman to be so assertive in the

³⁶ Aside from the exception of Lady Susan, who only succeeds with her second choice.

process of courtship. The fact that these women never take love into consideration shows Austen's distrust of assertive women's motives during courtship.

3. Deemed Women of No Importance: Seduced and Abandoned After an "Engagement"

Women like Sybil Vane and Marianne Dashwood are left behind by their seducers after a period of mock "engagement." In both cases, the men seduce but don't actually take sexual advantage of the women, finding their innocence endearing. Also in both cases, the women react melodramatically: Marianne falls into a fever; Sybil Vane commits suicide. Despite the serious nature of both broken engagements, Austen and Wilde impart these situations with wit.

Marianne is seduced by Willoughby's good looks, charming manner and impulsive nature. She acts impetuously and somewhat indecorously with him, believing that they will eventually become engaged. It seems that the engagement is all but official when Willoughby suddenly drops the Dashwoods' acquaintance to marry a wealthy woman. He is rude to Marianne when they meet again at a dance. Although devastated, Marianne eventually sees Willoughby's weakness of character and is relieved he did not propose. Austen disapproves of Marianne's attachment to Willoughby, which is based upon "sensibility" rather than "sense." She feels that Marianne acted too freely with her lover, as though they were already engaged. In trusting her first impressions, Marianne assumes too much. Marianne's "abandonment" could have had more dire consequences than are depicted in the novel. Because only a small family circle witnessed their courtship, the young woman was lucky that her enthusiastic response to Willoughby's attentions did not compromise her reputation. When she speaks to him openly at the

dance, many more people witness the implications of their prior relationship and she is mortified. She is also fortunate that Colonel Brandon wishes to wed her, even after witnessing her flirtation with another man.

Marianne's exuberant, overly-dramatic happiness with Willoughby is poked fun of, as is the couple's involvement in themselves and their relationship to the exclusion of everyone else. In portraying their relationship, Austen satirizes at the idea of "love at first sight." Especially ironic is the depiction of Marianne's delusion that she and her lover are completely alike when Willoughby merely agrees with everything she says for the sake of being agreeable.³⁷ Here Austen draws on misunderstanding to produce pathos and irony. The reader is meant to sympathize with Marianne while understanding that her reasoning is wrong and her character flawed.

In Wilde's depiction of Dorian's seduction of Sibyl Vane, the wit is cruel and the humor has a dark quality. Although Sibyl, like Willoughby has an attractive "artistic" personality, the artist is not the seducer in this case. Unlike artful Willoughby or aesthetic Lord Henry, Sibyl, an actress, is artless in her art. Learning from Lord Henry, who became a connoisseur of Dorian's beauty, Dorian becomes a connoisseur of Sibyl's acting. In the process, he courts her until she is in love with him, making her believe that they will marry. Once in love, she no longer acts as well on stage and Dorian callously leaves her, saying that she has "killed" his love. Because her death is tragic, Lord Henry's jokes about women and love take the form of black humor rather than comedy. Lord Henry jokes about Sibyl's suicide, telling Dorian that he should take it as a

³⁷ Willoughby's very name, reminiscent of "willow," points to this "bendable" quality. He will bend or change to please others, but in times of trouble, he will also bend. Willoughby cannot be "leaned upon."

compliment and hopes that in the future, more women will kill themselves for his friend's sake.

Both women react melodramatically to their abandonment. Wilde chooses the most melodramatic formula for his character. Sibyl commits suicide after her idyllic vision of love is dashed. Her death foreshadows Dorian's at the end of the novel. It is also the novel's turning point, after which the reader sympathizes less and less with the "hero." Although Willoughby was Marianne's "Prince Charming," as Dorian was Sybil's, Austen's character is not as melodramatic as Wilde's. Marianne believes herself to be the romantic character that Sibyl is, ready to give all for love, but Austen does not allow her good-hearted women to end tragically. Although she seems to employ melodrama in having Marianne fall ill after being abandoned, the illness is not fatal, as it would be in melodrama.

It is interesting that in both novels, the "Prince Charming" characters, Dorian and Willoughby, fail the women they have feelings for. In both cases, the men's "love" proves false. Sibyl is meant to symbolize innocence, beauty and art. By indirectly causing Sibyl's death, Wilde shows that Dorian is annihilating all that is innocent, beautiful and artistic within himself. Afterwards, Dorian finds that he cannot love. Unlike Sibyl, who is a two-dimensional character, Marianne is a more rounded character and therefore allowed to learn from her mistakes. She "awakens" from her illness to reject the idyllic romantic love that Willoughby no longer represents and embrace the real-life love that Colonel Brandon offers. Marianne learns that a practical mind and

solid temperament is preferable to wit and beauty in a man.³⁸

4. A Truth Often Unacknowledged: Sex and Adultery in Austen and Wilde

In *Dorian Gray* and *Lady Susan*, Wilde's and, surprisingly, Austen's characters show their audience that marriage vows can be meaningless. One does not often think of Jane Austen when one thinks of nineteenth-century satire containing examples of adultery and sexuality. In fact, Austen's view of sexuality during courtship was more permissive than that of later nineteenth-century writers. Although her heroines are all sexually innocent, she mentions sex in her novels.³⁹ Wilde's view of sex is more permissive than Austen's. He overtly writes about seduction and sexuality and some of his characters engage in premarital sex. In *Lady Windermere's Fan*, *A Woman of No Importance* and *An Ideal Husband* "Wilde makes the most of sexual imagery from earlier Victorian poets and sexual conventions from earlier playwrights, distinctly qualifying with his wit both moral associations and moral endings, both aesthetic and social meanings" (Johnson 197). Just as he borrows his plots from earlier models and twists them to suit his comic ends, Wilde also borrows sexual imagery from earlier patterns and changes this imagery to suit his comedy.

³⁸ See my pg. 52 in which Austen, in advising her niece in choosing a husband, counsels that "Wisdom is better than Wit" (*Letters* 280).

³⁹ See my discussion on pg. 51 of Mr. and Mrs. Bennet and Lydia and Wickham's relationships in *Pride and Prejudice*.

a. The Dangers of Sexually Motivated Courtship

Courtship that is sexually motivated is shown as dangerous to the sexually inexperienced party by both writers. In Wilde, Lord Henry's "seduction" of Dorian is the most vivid example of this. It is unclear whether the seduction is a "success" or "failure;" although Dorian falls under Lord Henry's spell, following Lord Henry's ideas on living a life of pleasure proves deadly for the young man. Wilde never overtly states that Dorian and Lord Henry have a homosexual relationship, but the men's "courtship" is described with more sexual imagery than Austen's heterosexual relationships. Humor in Lord Henry's seduction of Dorian occurs as the older man seduces the younger with his wit. In Austen, comedy ensues because these sexually motivated courtships, none of which are based upon love, are comic travesties of her idea of true, love-based courtships. The characters do not even pretend to affect an attitude of being in love.

The dangers of seduction and sexually motivated courtship are more clear-cut in Austen than in Wilde, and consequently there are more examples of it: Wickham's relationship with Lydia, Henry's relationship with Maria, Yates' seduction of Julia, Frederick Tilney's flirtation with Isabella, "old" Mr. Watts' desire for a young bride, even Lydia and Kitty's pursuit of handsome militiamen, are all looked down upon by the author. Most of these relationships end badly and do not lead to marriage. Those that do end in matrimony are nevertheless deemed inappropriate. Usually, the inappropriate seduction works both ways. Lydia, Maria, Julia, Isabella and the pursued militiamen are willingly seduced. Even in the juvenilia piece "The Three Sisters," Mary Stanhope, although repulsed by Mr. Watts, still marries him.⁴⁰

⁴⁰ I will discuss this piece in Chapter 3, pg. 99.

Though not officially courted, Lydia and Kitty flirt with the militia because they are attracted to handsome men in uniform. They hope to marry but are still young, so they are merely enjoying themselves in what they believe to be harmless fun. The militia are easy to entice and the sisters enjoy the attention they cause near the regiment. The sisters' "boy crazy" antics are a source of amusement in the novel, but also a foreshadowing of Lydia's later impetuous behavior. At the end of the novel, Austen "reforms" Kitty by having her benefit from being away from Lydia's influence, while Wickham and Lydia, like Julia and Yates are accepted back into the family.

Wickham is interested in making a wealthy match and flirts with Lydia without meaning to formally court her. He has every intention of leaving her when they "elope" and only marries Lydia because Darcy bribes him. Lydia treats her newly married status with the same nonchalance and good humor she treats everything else. In her letter to her family after she elopes, she does not see the seriousness of her actions, but treats the occasion as a lark, stating that she knows her family will be "surprised" and fixating on the fact that she will now have a new name. Mrs. Bennet's response is amusing, because she is more glad that her daughter is married than shocked at the fact that she eloped. Mr. Bennet's response is to sarcastically lament that Elizabeth did not marry Collins, because then he would have not one, but two ridiculous son-in-laws to laugh at.

Two more elopements occur in Austen in *Mansfield Park*. After her older sister breaks her engagement to run away with Henry, Julia impetuously elopes with Yates. Unlike Lydia, Julia bases her actions more upon willfulness and jealousy than good humor. Always hating to be left behind, Julia copies her sister's actions, allowing herself to be seduced. Both sisters' relationships with their suitors are based upon sexual

attraction rather than love, with Austen judging the women's misbehavior as harshly as the men's sexually motivated courtship. The play, the rehearsal of which intensifies the couples' courtships, is aptly named "Lover's Vows." Each couple plays an exaggerated role of themselves during rehearsals. The play allows for the young people to interact in a more intimate manner and with less inhibition than they normally would. For example, at one point Henry must take Maria's hand. Austen makes certain that we understand that the play's language and subject matter are a bit risqué and inappropriate for the group's performance. The fact that the young people are no longer under Sir Thomas Bertram's watchful eye grants them further license. Although the characters enjoy themselves during rehearsals in the first part of the novel, Austen places a cautionary undercurrent to their mirth. The inappropriate marriages that take place in the second part of the novel are Austen's proof of the dangers of such theatricals.

Isabella is shrewder than light-headed young women like Lydia, Maria and Julia. One cannot imagine her "eloping" without a settled marriage arrangement. She flirts with Captain Tilney as much (if not more) on account of his status as heir to Northanger Abbey as because of a physical attraction. When Captain Tilney makes no proposal, Isabella attempts to influence Catherine to help her win back James. The humor in this courtship is mostly at Catherine's expense. The reader laughs at her misunderstanding of both Isabella's and Captain Tilney's intentions, which the more experienced Henry fully understands. Catherine believes that Isabella is unintentionally leading Captain Tilney on and unwittingly ignoring James. She also thinks that the captain is in love with Isabella. This misguided thinking leads to comic misunderstanding in which Catherine tries to

convince Isabella of her error. Only after receiving her friend's last letter does Catherine realize Isabella's duplicity.

Unlike the other recipients of sexually motivated courtship, Mary Stanhope is not attracted to her suitor, although she is a willing recipient of Mr. Watts' attentions. Although Mr. Watts is not outwardly sexual, the fact that he wants a young bride and is not overly concerned with her lack of wealth implies that he may be interested in physicality. He does not even care which of the sisters he marries. All three are repulsed by the thought of marrying Mr. Watts, but Mary is attracted to his wealth. She also believes that she will be taking Mr. Watts away from her sisters, who pretend to want him. For the reader, it is comic when the sisters' idealistic and often quite materialistic views of what a suitor and husband should be are contrasted with the reality of Mr. Watts' blunt courtship.

b. Adulterous Possibilities in Austen and Wilde

Adultery is not a topic mentioned in Austen's mature works.⁴¹ There is only one allusion to adultery; it occurs in *Emma* regarding Jane Fairfax's relationship with Mr. Dixon. Frank Churchill implies that Jane was in love with Mr. Dixon while she resided with him and his wife and that some sort of impropriety occurred that caused her to leave.

He implies that Jane is visiting her aunt in town in order to put distance between herself and Mr. Dixon. Emma believes Frank's allusions to impropriety, taking the fact that Jane is good-looking while Mrs. Dixon is unattractive as part of the evidence against her. Jane becomes uncomfortable when Frank mentions Mr. Dixon, causing Emma

⁴¹ Though it is consistently written about in her juvenilia.

further suspicion. Here, Lady Susan's situation with the Manwarings is repeated, but to completely different effect. Unlike Lady Susan, Jane is innocent. Although Frank makes light fun of the matter, knowing it to be false, and Emma joins the fun, believing it to be true, the reader is not meant to find the situation amusing, but to sympathize with Jane against Frank and Emma. The subtlety with which Austen presents the situation does not allow us to understand Jane's circumstances fully until the end of the novel, when her engagement and Frank's deception is revealed. Until that point, we see through Emma's eyes and judge Jane harshly, believing in the possibility of impropriety. Perhaps Austen means for the reader, like Emma, to feel guilty about judging too quickly.

Unlike Austen's novels, Wilde's plays allow for the possibility of adultery for their "good" characters. Both *An Ideal Husband* and *Lady Windermere's Fan* begin with an implication of Sir Robert Chiltern and Lord Windermere's adultery. For Lady Chiltern and Lady Windermere, shining examples of marital fidelity in their own minds, the possibility of their own infidelity teaches them that no one is infallible. In both plays, the wives come to realize that it is often necessary for spouses to deceive one another for the good of the marriage. Ironically, the women's teachers are the dandies who are their seducers. In Wilde, the dandy is often the voice of reason. It is the seemingly irresponsible Lord Goring who urges Sir Robert to confess his early career indiscretions to his wife. Goring, Wilde's aesthetic philosopher, preaches the cult of youth, pleasure and modernity. His amorality and flexible view of love and marriage allows him to be sentimental on the subject while rebelling against Victorian ideals. He attempts to seduce

Lady Chiltern out of a feeling of passion, believing that a freer life with him would be to her greater good.⁴²

Lord Goring, although attempting seduction, also counsels marital charity and forgiveness, hinting for Lady Chiltern to have greater moral flexibility with her erring husband and to be more realistic in her marital standards so that she may more happily live in the real world. Lady Chiltern pays no heed to Lord Goring's advice, believing it to be another ploy for her love, and believing Sir Robert to be having an affair. Wilde shows the hypocrisy of Lady Chiltern's unrealistic expectations from her husband in her own subsequent behavior.

Lord Darlington is more a seducer than a philosopher like Lord Goring. Lady Windermere is the object of his affection. Like Lady Chiltern, Lady Windermere believes herself to be the model of propriety. Her life seems perfect until she finds her husband less-than-so. Then, like Lady Chiltern, she is prepared to run off with the dandy she has chastised for impropriety so many times in the past. Sammells calls Lady Windermere "at once an uncompromising puritan and the obverse: a sort of aristocratic Nora Helmer prepared to leave her husband and child" (87). Unlike Nora, Lady Windermere does not have feminist reasons for leaving her husband. She does not wish to discover herself – she is not even in love with Lord Darlington. Like Lady Chiltern, she merely wants to run from what she cannot face – the fact that the world is not as safely black and white as she had believed.

Humor in these melodramatic situations comes from the dandies' wit. In both cases the "seducers" do not see the possibility for adultery as melodramatically as the women

⁴² Another dandy and philosopher, Lord Illingworth in *A Woman of No Importance* also asserts that passion is the only thing worth taking seriously.

they are attempting to persuade. Both Darlington and Goring frame various epigrams around the subject of courtship, marriage and society's view of both. These bon mots delight the audience as well as the objects of their attention. The dandies, although enamored of the women, are not as agitated by the prospect of adultery. Their attitude towards it is gender-based. While the women are tortured by conscience, the men look at the situation amorally and therefore more dispassionately. Another reason the dandies are not as melodramatic about the prospect of committing adultery is that they are not the ones who would actually be deceiving their spouses. In addition, as single men, the social consequences would not be as great for them if they were to be found out; the women, on the other hand, would be ruined.

c. When Spouses are of No Importance and Marriage is Not in Earnest: Adultery in Austen and Wilde

Examples of adultery exist in both authors' works, but the context for each author's treatment of the subject must be noted. When Wilde satirizes marriage through his handling of the subject of adultery, he is a mature author writing for public consumption, when Austen does so, she is a youth writing for the amusement of a few family members. In Austen, actual adultery appears only in her juvenilia (*Lady Susan*, "Sir William Mountague") and not in her mature works. In Wilde, examples of adultery can be found in *The Picture of Dorian Gray*, *Lady Windermere's Fan* and *An Ideal Husband*. By treating the subject of marital infidelity humorously, these works satirize the bonds of marriage as well, bonds that can be so easily be broken.

It is implied that Lady Susan had several affairs while married. While widowed, she carries on an affair with a married man, Mr. Manwaring, under the nose of his wife, with whom she and her daughter are staying. She plans to continue this affair when she marries a second time. The wicked humor of the novel arises from Lady Susan's deceptions. As in all of her affairs, we are allowed to see the sweet face she presents to those she means to deceive and the real face she shows to her friend Alicia. Seeing men fall under Lady Susan's spell becomes a subject for amusement. Lady Susan never falls in love; her adultery stems either from lust or revenge and her affairs are thought out beforehand with military precision. Sir William Mountague, on the other hand, has a penchant for falling in love rapidly and repeatedly. In Austen's short farce of the same name, Sir William marries a woman he barely knows and falls in love immediately after the wedding. The fragment ends with Mountague about to take a mistress.

There are two examples of adultery in *Dorian Gray*. It is implied that Lord Henry is unfaithful to his wife with both women and men. Dorian may be included among his lovers. Lord Henry and his wife know little of each other's private lives. There is also the Duchess of Monmouth, a beautiful young noblewoman who is attracted to Dorian, with whom she flirts. She is married to a much older man and willing to be unfaithful.

When Dorian speaks of his own fidelity to Sybil, Lord Henry laughs at the idea: "Young men want to be faithful, and are not: old men want to be faithless and cannot" (37). Lord Henry implies that Dorian's desire for fidelity is merely naiveté. In counseling Dorian regarding his love life, Lord Henry is implicitly describing his own infidelity:

My dear boy, the people who love only once in their lives are really the shallow people. What they call their loyalty, and their fidelity, I call either the lethargy of custom or their lack of imagination...The passion for property is in it. There are many things that we should throw away if we were not afraid that others might pick them up. (50)

Lord Henry's glib words, in which he shows infidelity to be a "virtue," is Wilde's way of criticizing the hypocrisy of some marriages in which people remain faithful not out of devotion, but out of habit. Lord Henry jokes that what holds many marriages together is jealousy that one's spouse, if freed, would find someone better. He explains that marriage is an outdated bourgeois custom that people adhere to in order to appear respectable.

In *Lady Windermere's Fan*, adultery is looked upon as a matter of course. When Lady Windermere is appalled that her husband may be having an affair, the Duchess of Berwick sighs: "Yes, dear, these wicked women get our husbands away from us, but they always come back, slightly damaged, of course" (392). While the Duchess views adultery negatively, although banally, Lady Plymdale sees "wicked women" in a different, and more paradoxically humorous light. She wishes her husband to become interested in Mrs. Erlynne, who has a reputation for stealing husbands. Lady Plymdale states that her husband "has been so attentive lately, that he has become a perfect nuisance. Now, this woman's just the thing for him. He'll dance attendance upon her as long as she lets him, and won't bother me. I assure you, women of that kind are most useful. They form the basis of other people's marriages" (403). Lady Plymdale blithely implies that if her husband becomes involved with Mrs. Erlynne, she would be free to

pursue her own love interests. The Duchess' comment is funny, but still in line with nineteenth-century middle-class morality; Lady Plymdale's comment inverts the idea of a wife attempting to rein in her errant husband – she is attempting to set her husband loose.

Another blatant reference to adultery occurs in *An Ideal Husband* in a witty conversation between Lord Goring and Mrs. Cheveley. Mrs. Cheveley was married twice and had affairs each time:

LORD GORING. I should make you a very bad husband.

MRS. CHEVELEY. I don't mind bad husbands. I have had two. They amused me immensely.

LORD GORING. You mean that you amused yourself immensely, don't you? (533)

The fact that she is able to discuss her previous marriages and infidelities so easily makes a travesty of Mrs. Cheveley's marriage proposal to Lord Goring. As the conversation progresses, it becomes obvious that she has no sincere love for him.

There are also several throw-away allusions to adultery in *The Importance of Being Earnest*. Algernon explains how he uses visits to his fictitious "friend" Bunbury as an excuse to escape social responsibilities. Jack and Algernon then converse on the subject of infidelity:

ALGERNON. A man who marries without knowing Bunbury has a very tedious time of it.

JACK. That is nonsense. If I marry a charming girl...I certainly won't want to know Bunbury.

ALGERNON. Then your wife will...in married life three is company and two is none.

JACK (*Sententiously*). That...is the theory that the corrupt French drama has been propounding for the last fifty years.

ALGERNON. Yes; and the happy English home has proved in half the time. (327)

Algernon alludes to adultery when he speaks of the third person that is necessary for “company” or contentment to exist within marriage. Bunbury can therefore represent either the person one has an affair with, or the fictitious friend one uses as an excuse in order to cover for an affair. Although Jack asserts that he will be faithful to his bride, and therefore have no use for Bunbury, Algernon predicts that one partner in a marriage will inevitably commit adultery. The reference to French drama is important because adultery was celebrated in such literature. It is also self-reflexive because Wilde’s work is influenced by French drama. Even though Jack moralistically attempts to cite foreign influences for English infidelity, Algernon reminds him that adultery is a home-grown occurrence in “happy,” or respectable English households.

Another reference to adultery can be seen in a paradoxical diatribe against women who behave inappropriately. Algernon tells Jack that he does not wish to attend his aunt’s dinner party because

She will place me next Mary Farquhar, who always flirts with her own husband across the dinner-table. That is not very pleasant. Indeed, it is not even decent...and that sort of thing is enormously on the increase.

The amount of women in London who flirt with their own husbands is

perfectly scandalous. It looks so bad. It is simply washing one's clean linen in public. Besides, now that I know you to be a confirmed Bunburyist I naturally want to talk to you about Bunburying. (327)

Wilde reverses the premise of married women who flirt with other men. He describes the phenomena with mock seriousness, ending with another reversal regarding "washing one's dirty linen in public." The fact that the speech ends with a reference to Bunburying is important because the term later becomes established as code for infidelity.

Further reference to adultery is apparent in a conversation upon marriage between Dr. Chausable and Miss Prism:

MISS PRISM. ...by persistently remaining single, a man converts himself into a permanent public temptation. Men should be more careful; this very celibacy leads weaker vessels astray.

CHAUSABLE. But is a man not equally attractive when married?

MISS PRISM. No married man is ever attractive except to his wife.

CHAUSABLE. And often, I am told, not even to her. (345)

Miss Prism attempts to convince Dr. Chausable to marry. Here Wilde once again creates comedy by reversing gender roles, with the woman as the pursuer and the man as the pursued. The cliché that single, virginal women prove tempting to men is reversed as Miss Prism courts Dr. Chausable in this scene. Chausable refers to the unhappiness of marriage when he speaks of the dislike which causes a man to be unattractive to his wife. Such dislike may lead to adultery. It is ironic that Chausable should take such a negative view of marriage, because as a priest, he should defend marriage from a religious point of view.

In order to understand why so many references to adultery occur in Wilde's work, one must first understand his cynical view that marriage inevitably results in unhappiness. The *Importance of Being Earnest* opens with an explanation of the "demoralizing" effect of marriage, one that according to Wilde, may eventually lead to adultery:

LANE. ...in married households the champagne is rarely of a first-rate brand.

ALGERNON. Good heavens! Is marriage so demoralising as that?

LANE. ...I have had very little experience of it...I have only been married once. That was in consequence of a misunderstanding between myself and a young person.

ALGERNON. (*Languidly*). I don't know that I am much interested in your family life, Lane.

LANE. No, sir; it is not a very interesting subject. I never think of it myself.

ALGERNON. Very natural, I am sure....Lane's views on marriage seem somewhat lax. Really if the lower orders don't set us a good example, what on earth is the use of them? They seem, as a class, to have absolutely no sense of moral responsibility. (321-2).

The play is a comedy about courtship and marriage, yet Wilde opens with a reference to marriage's negative qualities. Here he presents a comic paradox as a truth, drawing on comedy to make a serious point. Instead of marriage as a "mutual understanding,"

Lane's union is based on *misunderstanding*. According to Wilde, marriages fail because partners inevitably misunderstand each other.

In an age when divorce was becoming more common, Wilde comments that the bonds of marriage are not strong. Lane feels he cannot know much about being married, since he has "only been married once." The ties that bind him to his partner are weak, as he no longer concerns himself with his "family life." When Wilde states that the lower class should provide "us" with a good example, he turns his eye to his middle-class audience, making sure they get the point. Wilde satirizes late-Victorian middle class notions of "moral responsibility" in marriage and the "moral responsibility" of setting a good example for the lower class.

PART B. Nonsense and Insensibility: When Courtship is Treated as a Game

In both Austen and Wilde, flippant characters treat the supposedly serious act of courtship as a game. The difference between Austen and Wilde's frivolous pursuers is that Wilde's playful courtships succeed while Austen's hardly ever do. This is because treating courtship as a game is seen more negatively by Austen, who takes marriage seriously, than by Wilde, who sees such play as more in a comic spirit although he also sees it negatively. In almost all of Wilde's comedies, those who court do not do so in earnest, but rather facetiously.

1. Austen's Dangerous Charmers

In Austen, characters who appear outwardly attractive, both physically and personally, are often revealed as shallow. Frank Churchill and Henry Crawford do not

seem dangerous at the onset. They are charming, even in their flirtation, but these young men are revealed as dangerous not only to the heroine's judgment of right and wrong, but to the very social fiber of the novel. In the end, they are summarily dealt with, put in their place as it were. Austen and Wilde differ in the way they treat these charming young men. While Austen chastises them, Wilde tolerates them. In Austen, those with dismissive attitudes towards marriage either lose out or learn their lesson; in Wilde, they achieve their courtship's aim and marry without changing their light-hearted views.

For example, Emma finds Frank Churchill very attractive. They have an immediate, easy rapport and become fast friends as he appears to take her into his confidence. The fact that they are easy with each other is in itself a sign that they are not meant to be together. In Austen, members of the opposite sex who are "right" for each other are often not quite comfortable in each other's presence. That Emma and Frank can flirt wittily points to a lack of deeper feeling, although we are meant to enjoy their banter. Austen believes that courtship should be simple and Mr. Churchill's "courtship" of Emma is anything but. He is also a bad influence on her: their seemingly innocent "quizzing" of those around them later leads Emma to hurt Miss Bates with similar rhetorical gibes. Miss Bates is an easy target for laughter and Austen sketches her as an amusing character throughout the novel. On the other hand, the fact that she is such an easy target forces us to quiet our laughter when Emma, emboldened by Frank's flattery, takes aim at her.

Frank does not take his relationship with Emma seriously, as he is engaged to Jane Fairfax. He does not seem to take his clandestine engagement seriously either. Mr. Churchill does not realize the precarious nature of Jane's situation. Her reputation must be spotless, because as a young woman with little family and no fortune, her character is

her only asset. Yet Mr. Churchill constantly makes fun of her, even implying that she engaged in an adulterous affair. Instead of attempting to win Emma to Jane's side, Churchill encourages her to believe the worst of his fiancé. In addition, Frank puts Jane's reputation in jeopardy by his impulsive gift of a piano. He does not seem to notice that his fun hurts his fiancé. He also acts callously by flirting with Emma in front of Jane. Although Frank achieves his aim by the end of the novel, his marriage to Jane is only made possible by a conciliatory gesture from Austen – a plot twist in which his controlling aunt dies and leaves him able to marry according to his wishes.⁴³ Although Frank may have achieved his desires and does not seem to have been punished for his mistakes, Emma's eyes are opened to his superficiality and to her own mistaken assessment of him.

Henry Crawford is another one of Austen's dangerous charmers. This young man is a dangerous influence on young people around him, even more so than Frank Churchill. Austen portrays Churchill as innocently doing wrong without understanding his errors. Henry Crawford does wrong knowingly, yet is unrepentant. Like his sister, he does not believe in the same values held by Fanny Price and Edmund Bertram. Henry flirts with Julia Bertram with an eye on making a wealthy match, although he does not seriously court her. He seems to pay equal attention to Maria although he knows she is engaged. Towards the end of the novel he turns his attention to Fanny, pursuing her even to her home in Portsmouth. Yet Fanny sees through Henry and does not desire him as a suitor. She knows that Henry, although he believes himself to be in love and in earnest, does not

⁴³ Another clue to Frank's shallow nature is the fact that he never attempts to contact his father in all the years they live apart. Only when he comes to town to see Jane does Frank make an effort to see Mr. Weston.

truly take courtship or marriage seriously, as he does not take life seriously. She is proven correct when Henry elopes with Maria.

Both Frank Churchill and Henry Crawford represent inappropriate “initial” suitors. Their failed efforts serve to set off the courtships of second, more appropriate suitors, Mr. Knightley and Edmund Bertram, respectively. Because Emma and Fanny view marriage differently, their interaction with these “dangerous charmers” proves different as well. While Frank’s witty repartee plays off of Emma’s humor, Fanny is made uncomfortable by Henry’s wit. This is because at the start of their respective stories, Emma views marriage with much less seriousness than Fanny. For example, in her pursuit of Mr. Elton as a potential mate for her friend Harriet, Emma engages in a kind of courtship by proxy. Although she has her friend’s and she believes, Mr. Elton’s, best interests at heart, she later realizes that by playing at matchmaking she is “making light of what ought to be serious” (137). Her matchmaking efforts prove comically disastrous for both herself and her friend. Emma thinks she takes courtship seriously, but in reality she does not yet know what love means, believing that if Mr. Elton speaks with Harriet alone, he will immediately fall in love and marry her. This lack of seriousness towards courtship in marriage is what allows Emma to be taken in by Frank’s dangerous charm. Meanwhile, Fanny’s serious attitude towards marriage allows her to see through Henry. Only when Emma discovers her own latent love for Mr. Knightley does she realize how carelessly she has treated the courtships, potential marriages and consequently, the lives of Harriet, Elton, Churchill and Jane.

As lightly as some characters in Austen’s novels knowingly or unknowingly, treat marriage, in Austen’s juvenilia, engagements and even marriages are often broken as

quickly as they are made.⁴⁴ In *Lady Susan* the title character plays at seduction and courtship with three men: her lover, her sister-in-law's younger brother and her daughter's suitor. Having no home of her own, Lady Susan must rely on the hospitality of her hosts, yet she takes courtship so lightly that she engages in romantic diversions in the homes of those who have taken her in as a guest. For example, she engages in an affair with her "friend's" husband for sport. In addition, while staying with her sister-in-law, she seduces Catherine Vernon's younger brother out of spite, because he had initially treated her with disdain. She also engages in the seduction in order to spite her sister-in-law, who disapproves of her. Lady Susan is ready to marry Reginald and later Sir James, although she feels nothing but derision for both.⁴⁵

In Austen's mature novels, humor is drawn primarily from narration and dialogue. In *Lady Susan*, situational comedy is more apparent while in the juvenilia fragments the sometimes dark humor centers on action and physical comedy. For example, dark humor can be found in "Frederic and Elfrida," a story in which a beautiful young woman has many suitors. She agrees to two engagements, then feels guilty and drowns herself. Her unattractive sister, on the other hand, marries, having received only one proposal. The same "novel" includes physical comedy as well. Elfrida and Frederic remain engaged for many years because the woman's parents do not want to pressure her into marriage. When the marriage is finally to take place, Frederic believes Elfrida too old and wishes to

⁴⁴ Austen takes a more serious view of marriage in her mature novels. There is a world of difference, for example, between the quickly forgotten loves of her juvenilia to the years Anne spends faithfully waiting for Wentworth in *Persuasion*, Austen's last novel.

⁴⁵ Lady Susan's wit seems to be a precursor of Mary Crawford's. Each enjoys cruelly satirizing those around her. Both lose the object(s) of their seduction as their true personalities are revealed.

marry a younger woman: “Damme, Elfrida, *you* may be married tomorrow, but *I* won’t” (“Frederic and Elfrida” 11). Hearing this, Elfrida falls into many fainting fits prompting Frederic to regret his behavior and marry her.

In a short paragraph entitled “The Adventures of Mr. Harley” a ship’s chaplain returns from the navy to see “his Emma.” He sees a young woman in a stage coach and “soon found out that she was his Emma and recollected he had married her a few weeks before he left England” (“The Adventures of Mr. Harley” 40). Austen draws on the comic nature of Mr. Harley’s actions to comment on how small an aspect of men’s lives marriage is, compared to the large role it plays in the lives of women.

One of Austen’s most irreverent juvenile treatments of courtship and the sacrament of marriage is the fragment “Sir William Mountague.” In it Sir William falls in love with a widow who insists on having the wedding on a hunting day: “Sir William was sorry to lose her, but as he knew that he should have been more grieved by the loss of the first of September...” (“Sir William Mountague” 41). He loses no time in falling in love again. In fact he falls in love with anyone he comes across, proposing immediately.

2. Wilde’s Frivolous Courtships

In Austen, those who treat courtship as a game are an exception; in Wilde they are the rule. Although we are allowed to enjoy the Austenian wit’s words, we know that eventually, we will must judge his or her character lacking. In Wilde, we are allowed to take pleasure in his wits’ language without having to make judgments regarding their characters. Austen would disapprove of Algernon Moncrieff who “has nothing, but he looks everything” (*The Importance of Being Earnest* 375), while Wilde would hail

Austen's Henry Crawford as a wit. If Austen's dandies meet with rebuke and disapproval, Wilde's meet with admiration and acceptance. After all, according to Wilde, "The future belongs to the dandy" (*A Woman of No Importance* 459). In addition, at least one party in Austen takes courtship seriously despite his or her partner's frivolity; in Wilde, both sides treat courtship as a game. There are hardly any relationships that are not based on lies and deception according to his cynical view of marriage. Wilde prides himself on his amorality and wishes to show that despite his characters' "good" intentions, their marriages would fall apart if not bolstered by a measure of deceit.

The Importance of Being Earnest is his most brilliant and most comic satire of marriage. The plot revolves around courtship, satirizing love inspired by superficial reasons. It is also a play in which deceptions abound: "Deception is everywhere [in *The Importance of Being Earnest*], cancelled by spontaneity and humor" (Ellmann *Oscar Wilde* 423). For example, Cecily and Gwendolyn are willingly deceived into marrying their "ideal" mate (one named Ernest); Jack and Algernon are "game" enough to get christened "Ernest" in order to win the women and are rewarded for their deceptions. In the comedy, Gwendolyn and Cecily treat courtship and by implication, marriage, as lightly as their dandy lovers. In fact, the women's actions often parody that of men. One of the funniest scenes in the play is that of Cecily and Gwendolyn arguing over which one of them is engaged to Ernest. The situation reverses the cliché of two men quarrelling over a woman they both love.⁴⁶ The play's courtships are almost as comically improbable as its farcical situations.

⁴⁶ The women attempt to undermine each other while drinking tea. Bergson calls this type of comic situation "reciprocal interference" (qtd. in Pestka 188).

While Wilde's other plays produce humor mostly through comic words, in *The Importance of Being Earnest* humorous situations and comic characters are as important as funny words, making it a more comically complex play and proof of Wilde's maturing comic technique.⁴⁷ One of the reasons this play is outstanding in Wilde's comic oeuvre is because "a flippant, light and playful tone is prevalent throughout the whole of *The Importance of Being Earnest* while in other comedies by Wilde it appears only occasionally and only when it reflects a dandy's attitude to the world" (Pestka 177). The future may "belong to the dandy" but the dandy is not the only one who gets good lines in this play. Here, "even the manservant and the governess are unfailing epigrammists" (Eltis 170). *Lady Windermere's Fan*, *A Woman of No Importance* and *An Ideal Husband* assign clever lines only to the wits, who utter them knowingly. In contrast, Wilde's last play contains "absurd remarks uttered inadvertently, and unexpected verbal reactions" by various characters (Pestka 185). In addition, "in *The Importance of Being Earnest*, the scale of ironies becomes larger, which makes the play more daring and exceptional in its style than its predecessors" as well as more humorous (ibid 180-1).⁴⁸

Lord Illingworth's cynical view of marriage holds true in *The Importance of Being Earnest*: "Men marry because they are tired; women because they are curious. Both are

⁴⁷ Bergson's definition of the comic states that the comic must incorporate comic characterization, comic situation, comic wording and repetition (of words or action) (Bergson 104-6). These elements are found in both Austen and Wilde's works. In Wilde, comic language is especially prevalent, along with repetition (a technique not as common in Austen's humor).

⁴⁸ Wilde's last comedy is funnier and better written than its predecessors because, finally, the witticisms combine smoothly with the plot. In the three other plays, the plot was more melodramatic than humorous, causing the witticisms to fit in awkwardly with the course of events.

disappointed" (*A Woman of No Importance* 436). Jack, and especially Algernon seem to wish to marry partly because they are tired of being reprobate bachelors; it appears that Gwendolyn and Cecily desire marriage because they are bored with their lives as well. Pestka explains that Gwendolyn's "affection [for Jack] is mere self-admiration combined with the desire for novel experiences" (192). For example, Gwendolyn admonishes Jack for not going through the proper formalities when proposing, formalities she values perhaps more than the idea of marriage itself. Her desire only to marry someone named Ernest is the most obvious example of the lightness with which she views marriage.

Cecily, like Gwendolyn, insists that her lover change his name to Ernest. Also like Gwendolyn, her attraction to her suitor seems to stem from a desire for titillation. Cecily wishes to be a heroine in a romance novel. She creates a full courtship process with Jack's "wicked" brother Ernest, the idea of whom fascinates her. Since Algernon, unaware of her existence, has not written to her, Cecily creates a fictitious correspondence complete with exchanged mementos, a lover's quarrel, a broken engagement and a reconciliation. She treats the invented engagement as trivially as she later treats the real thing: "Today I broke off my engagement with Ernest. I feel it is better to do so. The weather still continues charming" (*The Importance of Being Earnest* 454). Here is another example of Wilde employing "irony of comparison" which is "built upon an incongruous juxtaposition. Consequently, the significant is again deflated by an equation with the trivial" (Pestka 178). Each woman is more than a match for her suitor: Gwendolyn is more clever than Jack, while Cecily immediately throws Algernon off guard by creating an alternate reality to him.

Wilde's satire of Cecily's romantic conception of Algernon/Ernest's words echoes Austen's lampoon of an equally silly young woman whose imagination puts words into her lover's mouth. The "heroine" of "Lesley Castle" falls in love at first sight, declaring that: "He did not speak; but I can imagine every thing he would have said..." ("Lesley Castle" 136).

Wilde attempts to show the triviality of serious subjects such as formal courtship and marriage by treating them as if they cannot be done away with, when in reality he believes the opposite: After all, *The Importance of Being Earnest*'s subtitle is "A Trivial Comedy for Serious People." He employs the character of Lady Bracknell, a representation of all that is supposedly strong and ineradicable in late nineteenth-century society to show the inconsequence of courtship and marriage. Lady Bracknell is a "confirmed follower of social decorum" (Pestka 176)⁴⁹ and "a confirmed follower of a Philistine morality" (ibid 185). By making her ridiculous, Wilde criticizes both social decorum and Philistine morality. Lady Bracknell's words make fun of upper class marriage procedures. When she explains to Cecily that "Algernon is an extremely, I may almost say ostentatiously, eligible young man. He has nothing, but he looks everything. What more can one desire?" (*The Importance of Being Earnest* 375), she not only unknowingly criticizes her nephew but more importantly critiques "the social norms of an upper class ruled by appearances" (Pestka 184).

⁴⁹ In *Persuasion*'s Lady Russell, Austen also draws a portrait of a well-respected older woman who attempts to guide the young and act as an arbiter of social propriety. But Austen accepts Lady Russell as a good woman while Wilde ridicules Lady Bracknell as a social obstacle.

Dr. Chausable and Miss Prism's courtship occurs simultaneously with the two primary courtships of Jack/Gwendolyn and Algernon/Cecily. Representing the Church and Education respectively, Dr. Chausable and Miss Prism, along with Lady Bracknell supposedly depict the older and wiser generation and attempt to set an example to the play's young people. Yet despite their cant, Dr. Chausable and Miss Prism often act as giddy and irresponsible as the youth they look down upon. At one point, they chase each other around the manor. Their union makes for a third engagement at the end of the play and adds to its comic resolution.

Aside from the frivolity with which marriage is treated in Wilde's final comedy, marriage is also treated as a game in *An Ideal Husband* and *Lady Windermere's Fan*. Mabel and Lord Goring play at courtship just like Algernon, Cecily, Jack and Gwendolyn. Lord Goring, whom Pestka calls "Wilde's most perfect dandy" (176), "gor[es]" with his wit. His partner in the game of courtship is a "modern" girl - pert, although virginal Mabel. Witty banter leads to a marriage proposal, despite the gentleman's previous vows of staying a bachelor.

Unlike prospective lovers in *An Ideal Husband* and *The Importance of Being Earnest*, who court through clever conversation, a pair of "lovers" in *Lady Windermere's Fan* become engaged without exchanging a word. Nowhere is courtship treated with less seriousness than in the case of Agatha and Mr. Hopper. Their courtship and by implication, their engagement, is arranged by Agatha's mother, the Duchess of Berwick. The Duchess has little respect for the idea of marriage as a love match. I had discussed earlier how she probably engaged in adultery and encourages her husband to do the same. She seems to agree with Lady Bracknell, who says: "I am not in favor of long

engagements. They give people the opportunity of finding out each other's character before marriage, which I think is never advisable" (*The Importance of Being Earnest* 375). The Duchess wishes that her daughter marry because it is the end of the season. According to Wilde's satire of aristocratic snobbery, the fact that she sets her sights on a newly-moneyed Australian⁵⁰ shows her desperation. She makes certain that Agatha and the wealthy man dance together several times and arranges for them to be alone so that he may propose. Mr. Hopper is interested in Agatha, although Agatha's wishes are unknown. Her only words throughout the play are a repetition of "Yes, mamma."

PART C: Persuaded: "Successful" Courtships by Mentor Figures

Austen views a courtship as "successful" if it ends in marriage. The best kind of courtship is one that is not sexually or financially motivated. The parties should also be "well suited" to each other with regard to class, family and personality. Austen advises her niece to marry a man who is recommended by "His situation in life, family, friends, & above all his character – his uncommonly amiable mind, strict principles, just notions, good habits...*All* that really is of the first importance" (*Letters* 280). This was a lot to ask for in the early nineteenth century and not all of her courtships possess all of these qualities, although Austen makes sure that her heroines' successful courtships are motivated by love. Her most important courtships, those of the heroine and of those close to the heroine, are often depicted as instructorships through mentor figures. For example, Mr. Knightley is Emma's teacher as well as potential lover. The same relationship can be found between Henry Tilney and Catherine Morland in *Northanger*

⁵⁰ Mr. Hopper's name makes a humorous reference to the hopping of kangaroos.

Abbey and Colonel Brandon and Marianne Dashwood in *Sense and Sensibility*. Captain Benwick's courtship of Louisa in *Persuasion* is also such a relationship. Humor in such courtships is often created at the expense of the young woman, who, having much to learn, often makes comic errors. The woman usually makes a series of such errors before allowing herself to be guided by her more knowledgeable suitor. Successful courtships are based upon a certain amount of deference to the superior understanding of the mentor figure. For example, when Emma finally defers to Mr. Knightley's judgment after the Box Hill incident, she realizes her erroneous thinking regarding courtship and marriage and can at last think of Knightley as a potential suitor.

Like Knightley, Henry Tilney teaches Catherine how to judge people and situations. He also gives her an education about literature, art, nature and taste. Like *Emma*, *Northanger Abbey* presents a crucial scene in which the heroine, through the hero's guidance, realizes a grave error in judgment. In Catherine's case this occurs when Henry lectures her after discovering her looking for evidence of foul play in his mother's room. Her earlier errors in judgment are also a source of comedy in the novel as such errors are in *Emma*. Like Emma, Catherine has an epiphany in which she realizes that many of her previous conceptions about people are mistaken. At this point in the marriage plot, immediately following such epiphanies, is when Austen's heroines believe they are furthest from their lovers' affection. This is ironic because it is at this point that they are closest to receiving a marriage proposal.

Though Darcy courts Elizabeth, she, unknowingly is at the end his seducer and teacher although not his mentor. His great attraction for her causes him to act rudely each time he is in her presence and finally to propose "in spite of himself." Yet unlike

aborted courtships based solely on sexual attraction, Austen shows that successful courtships like that of Elizabeth and Darcy, are based upon mutual respect. Elizabeth believes that their “happy marriage” could “teach the admiring multitude what connubial felicity really was” because Darcy

was exactly the man who, in disposition and talents, would most suit her.

His understanding and temper, though unlike her own, would have answered all her wishes. 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* 312).

In addition to educating him on class issues, Elizabeth teaches Darcy how to laugh at himself, which allows him not only to better enjoy life but to better get along with others. On the other hand, Elizabeth believes that she receives the better end of the bargain in the match because in marriage, Darcy will become her mentor by teaching her about the world.

Unlike successful courtships by mentor figures of main characters, those leading to marriages of lesser characters do not seem to be based upon love. Marianne’s sudden esteem for Colonel Brandon and Louisa’s acceptance of Captain Benwick is less palatable to our modern tastes than Elizabeth’s union with Darcy. Marianne seems to turn from dynamic and exciting Willoughby to reserved and staid Colonel Brandon from a sense of resignation. Likewise, Louisa, after realizing she will not receive a proposal from Wentworth, seems to simply fall in with Captain Benwick. Marianne and

Willoughby had laughed at Colonel Brandon, whom they considered overly-serious and unsentimental. Prior to meeting Captain Benwick, Louisa scoffed at the prospect of life without physical activity and amusement. Austen implies that both women's impetuous and head-strong natures will be tempered by the steady personalities of their older husbands. It is interesting to note that both young women accept the older men as suitors during or after a traumatic illness: Marianne has a fever and Louisa suffers a bad fall. After recovering, their personalities change. While her heroines marry for love, Austen's lesser female characters seem to marry for stability.

Although "mentor" courtships are positive in Austen, Wilde depicts them negatively. This is the case in *The Picture of Dorian Gray*, in which Dorian is mentored by Lord Henry. Lord Henry seduces Dorian by introducing him to aesthetic pleasure. This seduction can be seen as a sexual courtship through art. He wins Dorian away from Basil's gentle influence and the guidance of do-good society matrons. Dorian sees too late that although Lord Henry can show him the selfish pleasures of life, he cannot counsel him when he is in emotional pain after finding such pleasures empty. For example, Lord Henry cannot help Dorian when the latter wishes to do good for the sake of others. The novel's often dark humor comes from Lord Henry's witty remarks. After Dorian falls under his "mentor's" influence, his language begins to parallel that of Lord Henry. But while Lord Henry's cleverness is all surface, Dorian's clever remarks come to mask an inner anguish.

When looked at together, Austen and Wilde's comic depictions of seduction and courtship within their satires of marriage reveal some interesting points. Although her

comedies of manners give an impression of eavesdropping on a tea party, Austen's novels give a richer sense of human potential than Wilde's drawing room comedies. This is partially because Wilde views people more negatively and with less hope for the possibility of their reform. He goes against the status quo by satirizing marriage and society through his often melodramatic social comedies. Wilde believes that although society must accept the individual, the individual need not accept the dictates of a perpetually flawed society.

Though there are many bad marriages in Austen, good marriages, rare in Wilde's writing, exist in her novels. For example, the Gardiners in *Pride and Prejudice* are caring, nurturing and full of common sense. They act as surrogate parents to the Bennet daughters. In *Northanger Abbey* the Morlands have a happy marriage as well. We see a good marriage even in *Lady Susan* as represented by Charles and Catherine Vernon. Unsuccessful marriages are attributed to marrying too far outside one's class (the Prices in *Mansfield Park*), marrying out of purely mercenary reasons (Maria Bertram in *Mansfield Park*), purely out of physical attraction (the Bennets in *Pride and Prejudice*), or for the sake of social connections. The purpose of the plot in Austen's novels is to provide a "good match" for the heroine, one that combines intellectual and emotional compatibility without overwhelming physical attraction. Through marriage, the heroine, who at the beginning of the novel is just starting out in life, ends by becoming a member of a larger community.

Jane Austen also shows that although it is appropriate to contain one's emotions during courtship, it is not beneficial to be *too* restrained in emotion and action. Such overly-zealous restraint can lead to misunderstanding. She employs the comic and often

dramatic device of characters misunderstanding one another within her marriage plots.⁵¹

Pride and Prejudice, *Sense and Sensibility*, *Emma* and *Persuasion* can be called comedies of misunderstanding; they criticize how over-emphasis on propriety results in often unnecessary suppression and secrecy between even the most closely related persons. In these novels, "separate spheres" for men and women force a lack of communication which leads to misunderstanding, especially over romantic intentions. In *Pride and Prejudice*, the Bennet family is not vigilant regarding Wickham's attentions towards Lydia partially because of Elizabeth and Darcy's reluctance to reveal Wickham's past. In *Persuasion*, Anne hides her feelings for Captain Wentworth because he does not make *his* feelings plain. In return, he conceals his feelings from her because he believes *she* does not care for him. A similar misunderstanding occurs in *Emma*, where Emma and Mr. Knightley humorously misconstrue each other's feelings.

There are several other romantic misunderstandings within *Emma*'s marriage plot, many of them comic. These occur because it took little in the nineteenth-century for a person to attribute romantic intentions to the opposite sex: Mr. Elton believes Emma cares for him because she is kind to him for Harriet's sake; Harriet believes Mr. Knightley has feelings for her because he asks her to dance out of politeness; Emma believes Mr. Knightley loves Jane Fairfax because he defends Jane from her criticism and praises Jane's accomplishments. Austen implies that these misunderstandings occur because in tending to the social niceties of common intercourse, men and women have little opportunity to talk openly to each other.

⁵¹ Incidentally, while Austen fears misunderstanding, Wilde writes that "...I live in terror of not being misunderstood" ("The Critic as Artist" 1016).

An Ideal Husband, *A Woman of No Importance* and *Lady Windermere's Fan* are also comedies of misunderstanding, except with a different purpose; they shed light on how attempting to suppress and hide imperfections of character or behavior forces people to commit greater evils. For example, in *An Ideal Husband* Sir Robert Chiltern attempts to hide a business indiscretion he had committed in his youth from his wife, a deception which forces him towards further corruption.

Wilde's satiric presentation of seduction of courtship in his comedies also tells us much about his views regarding marriage. One of the most important ideas that comes across is the idea that the individual's wishes are more important than those of society. This is reiterated in all of his plays. Pestka states that *An Ideal Husband*, *A Woman of No Importance* and *Lady Windermere's Fan* "are on the surface extensions of sentimental drama based on the melodramatic pattern, but, in fact, their real issue is the attempt to rationalize the theme of the individualist's position in a conformist and hypocritical society" (175). While Austen's characters learn to accept others and not to think so much of themselves, Wilde's characters realize "a duty to oneself as well as to others: the duty of self-discovery and self-expression. This duty made necessary, among other things, the loss of innocence, for innocence too long maintained could be as dangerous as guilt" (Ellmann xii). In Austen the loss of innocence and the gaining of experience occurs for the sake of better understanding others and therefore better being able to act as a member of society; in Wilde it occurs for the sake of gaining a better understanding of oneself.

Austen and Wilde wrote about marriage themes from the perspectives of outsiders: Austen never married; Wilde was homosexual. Each addressed the sexual politics of the Victorian era without being mired in it: she wrote before the Victorian era's strict outlook

on sexuality; he when such an outlook was on the wane. Both writers effectively employ humor to satirize social vices, although they have different conceptions of what these vices are. There has been much debate over whether Jane Austen or Oscar Wilde's humorous writing subverts or reinforces the status quo, but because of the rich and complex nature of their writing, these satirists escape categories of "conservative" or "subversive."

Chapter 3

“To Market, To Market!”:

Marriage as Financial Agreement in Austen and Wilde

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“There certainly are not so many men of large fortune in the world, as there are pretty women to deserve them.”

- Jane Austen (*Mansfield Park* 7)

“You can hardly imagine that I and Lord Bracknell would dream of allowing our only daughter – a girl brought up with the utmost care – to marry into a cloak-room, and form an alliance with a parcel?”

- Oscar Wilde (*The Importance of Being Earnest* 334)

The last chapter focused on how Austen and Wilde satirized seduction and courtship. This chapter will deal with how they treat the type of courtships and marriages that are based purely on financial reasons. Both Austen and Wilde critique such mercenary marriages and courtships, and in satirizing these types of alliances they critique the societies which allow and encourages them. In addition, both authors have serious points to make regarding the subject, although each author’s motives for satire and critique is different. In Austen it is possible for a well-disposed character or even the heroine to marry for money while no such possibility exists in Wilde. Because Austen sees marriage as a positive and indispensable part of society, she makes allowances for a variety of marriages. Wilde on the other hand does not see marriage as a desirable social enterprise and therefore has much less tolerance for mercenary marriage of any kind.

PART A. The Proud and the Prejudiced: Austen's Mercenary Courtships and Marriages

Although Austen shows that compatible amounts of money are important in a good match, she looks down upon a match made primarily because of financial considerations: "Anything is to be preferred or endured rather than marrying without affection" (*Letters*, 280). When the narrator in *Mansfield Park* sarcastically laments that "there certainly are not so many men of large fortune in the world, as there are pretty women to deserve them" (7), she implies that every pretty woman wishes to marry a man with a large fortune. The ironic aspect of the first line of *Pride and Prejudice*: "It is a truth universally acknowledged, that a single man in possession of a good fortune, must be in want of a wife" can be read as proposing that a single woman is in need of financial security, of a man with a fortune. Austen may deride money-grubbing women, but at the same time she critiques a society in which women have no choice but to marry for money if they are to live. Austen says this bluntly in her juvenilia where a poor woman's father "too well knew that to be married would be the only chance she would have of not being starved" ("Lesley Castle" 117).

Mansfield Park is critical of those like the mercenary Mary Crawford, who make alliances based on money alone, without recourse to tenderer feeling: "Matrimony was her object, provided she could marry well" (42). In *Persuasion*, Mr. William Elliot is in Mr. Collins' position as heir to Kellynch Hall. Anne's sister Elizabeth is looked down upon by the narrator for wishing to marry him because of his status and the money he would inherit, despite knowing little about him and despite the rudeness he displayed toward her family. In *Northanger Abbey*, the manipulative Isabella and boasting John

Thorpe quickly show an interest in James and Catherine Morland's perceived wealth. This is the reason that John befriends James in college and invites him home. It is the reason Isabella "falls in love with" James and befriends Catherine, and the reason John takes a romantic interest in Catherine. It takes Catherine and James longer to understand the Thorpes' selfish motives. John's attentions, once understood, are quickly rebuffed, while Isabella truly hurts James by breaking off the relationship. Austen also looks down upon General Tilney, who, after flattering Catherine while believing her rich and therefore an excellent match for his son, rudely dismisses her after hearing she is poor.

Although Willoughby in *Sense and Sensibility* is initially shown as an attractive character, he is revealed as a weak man later in the novel when he makes a mercenary marriage, greatly hurting Marianne. Additionally, the scene she makes at the ball when she sees him with another woman might have ruined her reputation. In Austen's novels those like Marianne who see love and the lover as an unrealistic ideal are punished, while prudent lovers like Elinor are rewarded.

1. When Sense Rules Sensibility: Austen Portrays a Society in which Women are Forced to Marry for Money

Austen shows many examples of women forced to marry for money, usually to unfortunate effect: "Single women have a dreadful propensity for being poor, which is one very strong argument in favour of matrimony" (*Letters* 332). All her heroines, except Emma Woodhouse are in need of money. There are several reasons in Austen why a woman would be socially forced into making a mercenary marriage: the law of entail, the fact that there is no man in the household to provide for the family, and that

she cannot be otherwise independent from their family. Women who could not or would not live with their families had to get married. It was not only inappropriate for a single woman of marriageable age to live alone, but she would not be able to support herself while maintaining her gentility.

In critiquing a society in which money is often valued over love in the making of a match, Austen gives one example where the idea is taken to an extreme, in a situation in which the cost of the wedding breakfast is valued higher than the life of the fiancé. “Lesley Castle” describes a young woman who is convulsively hysterical because her fiancé broke his head; her sister is more concerned with the practical matter of what to do with the wedding feast she has prepared: “Good God!...Why what in the name of Heaven will become of all the victuals?” (113). As the rest of the family attempts to eat as much of the food as they can before it spoils, the heart-broken bride-to-be is assured by her sister that “should he [her fiancé] die (as I suppose he will) I shall still have to prepare a dinner for you whenever you marry any one else” (114).

a. Women Forced into Mercenary Marriage Because of Entail

Mercenary marriage sometimes occurs because of entail, which makes young women desperate to get married. Entail allows property to be passed down only through the male line. *Persuasion*, *Sense and Sensibility*, and *Pride and Prejudice* all critique entail. For example, despite Mrs. Bennet’s humorous matchmaking faux pas, the Bennets are in the precarious position of having to marry off at least one of their daughters immediately and all of them eventually. In the character of Mrs. Bennet, Austen shows how entail creates a strong desire for marriage among young women and their mothers. Mr. Collins’

“benevolent” intention of marrying one of the Bennet sisters since he will inherit their property anyway, was common.

b. Women Forced into Mercenary Marriage Because They Have No Male Family Member to Provide for Them

Even those women who Austen portrays as grasping and mercenary are often shown to face the same problems as her heroines. In “The Three Sisters” for example, Mary Stanhope⁵² must make a good marriage because her family, consisting solely of women, have no male to care for their welfare. “The Three Sisters” is an ironically humorous, although sometimes dark and brutal, feminist sketch.⁵³ Although Austen treats marriage seriously in her novels, she treats it irreverently in her juvenilia, often with a dash of black humor, in a style similar to that which Wilde will later adopt. Austen’s juvenilia gives a darker vision of the marriage market, especially in this tale.⁵⁴

In the story, the girls’ mother wishes one of her daughters to marry rich. (Desperation for marriage will become a recurring theme in Austen’s later works). Mary is repulsed by her suitor, but being the eldest, she wishes to marry before any of her sisters and friends and to be established in her own household. Here is another example of a family of women without a strong male figure to care for them. Mary’s sisters egg

⁵² “Mary” is perhaps a pun for “marry,” while “Stanhope” may be deconstructed optimistically as “stands to hope” or more pessimistically as “sans hope.”

⁵³ It is interesting to note that even in these early works, women play the main roles while men remain secondary characters.

⁵⁴ The social critique implicit in the burlesques that constitute Austen’s juvenilia must be qualified by the fact that Austen wrote these pieces when she was quite young and had no intention of having them seen by anyone outside her family.

her on to marriage by pretending to be interested in their neighbor, Mr. Watts. They hope her jealousy would prompt her to accept him so that they need not. Georgina makes excuses for him. He is plain "but then what is Beauty in a man...They say he's stingy; We'll call that Prudence" (61). Like the later Mr. Collins, Mr. Watts does not care which sister he marries: "It is equally the same to me which I marry of the three" (ibid 64). Watts vows to propose to Mary's sisters or her friends if she does not accept him. Mother, daughter and suitor spend much time haggling over settlements and pin-money. After marriage, Mary expects to lead a very fashionable life. Her main concern is that her carriage is as fine as that of her friends the Duttons. The settlement arranged and marriage date set, Mary's later "...conversation entirely consisted in abusing the man she is so soon to marry, and in longing for a blue chaise spotted with silver" (ibid 67). The couple is off to an unpromising start, he calling her a "vixen" and she calling him a "blackguard" (ibid 70). To the outside world, Mary styles herself "the happiest creature in the world," but she admits that although Watts, at thirty-two, is "an old man" he is unfortunately "very healthy" and unlikely to die soon (ibid 58).⁵⁵ Austen's sketch although humorous in its absurdities, touches on the realities of such marriages of convenience, completely mercenary on the part of the woman. Austen shows Mary Stanhope as a weak woman, one who values luxury over love, but also one whose views of what is important in a connection are partly formed by her society, which consists of her mother, sister and friends.

⁵⁵ Like "The Three Sisters," "Jack and Alice" portrays a similar situation of a young woman receiving a proposal from an older, unattractive, but wealthy suitor. Lucy is interested in the Duke's proposal because she hopes that being old, he will not live long after the wedding.

Another mercenary-minded character is Isabella in *Northanger Abbey*. Although portrayed as a negative character, she is in the same position as Charlotte in *Pride and Prejudice* – willing to marry for stability rather than love. Like most women in the nineteenth century, she must marry in order to be provided for. Her family is not well-off and with two younger daughters to think of, are eager to see her settled. For four years she has been attending balls at pleasure resorts such as Bath in an attempt to find a husband. But unlike Charlotte, who is a sweet, modest young woman, Isabella represents herself falsely, only pretending to be such in order to attract a husband.

c. Women Forced into Mercenary Marriage Because They Cannot Otherwise Be Independent From Their Family

Another critique inherent in Austen's deprecation of mercenary marriage, one that is very apparent in "The Three Sisters," is the great social divide between a woman's unmarried and married life. Many social constraints are placed on single women, even if they are wealthy. Mary is eager to become a married woman at any cost because of the personal and financial freedom it will give her. One young woman hopes that her future husband will "...always let me do just as I please..." unfortunately, "...he talks a great deal of Women's staying at home and such stuff" ("The Three Sisters" 59). Instead of needing an escort in public, Mary looks forward to escorting her unmarried sisters and friends. Instead of having to ask her mother for money, she hopes that her husband will be generous and provide her with an allowance that will give her a modicum of independence. In addition, it is only through marriage that a woman could live independent of her family. Mary looks forward to entertaining in her own home and

riding in her own carriage, things she cannot do as a single woman. Although she is drawn as a parody, many young women in Austen's time followed Mary's example of marrying in haste and without love in order to gain a measure of independence.

In "Love and Freindship" the heroine seems to have eloped for a similar reason. Sophia, a young woman living in a remote romantic location answers a knock at the door. It is a young man seeking shelter. Hilariously, the couple marries immediately upon seeing one another, in defiance of his family. They are destitute and are promptly arrested for debt. Although in this case the heroine did not marry for money, she most likely married for independence and as a way out of the remote area in which she lived. She definitely did not marry for love, as is evident by her reaction to her husband's imprisonment. Sophia flees when her husband is taken to Newgate: "[N]ever shall I be able so far to conquer my tender sensibility as to enquire after him" she says (97). In her writing Austen critiques rash marriages made in the heat of the moment. These often have financial consequences. In "Love and Freindship" violent "love" is tempered by the realities of debtor's prison.

d. Women Forced into Mercenary Marriage Because They Cannot Otherwise Survive

Sometimes women in Austen are forced to marry for money because they literally cannot survive on their own. A marriage made in haste and without love occurs in "Henry and Eliza," another playful piece of juvenilia that also treats marriage irreverently. Eliza's life seems to parody that of Richardson's *Clarissa*. She is an upper-class young woman of landed gentry, initially universally beloved and doted upon by her

parents. When she is for no apparent reason turned out by her suddenly cruel parents, she is forced to become a lady's companion to a duchess. Henry, a young man engaged to the duchess's daughter, falls in love with Eliza. The couple elopes and leaves the duchess an abrupt note: "Madam, we are married and gone" (36). Behind Austen's satire of the quickness with which characters fall in love and elope in eighteenth-century romantic novels, "Henry and Eliza" may also be read as an example of a woman forced to marry a man she barely knows. Without her parents' financial support, Eliza would have to continue to work for the duchess, losing her gentility. Eliza had no choice but to elope with the wealthy Henry.

"Lesley Castle" also highlights the desperation of young women to marry and the consequences of making a bad marriage. Margaret Lesley's brother makes what the family believes to be an unfortunate match with a poor woman. This woman literally has to either marry or starve. The young woman later abandons Margaret's brother and their infant, for whom Margaret and her sister must now care while their brother travels the Continent to forget his sorrows. Here is another critique of a mercenary marriage that comes to a bad end. The woman who married for money left Mr. Lesley, who in turn left the women of his household to bear the responsibility of his mistake. Mr. Lesley's sisters and child are left unprovided for.

2. Not Every Gentleman Can Afford to be Knightley: Austen's Mercenary Men

Although more women than men marry for money in Austen, she also looks down upon men who attempt to make mercenary marriages. In the juvenilia fragment "Sir William Mountague," the title character falls in love only with ladies of a caliber which is

later employed to describe Emma: the young women are “all equally young, equally handsome, equally rich and equally amiable” (41). Another mercenary-minded man is John Thorpe of *Northanger Abbey*. He is portrayed negatively for pursuing Catherine only because he believes she is rich: “...you have so much, so much of every thing...” (123). He later spreads lies about her being completely poor when he believes that he had been “deceived” because Catherine is only moderately wealthy.

Mr. Elton (*Emma*) also makes a mercenary marriage.⁵⁶ Mr. Elton makes a mercenary marriage when he unites with a woman who lacks gentility but has a large dowry. Mr. Collins, although his marriage is not mercenary, marries mostly to please his patroness, whom he hopes will eventually reward him. He gives two “dutiful” and one personal reason as to why marriage would add to his happiness:

My reasons for marrying are, first, that I think it a right thing for every clergyman in easy circumstances (like myself) to set the example of matrimony in his parish. Secondly, that I am convinced it will add very greatly to my happiness; and thirdly...that it is the particular advice and recommendation of the very noble lady whom I have the honour of calling my patroness. (*Pride and Prejudice* 105)

Mr. Collins’ proposal is humorously interesting because he fails to explain how the marriage would add to *Elizabeth’s* happiness. In fact, speaking as he does in general terms “coming into Hertfordshire with the design of selecting a wife” (*ibid*), he fails to

⁵⁶ Like Mr. Collins (*Pride and Prejudice*) Mr. Elton constantly brags of his connections and Austen detests this combination of snob and sycophant.

mention Elizabeth at all. By marrying into the family whose land he would inherit anyway, Collins would place himself in the position of family patron, a role he enjoys.

3. Sense Unites With Sensibility: When Marrying for Money is Acceptable in Austen

Although Austen satirizes mercenary marriages, she does not consider it a bad thing for a poor heroine to marry well, provided that she is in love and well-situated class-wise with regard to her husband.⁵⁷ Or if she is not in love, at she should be least well-situated class-wise. An example of the latter can be seen in Charlotte's marriage to Collins (*Pride and Prejudice*). Although this relationship is not based on love, they are of the same class, which makes the marriage socially acceptable. Because Elizabeth initially balks at such a union, Charlotte explains that she has few prospects as a twenty-seven-year-old woman with little money and no great beauty. Although Elizabeth is shown as having good intentions in attempting to talk her friend out of the marriage, her opinion that one should only marry for love is shown as socially naive. The fact that Elizabeth is shown to have such an opinion at all is Austen's way of educating those readers who believe as Elizabeth does. We, along with Elizabeth are gently chastised by Charlotte. Elizabeth accepting Charlotte's fate is Austen's way of teaching the reader to do the same.

It is ironic that although Elizabeth scoffs at marrying for money, she makes the greatest financial gain in the novel. In fact, Elizabeth makes the wealthiest marriage of

⁵⁷ In counseling her niece to marry a man who lacks "wit," Austen writes that
 There *are* such beings in the World perhaps, one in a Thousand, as the Creature You & I should think perfection, where Grace & Spirit are united to Worth, where the Manners are equal to the Heart and Understanding, but such a person may not come in your way, or if he does, he may not be the eldest son of a Man of Fortune, the Brother of your particular friend, & belonging to your own country. (*Letters* 280).

all of Austen's heroines. Her union with Darcy is one in which the disparity between the heroine and hero's wealth is the greater than that of any union in Austen's novels.

Elizabeth's marriage is much more fortunate because she is in love. But so long as she can say to Lady Catherine, "He's a gentleman and I'm a gentleman's daughter," (*Pride and Prejudice* 356) in Austenian terms it is not an unfortunate connection on Darcy's part. Although Elizabeth disapproves of Charlotte's mercenary marriage and both she and Jane are embarrassed by their mother's marital scheming, Elizabeth and Jane end by making rich marriages of which their mother is proud. Ironically, they marry the very men Mrs. Bennet had wished for them.

Though not mercenary-minded, Anne is one of Austen's principle heroines who is rewarded with a wealthy marriage. In *Persuasion* she desires a love match with Wentworth, but allows herself to be persuaded by Lady Russell. Her mother's friend is practical and believes Anne's duty is to marry someone of her own station who can better provide for her. Although Austen deprecates mercenary marriage, she does not support completely giving into romantic love when it opposes practical happiness. Austen's idea of a successful marriage is one that is tempered by duty. Anne Elliot says that "a strong sense of duty is no bad part of a woman's portion" (500). According to Austen, a good marriage is one where love and passion are tempered by reason and practicality. Anne upholds this view when she defends her reasons for rejecting Captain Wentworth: "If I was wrong in yielding to persuasion once, remember that it was to persuasion exerted on the side of safety..." (ibid 523). Although Anne loved Wentworth, Lady Russell believed it was Anne's duty to refuse his offer, partly because they were at the time of

different classes. Anne listens to Lady Russell, but refuses other offers of marriage. In this way she honors both her lover and Lady Russell.

For Anne and Austen, marriage is a subordination of self to the social order, which changes in the eight years after Anne's refusal of Wentworth. His new status of Admiral allows Anne to marry him, despite the fact that his "new" money is made through the navy. So it is partially Captain Wentworth's fortune that allows him to marry Anne. Prior to this time, his lack of wealth and status can be compared to that of Mr. Price in *Mansfield Park*.

Fanny's mother "married, in the common phrase, to disoblige her family, and by fixing on a Lieutenant of Marines, without education, fortune, or connections, did it very thoroughly" (7). If Anne had married Wentworth before his naval success raised his social status and made him wealthy, she also would have been "marrying to disoblige her family." Austen commends Anne for holding out until Wentworth's prospects are better, although this makes Anne appear in some respects mercenary. Although Austen looks down on mercenary marriages, she also looks down upon Mrs. Price for marrying without money. Mrs. Price, whether she married out of love, passion, or a true desire to thwart her relatives, was not at all mercenary-minded. So in Austen, not only is it sometimes acceptable to marry for money, but it is considered imprudent to marry without taking financial considerations into account, however disinterested one's motive. We are not given Mrs. Price's reasons for marrying because for Austen they are not important. Even if Mrs. Price was deeply in love, by not taking her future finances into account, she "married to disoblige her family," for their prospects suffer because of her marriage.

But Austen's work warns that if one marries *only* for money, one cannot expect a love match. In "The Three Sisters" a young woman's fantasy of an ideal husband is promptly deflated by a man experienced in the ways of the world:

"I expect my husband to be good-tempered and cheerful; to consult my happiness in all his actions, and to love me with constancy and sincerity."

Mr. Watts stared. "These are very odd ideas young Lady. You had better discard them before you marry, or you will be obliged to do it afterwards."

(66)

Mary is interested in a man she does not love because he is rich. Austen reminds us that the ideals Mary describes are possible for non-mercenary heroines only.

PART B: The Importance of Being Rich and Titled: Satirizing Aristocrats and Those with Aristocratic Pretensions - Issues of Class, Wealth and Good Name with Regard to Mercenary Marriage in Austen and Wilde

1. Issues of Class and Wealth with Regard to Mercenary Marriage

Both authors address issues of class, wealth and good name in potential marriage partners for their characters. These issues are all important when making mercenary marriages. In discussing them Austen and Wilde satirize marriage as financial agreement. Austen addresses class issues in all her novels, especially with regard to the formation of marital ties. Although she considers class of great importance in forming a "connection," Austen denigrates characters who are wholly class-conscious. These characters usually approve of mercenary marriages. For example, Sir Walter Elliot's derision of the navy for bringing "men of obscure birth into undue distinction"

(*Persuasion* 39) is a statement made by a man who is also horrified by the way a seafaring life ruins the complexion. Both statements are meant to be silly and lacking in merit. One of the reasons Sir Walter is initially uncomfortable with the social rise of navy men is that Wentworth is one of them. Sir Walter does not consider Wentworth high enough socially to marry his daughter. Although he does not actively try to marry Anne off, he wishes for her to make a rich marriage to someone of her own class. This parental wish is not in itself derided by Austen, (the kind-hearted Lady Russell has the same wish), but Austen looks down upon Sir Walter because he is wholly mercenary-minded, not taking his daughter's feelings into account.⁵⁸ When his other daughter schemes to marry Mr. Elliot, Sir Walter supports her efforts despite the fact that Elliot repeatedly insults the family by snubbing them. Mr. Elliot's status as heir negates his rude behavior. After Mr. Elliot shows no interest, Elizabeth Elliot, vain and overly class-conscious like her father, cannot find anyone suitably high to marry. She is forced through her own self-importance to remain single at the end of the novel. Elizabeth is punished for her mercenary-mindedness.

Class-wise, her father represents the old order, an effeminate eighteenth-century man concerned with physical appearance, dress and strict distinctions in class as outlined in the Baronetage. Sir Walter, with his mirrored dressing room, is a caricature of the declining aristocracy, an antique in a new century of progress.⁵⁹ As Sir Walter represents

⁵⁸ Likewise in Wilde's *Ideal Husband*, Lord Caversham is portrayed as silly in his urging of marriage as a good in itself, without reference to his son's tastes in women. His only concern is for his son to make a good match and have a son of his own so that the Caversham line may continue.

the old, Captain Wentworth represents a new type of gentleman. He makes a fortune greater than that of the Elliots' and attains his wealth through merit, unlike Sir Walter who wastes money he never has to earn. At the end Wentworth is accepted as part of the family despite his lower birth. This, along with the fact that Sir Walter must let his hall to another navy man is Austen's way of showing merit's triumph over class, especially when Wentworth comes to stay in the hall where he was once banned. Although Anne seems to have made a mercenary marriage after all and Wentworth's "worth" is finally accepted once he is wealthy, the match is like Elizabeth Bennet's - one tempered by love and therefore acceptable to Austen.

Although Austen allows Anne and Wentworth to defy class boundaries in order to find happiness, Sir Walter and Mrs. Clay are punished for breaking these boundaries. Also, although Anne's patronage of the impoverished Mrs. Smith shows her regard for friendship over appearances, Elizabeth's friendship with Mrs. Clay is deemed inappropriate by Anne and Lady Russell, both authorities of proper behavior in the novel. Likewise, in *Emma*, Emma's friendship with Harriet Smith is deemed inappropriate by that novel's authority on behavior - Mr. Knightley. Emma is chastised by Mr. Knightley for allowing Harriet to believe that she can be a potential marriage partner for men of a higher class.

In Austen's world, class may only be set aside for what she deems the "right" reasons, although it remains uppermost in society's thoughts. When Anne marries Wentworth, her love for him is great and "His profession was all that could ever make her friends wish that tenderness less" (*Persuasion* 506). Austen explains that Anne "must

⁵⁹ At the time, new industrialists and wealthy merchants were forcing the old guard to take notice of the nouveau riche.

pay the tax of quick alarm for belonging to that profession which is, if possible, more distinguished in its domestic virtues than in its national importance" (ibid). These references to "profession" not only allude to the dangers of a navy life, but to the fact that Wentworth continues to belong to a profession, a profession which Anne's friends are said to regret. The navy's "domestic virtues" have allowed Wentworth to move up quickly in rank, both professionally and socially. In addition, it is underscored that by marrying Wentworth, Anne has given up her aristocratic status and now too belongs to the navy profession.

Wentworth is Anne's equal in gentility and understanding, just as Mrs. Smith is Anne's equal in friendship. In this case Wentworth's lack of family name and Mrs. Smith's poverty may be set aside. Also, Mrs. Smith, although a poor widow, does not scheme to get married as Mrs. Clay does. Anne is wary of Mrs. Clay because Mrs. Clay is well-mannered, but mercenary-minded. She also lacks gentility, which Austen associates more with character than wealth or class. More intelligent than Sir Walter or Elizabeth, Mrs. Clay's interest in both is mercenary, to the point that she leaves her children in order to travel with the Elliots. Her name reflects her temperament, like "clay," she molds herself into the type of person the Elliots want to see.

Like Mrs. Clay, Harriet Smith is of a lower class and lacks gentility. She is also less intelligent than Emma. It is this, in addition to her lack of wealth and family name that Mr. Knightley believes will prevent her from attracting a suitor from a higher class and should prevent her from being Emma's close friend. He believes that Emma is wrong in playing marriage-market mother to the motherless Harriet and that this role is beneath

Emma. Mr. Knightley believes that finding a spouse is serious business, and not the game that Emma considers it to be.

Austen shows examples of class-defying alliances in her juvenilia as well. All of the issues presented in her later novels are taken to extremes in the juvenilia, class-defying marriages included. In "Love and Freindship" Lord St. Clair has two daughters with an Italian opera girl. The sons of these women, bearing the exalted names of Gustaves and Philander state that "Our mothers could neither of them exactly ascertain who were our fathers," although they suspected they were a bricklayer and a stay maker (106). Here, the lower-class woman, despite the high status of her mate, bears daughters with loose morals, although they make an attempt at gentility in the naming of their sons. Austen looks down upon the unequal alliance of lord and opera girl, showing that in the end, the social climbing woman could not change the fate of her daughters.⁶⁰

Wilde also addresses the role of class in potential marriage partners, especially if the courtship or marriage is mercenary-minded.⁶¹ *Lady Windermere's Fan* comments on class hypocrisy through the character of the Duchess of Berwick, a proto-Lady Bracknell in her social conservatism. Complaining of the tea served at her friend's house, she says that "It was quite undrinkable. I wasn't at all surprised. Her own son-in-law supplies it"

⁶⁰ But Austen also sends up class-consciousness, for by the end of the same tale, a "ruined" lord and lady are forced to become coach drivers. "The Beautiful Cassandra" also satirizes class by making a burlesque of literary conventions, stating that a woman's "father was of noble birth, being the near relation of the Duchess of ---'s butler" (44).

⁶¹ Although he satirizes the aristocracy, Ellmann points out that Wilde's "favored characters are as likely to be 'classless' Americans or illegitimate sons as to be titled persons born properly in wedlock" (*The Picture of Dorian Gray and Other Writings* xii). Perhaps Wilde believes that a certain class standing is necessary if one is to have the leisure for wit.

(389). The duchess' antipathy towards "trade" vanishes in her attempt to make a wealthy match for her daughter. According to society, Mr. Hopper is doubly cursed: He is not only in trade, but is an Australian, but "His father made a great fortune by selling some kind of food in circular tins – most palatable, I believe..." (393) says the duchess. The duchess looks down upon her friend's son-in-law, who she believes rose too high when he married her friend's daughter, but her class-consciousness vanishes when she wishes her own daughter to marry the wealthy Mr. Hopper, although Mr. Hopper's family is also in trade. Wilde shows that when it comes to marrying for great wealth, class consciousness often diminishes, and social alliances that were previously deemed impossible ("undrinkable") become acceptable ("most palatable").

In *A Woman of No Importance*, Miss Hester Worsley, an aesthetic young American, speaks of a classless society in the United States, one based on individualism: "We are trying to build up life...on a better, truer, purer bases than life rests on here" (449).

Wilde allows Hester to get the better of an English aristocrat:

LADY CAROLINE PONTEFRAC. In my young days, Miss Worsley, one never met any one in society who worked for their living. It was not considered the thing.

HESTER. In America those are the people we respect most. (ibid 432)

A snobby aristocrat, Lady Caroline might have at first looked down upon Miss Worsley, assuming her to be one of the many American young women, some of them quite wealthy who come to England to obtain a titled husband (some of these lords are quite poor).⁶²

⁶² Usually when moneyed American young ladies marry impoverished English aristocrats they are "wonderfully clever in concealing their parents" (*A Woman of No Importance*,

Perhaps Lady Caroline is surprised that Miss Worsley, an unmarried young woman, would talk about working for one's living. In Lady Caroline's eyes, such talk would lower Miss Worsley's marriage prospects. The mercenary lady is herself on her fourth husband, a hen-pecked man whose conversation is limited to "Yes dear." In the marriage of Lord and Lady Pontefract Wilde not only satirizes the husband-hunting woman, but the weak-minded man who falls into her trap.

Aside from class, Wilde also addresses the issue of wealth and its relative importance in marriage. His characters state that "wealth conquers all" (*An Ideal Husband*) and that "The God of this century is wealth. To succeed one must have wealth. At all costs one must have wealth" (*Lady Windermere's Fan* 504). In Wilde's time, as in Austen's the only way a woman can obtain wealth is by marrying wealthily.⁶³

In *An Ideal Husband*, Mrs. Cheveley, forced a false courtship with Lord Goring when she was poor and unmarried in order to later get a settlement. Mrs. Cheveley knew that Lord Goring did not wish to marry her, so by obtaining a settlement she foils the marriage market. If in the marriage market women sell themselves into marriage in return for financial security, by obtaining a settlement Mrs. Cheveley obtains financial security without sacrificing herself to a loveless marriage. Stealing a present meant for Goring's cousin's wedding shows how little Mrs. Cheveley thinks of marriage. The gift, a brooch featuring a snake set in diamonds, is symbolic not only of Mrs. Cheveley's dangerous beauty, but perhaps of the dangers of marriage itself. Mrs. Cheveley

436). Such concealment is perhaps necessary because the parents are not aristocratic, are in trade, or otherwise lack gentility.

⁶³ Ironically, this is also the only way an impoverished aristocrat can obtain wealth. Like women, impoverished aristocratic men in the nineteenth century could not work without ruining their good name.

eventually marries Mr. Cheveley, probably after the money from her settlement runs out. Financial reasons motivate her to seek marriage once more, perhaps after the funds her previous husband left have been depleted. At the end of the play she attempts to blackmail Lord Goring into marriage, hypocritically asserting that she had always loved him. Like William Thackeray's Becky in *Vanity Fair*, Mrs. Cheveley's intelligence, attractiveness, and strong personality could have made her "a general," had she not been a woman. But being a woman, she, like Becky must play to win on the marriage market.

2. The Issue of Family Name with Regard to Mercenary Marriage in Wilde

Since Wilde states that "the Peerage...is the best thing in fiction the English have ever done" (*A Woman of No Importance* 461), it is no surprise that he satirizes those who take family name too seriously when making a mercenary marriage. In *The Importance of Being Earnest*, Lady Bracknell facetiously asserts: "You can hardly imagine that I and Lord Bracknell would dream of allowing our only daughter – a girl brought up with the utmost care – to marry into a cloak-room, and form an alliance with a parcel?" (334). Jack is an orphan who, although raised upper-class may not have been born as such. Lady Bracknell doubts his birth, since he was left in a handbag at a train station. Because of his lack of good name, Lady Bracknell is suspicious of Jack's wealth, although she wishes her daughter to make a wealthy match. She is sure that his house, although in a fashionable London neighborhood, is on the less exclusive part of the street. Because the Bracknells are already wealthy,⁶⁴ Lady Bracknell does not need to settle for wealth alone, but looks for a combination of a good name and wealth in a potential husband for her

⁶⁴ Lady Bracknell made a mercenary marriage herself.

daughter. But her avariciousness gets the better of her when she hears of Cecily's great wealth. Such a match for her nephew would benefit the whole family. Although Jack attempts to assure Lady Bracknell of Cecily's good family standing by offering to provide "certificates of Miss Cardew's birth, baptism, whooping cough, registration, vaccination, confirmation and the measles; both the German and the English variety" (ibid 373), her respectability is confirmed only when it is attested that her grandfather owned three estates. Lady Bracknell relents, for "Three addresses always inspire confidence..." (ibid).⁶⁵ Because she has already been won over by Cecily's extreme wealth, she does not question her good name. This is symbolized by Lady Bracknell's reaction to the estates. Although Jack's London address was suspect, no questions are asked about Cecily's grandfather's estates. The fact there are so many gives them validity.

3. Satirizing Aristocrats

Both writers satirize aristocrats, whose marriages were based on compatible class, family name and wealth. Many aristocrats in both Austen and Wilde are shown as mercenary-minded with regard to marriage. In Wilde, aristocrats, far from being looked to as models for behavior for the lower classes, are shown as a corrupting influence. In satirizing aristocrats Wilde reveals the hypocrisy that lies on the underside of seemingly genteel behavior, like that of the courtship and marriage process. Austen also laughs at

⁶⁵ Only those with the most respected family names were allowed to live in the most respectable neighborhoods, either because they inherited a family home, or bought or rented a home there. Elitism was such that even if one had money, one could not establish oneself in an aristocratic neighborhood without connections.

those in the upper class who would sacrifice anything in order to maintain their wealth and position, but her wit is especially cruel to those who toady to the upper class.

In *Lady Susan* Austen deals directly with decadent, high-society London and Lady Susan's over-reaching desire to make a rich marriage for both her daughter and herself. When a her daughter refuses to marry a wealthy, older man, Lady Susan courts him herself. Like many of Wilde's later aristocrats, Austen's aristocrats are snobs and both authors look down on the type of snobbery that brings about an undemocratic social structure. Even Fitzwilliam Darcy is treated coldly until he becomes neither "formal, nor falsely adorned" (*Pride and Prejudice* 245). Although he is wealthy and would make an excellent match for any eligible young lady, Elizabeth does not find him attractive as a potential husband until he becomes less formal.

In *Persuasion*, Viscountess Dalrymple and her daughter are stupid and cold-hearted, while in *Pride and Prejudice* Lady Catherine de Bourgh is rude and overbearing, yet these women are feted and fawned upon because of their wealth. Perhaps Elizabeth Elliot hopes that by patronizing the viscountess and her daughter, she can increase her status and meet more eligible young men. Mrs. Bennet is surprised that Elizabeth Bennet is not more gracious to Lady Catherine, considering the added stature Elizabeth can gain on the marriage market in cultivating such a connection.

Within her own family, Lady Catherine knows how to play the marriage market. She wishes for Darcy to marry her own daughter and does everything in her power to foil his match with Elizabeth. Likewise Bingley's sisters wish for their brother to form a

wealthier connection than Jane Bennet. Both Lady Catherine's and the Bingley sisters' meddling are examples where true love is temporarily thwarted by mercenary relatives.⁶⁶

In *Mansfield Park*, the most socially aware of her novels, Austen employs such characters as Sir Thomas Bertram and his children Maria and Tom to reveal the corruption of the upper class and the way in which its members exploit others. As the heir, Tom knows that he is a great catch on the marriage market. He senses no need to improve himself or curtail his impulses, because he will be acceptable to society no matter what he does, so long as he marries within his class and produces an heir. Maria is attracted to Rushworth only because of his wealth. Although she is already wealthy, she wishes to make a better and earlier marriage than her sister and show off her newly independent status. By flirting with Henry Maria puts her reputation and family honor in jeopardy, but she does not care for anyone's feelings but her own. Henry in the meantime is only trifling with her affections, or perhaps trying to take her away from her fiancé at the last minute and make a wealthy match for himself.

Like Austen, Wilde also shows aristocrats as a corrupting influence in his marriage satires. In *Lady Windermere's Fan*, the Duchess of Berwick thinks negatively of all men and tries to convince Lady Windermere that Lord Windermere is having an affair. She then cynically advises the younger woman to take the infidelity in stride, explaining that

⁶⁶ In "Love and Freindship" Austen expresses a reverse satire on negatively meddlesome relatives. Instead of sending-up those that marry for money in accordance to their family's wishes, the hero wishes so much to prove that he is marrying for love that he purposely defies his benevolent father:

"Lady Dorothea is lovely and engaging...but know, Sir, that I scorn to marry her in compliance with your wishes. No! Never shall it be said that I obliged my father." We all admired the noble manliness of his reply...Sir Edward was surprised... "Where, Edward in the name of wonder...did you pick up this unmeaning gibberish? You have been studying novels I suspect." (81)

this is the way of the world. When the naïve Lady Windermere asserts that she married for love, the more worldly Duchess replies “Yes, we begin like that” (392), implying that if one’s motives for marriage are not mercenary at the outset, they inevitably become so as time goes on. In the same play, Lady Plymdale is in danger of having her affair discovered by her husband, so she attempts to have a woman seduce him so that he will be busy with an affair of his own. Both the duchess and Lady Plymdale made marriages of convenience with which they are now unhappy. Since neither they nor their husbands expect love from such marriages, they are able to take infidelity in stride.

Aristocratic hypocrisy reaches a new height with Lady Bracknell in *The Importance of Being Earnest*. According to Wilde, it is hypocritical to speak about the ideals of marriage when in reality one has married for money. Lady Bracknell looks down upon Jack and Cecily, believing they lack “birth” and wealth, respectively, but her own nephew is deeply in debt and she herself “had no fortune of any kind” when she married Lord Bracknell (374). According to Lady Bracknell her lack of wealth upon marriage was acceptable because she disapproves of “mercenary marriages” (ibid). Lady Bracknell is hypocritically against accepting the orphaned Cecily as a potential mate for her nephew until she finds out Cecily is wealthy. Lady Bracknell knows that Algernon has no money and many debts. She makes certain that Cecily understands that in marrying Algernon she is marrying a penniless man. In addition, it is possible that Algernon’s sudden “love” for Cecily begins when he finds out she is wealthy. It is ironic that although Algy despises all that his Aunt Augusta stands for, like her, he also makes a mercenary marriage.

Lady Bracknell knows how to play the marriage market. She made a good match, perhaps with the help of her mother, when she was a young woman. Now that she is established in society through class, wealth and good name, she wishes to make a good match for her daughter. But Wilde “laughs at arranged marriages and all the prudential considerations entailed by them” (Ellmann, *The Picture of Dorian Gray and Other Writings* xvii). Lady Bracknell possesses a ridiculous list of potential suitors for her daughter that coincides with that of her dowager friend. Between them, the ladies have cornered the market of eligible men. These gentlemen are wealthy and come from good families. When Jack asks for Gwendolyn’s hand, her mother states that he cannot possibly be a suitable candidate for her daughter since his name does not appear on this list.

Lady Bracknell interviews Jack as she probably interviewed other potential suitors for her daughter. She asks Jack numerous personal questions about his family and finances. Jack is quite nervous before such scrutiny. Lady Bracknell is cognizant of the subtle niceties of society to a microscopic extent. Her very name speaks of her place as a bulwark of aristocratic society. The lofty “Augusta” perhaps alludes to Augustus Caesar, while “Bracknell” implies a tenaciousness that is evident in the strong-minded way she clings to her ideas and ideals. “Bracknell” is the vegetable matter that clings to the bottom of a larger entity; Lady Bracknell clings to society in the same way. Her ideas are those of society at large to the extent that she becomes the play’s symbol of aristocratic society.

Although with regard to mercenary marriage Wilde satirizes both Lady Bracknell and the society she represents, setting up both as antagonists to the young people in the play,

he acknowledges the formidable nature of both the woman and the prevailing social order. Wilde seems to condone the marriages of the two young couples in *The Importance of Being Earnest*. They seem to go against convention in acting to please themselves, portraying a different kind of earnestness than socially sanctioned. But at the end, although in their marriages Jack, Gwendolyn, Algernon and Cecily seem to prevail over stuffy social niceties and the woman that represents them, Lady Bracknell is not by any means vanquished. For one thing, she is happy in her nephew's marriage to an heiress. Although Jack appears to thwart her when he forces her to concede to his marriage to Gwendolyn before he will allow his ward to marry Algernon, in fact the marriage of her nephew more than covers any damage done to the Bracknell family honor through Gwendolyn's marriage to Jack. Lady Bracknell was most likely overjoyed at Algy's wish to marry, since she probably despaired at the effeminate aesthete and avowed bachelor ever marrying. She is probably also relieved at the end of the play to find that Jack is perfectly suitable for her daughter after all, being related to the Bracknells. And so Lady Bracknell's, and through her society's, "concession" to the younger and more unconventional generation is really no concession at all. At the end of the play, although mercenary marriage has been knocked down, it remains alive and well.

PART C. Marriage Market Mammias: Mothers Who Arrange Mercenary Marriages in Austen and Wilde

With the character of Lady Bracknell, what I call the "marriage market mamma" - the type of the nineteenth-century marriage-obsessed mother satirized in Austen (Mrs. Bennet, Lady Susan -) reaches her full power. The three women have much in common.

These older women married above their station and therefore feel adept at marketing their daughters. All three lack support from the men in their family. Lady Susan is a widow, while Mr. Bennet and Lord Bracknell are not involved in their daughters' marriages. All three mothers are meant to be shocking characters. They are satirized and their efforts seem ineffectual at the end. But there is a difference between women like Mrs. Bennet, Lady Susan and Lady Bracknell.

Although all three are ready to do whatever it takes to get their daughters married, Austen's marketing mammas are of a less dangerous type than Wilde's creation. Mrs. Bennet, for example, is taken seriously only by her two youngest and silliest daughters. Although her matrimonial schemes are an embarrassment to her husband and two eldest daughters, she is otherwise mostly harmless. She causes greatest harm when she allows too many liberties in the relationship between Wickham and Lydia. (Darcy later has to bribe Wickham into marrying Lydia). Mrs. Bennet's lax discipline and desperation for suitors for her daughters could have ruined Lydia's reputation. But in the novel, Mrs. Bennet has no power beyond the very little she exerts within her immediate family.

Lady Susan can more closely be compared to Lady Bracknell, which makes sense when one remembers that both characters were based on models from Restoration comedy. Unlike Mrs. Bennet, Lady Susan and Lady Bracknell are aristocratic, sophisticated women who know how to navigate society. They are more adept at the rules of the marriage market than Mrs. Bennet and know how to attract suitors for their daughters. Lady Susan and Lady Bracknell are similar with regard to their hypocrisy regarding marriage. Both look high for their daughters although their own husbands married "down" in choosing the ladies themselves. Both are also successful manipulators

of those around them, a necessary skill if one is to show one's daughter and family in the best light on the marriage market.⁶⁷

Although Lady Bracknell is the height of propriety while Lady Susan engages in scandalous affairs, Wilde's late-Victorian society matron is much more dangerous and insidious than Austen's throwback from the Romantic period. Everyone in the novel is shocked by Lady Susan when her true colors are revealed. She is meant to represent all that is contrary to the social order. Her mercenary views on marriage are refuted by good-hearted characters in the novel. Austen sets up Lady Susan as an "unnatural" mother who cannot exist in reality. In *The Importance of Being Earnest* on the other hand, Lady Bracknell is reality. Lady Susan, although a skilled manipulator, does not have as high a position in society as Lady Bracknell, perhaps because Lady Susan lacks money and social support. Lady Susan is shown as only outwardly upholding her society's judgments with regard to marriage. In reality, she is a liar. Therefore Austen shows that her mercenary marital schemes are looked down upon by society. In showing Lady Susan cast out by the society of the novel, Austen shows her optimistic belief that Lady Susan's mercenary match-making would not be acceptable in the real world of Austen's society.

Lady Bracknell on the other hand, is shown as upholding all the precepts that Wilde's Victorian society holds dear. In my opinion Lady Bracknell's social power makes her the most dangerous of the three marriage market mammas. Although late-Victorian audiences may have been shocked by some of Wilde's epigrams, in Lady Bracknell they recognized a familiar society mother. Unlike Lady Susan, there are no cracks in Lady

⁶⁷ Lady Susan also places *herself* on the marriage market.

Bracknell's armor. With regard to class, wealth and good name, her credentials are flawless. Her power is such that when accepting the orphaned Cecily and nameless Jack as part of the family (before Jack's identity is revealed), she knew that she could sway society to accept them as well. Although Wilde satirizes mercenary-minded mothers in the character of Lady Bracknell, unlike Austen he does not make her a powerless woman who lacks social graces, like Mrs. Bennet or a social villain like Lady Susan. He could not. In Wilde's view, society had accepted Lady Bracknell and she could not be toppled.

Lady Catherine (*Pride and Prejudice*) can also be considered a marriage market mother in her interest in Mr. Collins' marriage. She tells Collins to marry a gentleman's daughter who is not so well-off as to put on airs: "Chuse properly, chuse a gentlewoman for *my* sake; and for your *own*, let her be an active, useful sort of person, not brought up high, but able to make a small income go a good way" (105). Lady Catherine understands Collins' personality and knows that a woman who is too genteel will not be able to stand his more common ways. Still, Lady Catherine wishes for her to be "a gentlewoman" so that she need not be ashamed of being their benefactress, although she implies that the couple will be receiving only "a small income" from her patronage. Perhaps Lady Catherine does not wish for Collins to marry someone "too high" because she wishes his wife to give into her demands and does not want competition from someone with upper class confidence. Also, if Collins' wife is too rich, Lady Catherine will have to forgo the patronizing role she so enjoys. So although it seems that she is advocating against a mercenary marriage for her protégé, Lady Catherine does so from selfish motives.

PART D. The (Im)possibility of an Ideal Husband: Differences in Austen and Wilde's View of Marriage

Although there are similarities in Austen and Wilde's negative view of mercenary marriage, the differences in their view point to a larger differences in the way that each author sees marriage in general. Austen believes marriage to be a positive social fixture. Not only is it implied that her heroines will be happy with their chosen mates, but there are several examples of established happy marriages in her novels. (These are not mercenary marriages). In *Persuasion*, the older, practical-minded Musgroves are second only to the Elliots in the neighborhood. They provide a balanced, happy home for their children, consciously seeking Charles, Henrietta and Louisa's happiness. Admiral Croft and his wife are another example of an older happily married couple. Although males had charge of the public sphere while females ruled the domestic sphere, the Crofts' marriage seems to represent an ideal union of spheres: he assists her with household tasks while she helps him steer when driving the family carriage and travels with him when he goes to sea. Their marriage seems to be a union of equals. In Austen, a person, regardless of gender, is viewed as incomplete unless they have married. Her spinsters and perpetual bachelors are proof of this. Also, because the societal concept of marriage is seen as positive, mercenary marriage is acceptable under the right circumstances.

Unlike Austen, who satirizes the subject of marriage while taking the social idea of marriage seriously, Wilde does not take marriage seriously. His plays make many derogatory comments on the subject and he seems to think marriage a silly institution, whose reality is devoid of any romantic ideals. Wilde sees marriage as having no redeeming value: "Ah, nowadays people marry as often as they can, don't they? It is

most fashionable" (*Lady Windermere's Fan* 484). In Wilde, there are no circumstances in which marrying for money is acceptable; those who make mercenary marriages are fatuous hypocrites or liars to be unmasked. Wilde ridicules mercenary marriage, viewing the type sanctioned by late-Victorian high society as empty and ridiculous. For example, Mrs. Erlynne in *Lady Windermere's Fan* is looked down upon for wishing to marry for money. When she snares the rich and ridiculous Lord Augustus, Mrs. Erlynne "defends" her choice by stating that "there is a great deal of good in Lord Augustus. Fortunately it is all on the surface" (407). While Austen believes that mercenary marriage can be redeemed by love, Wilde shows that even a non-mercenary match has no redeeming value. His young women often profess a disinterested desire to marry for love, although he makes it abundantly clear that they only talk of love because they like the sound of the word.⁶⁸ Characters like Cecily and Gwendolyn (*The Importance of Being Earnest*) marry for the most frivolous of reasons. In *The Importance of Being Earnest*, Jack and Algernon seem to wish to marry on a whim. Throughout the play, Wilde shows Gwendolyn and Cecily holding unrealistic expectations regarding their notions of what an "ideal" husband should be. For example, in explaining her expectations to her suitor, Gwendolyn states:

We live, as I hope you know, Mr. Worthing, in an age of ideals. The fact is constantly mentioned in the more expensive monthly magazines, and has reached the provincial pulpits I am told: and my ideal has always been

⁶⁸ Wilde's actual definition of true, romantic love is unclear in his comedies, since most of his characters marry for selfish reasons.

to love someone of the name of Ernest. (*The Importance of Being Earnest* 437)⁶⁹

What makes Gwendolyn's statement comic is Wilde's use of "the ironic device of deflation by comparison; the serious issue is equated with the trivial one, undercutting the significance of the former" (Pestka 178). "Ideals," like that of finding an ideal life-long mate, are juxtaposed with the trivial notion of loving a man named Ernest: "In this case, the Philistine values are deflated...ideals in general become mere labels; in other words, the investment of moral value in accidental objects chosen arbitrarily by putting appropriate names on them" (ibid). One of the "ideals" of which Gwendolyn speaks is the ideal of finding "an ideal husband;" this endeavor, according to Wilde, is as ridiculous as wishing to marry someone with a particular name.⁷⁰

One of the reasons Wilde looks down at the ideals of marriage is because he sees these ideals as untruthful. Even the best marriages in his plays, those where the couple claims to have married for love, are supported by lies. In marrying Lord Goring in *An Ideal Husband*, Mabel, far from wishing to reform this rake, asserts that she wouldn't like "an ideal husband" and hopes that Lord Goring will keep secrets from her. Like Mabel, none of Wilde's wits attempt to find an ideal mate: "...the end-of-the century dandy, who is a sceptic in relation to everything, does not waste time searching for the ideal woman

⁶⁹ In addition, in the process of satirizing marriage through Gwendolyn's speech, Wilde manages to poke fun at two important propagators of nineteenth-century ideas: magazines and the church.

⁷⁰ Austen's "Love and Freindship" can be compared to *The Importance of Being Earnest* in its satire of unrealistic romantic ideals based upon names and appearances. In Austen's tale, a young woman is dismissed by her peers as unworthy, despite her good qualities: "[She] was then just seventeen – one of the best of ages; but alas! She was very plain and her name was Bridget...nothing, therefore, could be expected from her" (100).

because he does not believe she exists" (Laura Fernanda Bulger "The Importance of Being Fradique").

In his comedies he shows how society overly idealizes the qualities necessary in a marriage partner, resulting in unrealistic expectations from both husband and wife. The Chilterns' relationship in *An Ideal Husband*,⁷¹ is an example of an untruthful marriage where one partner has unrealistic expectations of the other.⁷² Lady Chiltern worships her spouse. When he wavers with regard to making an ethical judgment she begs him to "be that ideal still. That great inheritance throw not away – that tower of ivory do not destroy" (501). In employing the term "ivory tower," Wilde underscores the impossible nature of Lady Chiltern's idealization. Sir Robert gives in to Mrs. Cheveley's blackmail because he knows that if incriminating evidence about him were known, it would ruin not only his career, but also his marriage. Chilton asserts that wives expect too much from their husbands and put them on a pedestal so high that they are sure to fall. Although he loves his wife as she is, faults included, he curses her worship of him: "Why can't you women love us, faults and all? Why do you place us on monstrous pedestals?...It is not the perfect, but the imperfect, who have need of love" (ibid 521). This speech is covertly satiric because it is usually women who are put on a pedestal. It is also an example of Wilde's employment of paradox.

In this comedy Wilde plays with the idea of sexual purity and marital fidelity. Johnson explains that "Wilde reverses the idea of pure women made impure, with always

⁷¹From the very title of the play, Wilde makes clear that he will satirize the notion of "an ideal husband."

⁷² The family name of "Chiltern" suggests that there is a "chill" underneath this seemingly ideal marriage.

flawed men wanting them to be like virginal roses, and makes it the idea of ideal men shown to be really corrupt, with naive women urging *them* to be the saints” (208).⁷³ Like the stereotypical husband who cannot face a human flaw in what he believed to be a perfect wife, Lady Chiltern cannot forgive her husband when his less-than-ideal conduct is revealed. Later she will be convinced that “Pardon, not punishment, is [women’s] mission” (*An Ideal Husband* 548).

The Chilterns were both well-off financially prior to marriage and therefore had the luxury to marry for what they called “love.” Yet unlike Austenian characters whose love allow them to overcome obstacles in their relationship, Wilde’s characters are never saved by their conception of love but usually by some external element. In this case Lord Goring’s unmasking of Mrs. Cheveley. In *Lady Windermere’s Fan* each partner so idealizes the other that “Neither husband nor wife is capable of knowing the whole truth... The Windermers are happy, in part because of what they will never know” (*The Picture of Dorian Gray and Other Writings* xiii). Lord Windermere does not tell his wife that Mrs. Erlynne is her mother; Lady Windermere does not tell her husband that she was about to leave him for Lord Darlington. Each tries to “protect” the other because they romanticize each other and the “sacrament” of marriage, yet according to Wilde, their marriage, like that of the Chilterns’, is based upon lies. While nineteenth-century ideals praised complete honesty within marriage, Wilde believes that marriage “makes a life of deception absolutely necessary for both parties” (*The Picture of Dorian Gray* 20).

⁷³ Wilde was also against the unrealistic Victorian idealization of women in marriage, one that viewed unmarried women as having to be completely innocent to the world and married women as “Angels of the House.”

Both satirists are against overly-idealizing a potential marriage partner, although Austen, unlike Wilde, believes that it is possible to find a perfect mate in an imperfect world. This is the ending all of her heroines achieve in her mature novels. On the other hand, she believes that one should not be unrealistic in choosing a partner. For example, in *Northanger Abbey*, when Henry Tilney lists the qualities necessary for a woman to be attractive, Eleanor protests that he is asking for too much, for no such woman exists. In *Pride and Prejudice*, Darcy also lists an unrealistic number of qualities necessary for a woman to be pleasing. By the end of the novel, he reevaluates his ideas regarding what constitutes an “ideal” woman.

In her juvenilia, Austen criticizes those who, unlike her later heroines, take romance to an extreme in the name of idealization. In “Love and Freindship,” she makes a point of showing that love cannot be held more highly than the common and necessary pursuits of life:

“Victuals and drink!” (replied my husband in a most nobly contemptuous manner) “and doest thou then imagine that there is no other support for an exalted Mind (such as my Laura’s) than the mean and indelicate employment of eating and drinking?” “None that I know of, so efficacious” returned Augusta. (83)

After a long journey Augusta reasonably suggests nourishment, while Laura’s husband revels in the extremes of the cult of sensibility. In the same tale, two young women look down upon a man because he fails to display excessive feeling: “They said he was sensible, well informed, and agreeable; we did not pretend to judge such trifles, but...we

were convinced he had no soul [because] he had never read *The Sorrows of Werther*" (93). The ladies are also disappointed at the young man not having auburn hair.

Unlike Austen, who believes that marriage is absolutely necessary for the maintenance of society, Wilde believes marriage is given too high a place in society, constricting both men and women's movements and suppressing individual freedom. He critiques a culture so eager to maintain the status quo that it becomes inhuman. Wilde sees conforming to the conventions of society as a suppression of individuality and seems to view marriage as one such convention. His most witty characters engage in superficial speech and behavior in order to promote individualism, with statements such as "The happiness of a married man depends on the people he has not married" (*A Woman of No Importance* 461). Unlike Austen's heroes, who lack complete felicity until they marry the heroine, Wilde's bachelors are usually his most contented characters. For example, when Algernon's servant states that unlike that of bachelors' establishments, "in married households the champagne is rarely of a first-rate brand" (*The Importance of Being Earnest* 321),⁷⁴ the quality of champagne seems to symbolize a more general decline of pleasure after marriage.

⁷⁴ Cf my discussion on the marriage's "demoralizing" effect in Chapter 2, pg. 73.

Chapter 4

Courtship Gone Awry:

Single Mothers in Austen and Wilde's Marriage Texts

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JACK. (*in a pathetic voice.*) Miss Prism, more is restored to you than this handbag. I was the baby you placed in it.

MISS PRISM. (*amazed.*) You?

JACK. (*embracing her.*) Yes...mother!

MISS PRISM. (*recoiling in indignant astonishment.*) Mr. Worthing! I am unmarried!

JACK. Unmarried! I do not deny that is a serious blow. But, after all, who has a right to cast a stone against one who has suffered? Cannot repentance wipe out the act of folly? Why should there be one law for men and another for women? Mother, I forgive you. (*Tries to embrace her again.*)

- Oscar Wilde (*The Importance of Being Earnest* 470)

"If there is anything disagreeable going on men are always sure to get out of it." (regarding the care of a sick child)

- Jane Austen (*Persuasion* 308)

Among the several differences between Austen and Wilde's satires of marriage is that Wilde disparages the whole of marriage, while Austen critiques specific abuses. Both satirize marriage in order to point out social instability, although Austen deplores such instability while Wilde often embraces it. Wilde satirizes the standard tropes of Victorian theater: loyalty, sacrifice, undying love and ideal marriages, all topics that Austen seems to treasure in her novels. In this chapter, I will discuss "single mothers" in Austen and Wilde's work. These women are mothers who are either unmarried, widows or mother

figures. They live without male support. For the purpose of my discussion, I will adapt the words “single” and “mother” to refer not only to unwed mothers and widows,⁷⁵ but also to married women whose husbands do not lend either emotional or financial support for the maintenance of children. I will also discuss mother figures – women (sometimes unmarried), who act as mothers to younger siblings or other children. In these cases, I will employ the word “child” to mean “dependent,” because sometimes these mother figures must care for young adults. These young adults may be their children, siblings or others who cannot care for themselves financially and/or emotionally. They are usually female, for in the nineteenth century unmarried women usually continued to live with their families while young unmarried men moved outside the home to pursue professional interests.

Austen and Wilde deal with similar themes as critics of marriage and its trappings and both are sensitive to the plight of these “single mothers.” The authors do not usually satirize the mothers themselves. Instead, they satirize the social structure that gives rise to the mothers’ problems. Here they diverge. Austen satirizes individual characters while taking the idea of marriage seriously; her treatment of single mothers critiques certain social rules that give rise to their plight, but she does not critique the idea of marriage itself. Wilde satirizes the construct of marriage itself rather than specific social abuses. His negative view of marriage as a social construct comes through in his satiric treatment of single mothers. A comparison of their treatment of this ideology sheds light on both.

⁷⁵ These authors’ works do not mention divorced mothers because divorce was still quite rare in the nineteenth century.

Each writer's work defines single mothers differently. In Austen, there are several types of single mothers. There are instances of widows caring for sometimes grown children. Another example of single mothers in Austen is married women with "absentee" husbands who must manage the household and children. In this case, the husband is usually emotionally vacant, providing no moral support in making decisions regarding the children. There are also examples of women (sometimes barely out of childhood) who are neither married nor mothers, yet they must care for their siblings because they have absentee parent(s). Their mothers, and sometimes fathers, are emotionally incapable of providing for the family. These young heroines in Austen's novels must therefore act as surrogate mothers to their younger siblings.

Wilde's treatment of single mothers differs from Austen's. In addition to writing about widows and married women with unsupportive husbands, Wilde tackles the issue of unwed mothers, an issue Austen does not touch upon. In addressing the problems of unwed mothers, Wilde broadens the ideology to include what has become our modern definition of the "single mother." In the nineteenth century, society considered the children of such women illegitimate, but Wilde treats these women with surprising tenderness and sympathy. Wilde, unlike Austen, does not comment on the ideology of young heroines mothering their siblings without parental support. No such women appear in his comedies.

Austen concentrates on the women's financial situation. She addresses what happens when women lack financial support because their husbands or fathers have not sufficiently provided for them. This is Austen's implicit critique of a society that does not allow married women control over their own money and prevents genteel women

from earning money.⁷⁶ When the male provider dies, the dependent females cannot make their way in the world. In Jane Austen's time, the woman became "one body" with her husband upon marriage. She had no custody of her own children or property. Richard Ellmann explains that "...when the husband and wife exchanged vows, they became one person, and, in the words of the jurist William Blackstone, 'the husband is that person'" (184). Wilde does not take these financial considerations for his main point. In the aristocratic world of Wilde's comedies, single mothers are rich or at least well provided for. They are in no danger of poverty.

PART A. A Truth Not Usually Acknowledged: Jane Austen's Single Mothers

1. Good Widows are Hard to Find: Why Most of Austen's Widows Behave Badly

a. Mrs. Dashwood (*Sense and Sensibility*) and Lady Susan

In analyzing Austen's treatment of single mothers, I will begin by comparing two of her most disparate mothers: Mrs. Dashwood (*Sense and Sensibility*) and Lady Susan. Mrs. Dashwood is the mother of three daughters and Austen's most sympathetic widow, while Lady Susan, the author's most unsympathetic widow, has one daughter. *Lady Susan* and *Sense and Sensibility* show single mothers who seem to be polar opposites. Yet although Lady Susan is heartless and conniving while Mrs. Dashwood is good-hearted and well-meaning, both have a negative influence on their daughters. Although Lady Susan cruelly ignores her daughter except when the girl serves her ends, she is a shrewd manager of household economy. Lacking in personal funds, she moves from one

⁷⁶ Such a situation occurs in *Persuasion* with the character of Anne's girlhood friend Mrs. Smith, who although not a mother, is nevertheless a widow without means of financial support. Her husband died while in debt and she has little means of earning a living.

set of friends to another and never spends a penny of her own. Mrs. Dashwood is a flighty woman who can manage neither her financial situation nor her children, although she has their best interests at heart. Faced with bleak financial prospects, she is not practical minded and cannot think of ways to improve her situation. Like Lady Susan, Mrs. Dashwood casts her lot with various relations. While those surrounding Lady Susan treat her as a charming guest, Mrs. Dashwood's family sees her as a poor relation and nuisance. Lady Susan, although conniving and manipulative, is able to obtain financial assistance from friends and relatives; Mrs. Dashwood cannot muster financial support from her step-son and others who are unwilling to help her.⁷⁷

Mrs. Dashwood also cannot manage her children. Her weak personality serves as a poor model for her daughters. She is not a mentor to the intelligent and strong-minded Elinor. By allowing Marianne to be courted by Willoughby, she encourages her daughter's romantic conceits and unrealistic expectations of marriage. Later she realizes "her own mistaken judgment in encouraging the unfortunate attachment to Willoughby" (*Sense and Sensibility* 335). She also allows tomboyish Margaret to run wild and engage in unladylike behavior. As the new head of the family after her husband's sudden death, Mrs. Dashwood is ill prepared to deal with life's harsh realities, leaving Elinor to run the household. It is interesting that although she seems to blame Mrs. Dashwood for not acting as a stronger role model, Austen does not fault her for being unable to deal with the financial reality of her situation. Austen sees women like Lady Susan and Fanny Dashwood, John Dashwood's manipulative wife, as being *too* shrewd in financial

⁷⁷ It should be noted that Austen shows the fault to be on the side of Mrs. Dashwood's step-son.

matters. She portrays them as cold and calculating. She portrays Mrs. Dashwood, on the other hand, as an honest, dignified person who cannot stoop so low as to forge schemes or beg for financial support as Lady Susan does. According to Austen, the fault lies with her step-son for neglecting his step-mother. Therefore, we may chasten Mrs. Dashwood for not being a better mother, but we must pity her for the way in which society left her and her all-female family adrift, with no marketable skills and no foreseeable means of subsistence.

Mr. Dashwood died suddenly without leaving provisions for his family. Had he lived longer, he probably would have willed part of his estate to Mrs. Dashwood as a jointure.⁷⁸ The Dashwood women are not impoverished only because they have relatives to stay with, although they must now live on a much lower scale. However, staying with relatives is only a short-term solution to their financial problems. The family can only avert genteel poverty if one of the older daughters makes a wealthy marriage. This is unlikely because the daughters lack dowries. This financial uncertainty is translated into emotional uncertainty and subsequently misunderstanding for the novel's main characters. Action revolves around women who are uncertain of the conduct and/or emotions of other members of their family. Mrs. Dashwood and Elinor are unsure of Marianne's engagement and are afraid to ask her. Elinor hides her love for Edward from her mother and sister because she is unsure of his intentions. The sisters also misunderstand each other's natures: Marianne considers Elinor cold-hearted while Elinor believes Marianne to be imprudent.

⁷⁸ The exact amount of jointure (money, land, etc.) was negotiated between groups of lawyers during the arrangement of "marriage settlements" before a financially comfortable couple got married.

Austen's own life and that of her mother and sister paralleled that of the Dashwood women. I believe that these experiences made Austen more sensitive to the plight of single mothers. After Austen's father's death in 1805, the women had financial difficulties for the next four years. Like the Dashwood women in *Sense and Sensibility*, they relied on the charity of the family's sons. The Austen women moved into brother Frank Austen's house in Southampton and lived with his family. When Jane Austen visited London, she stayed with her brother Henry. In 1809, they moved to a permanent home in a small house on her brother Edward's estate in Chawton, where Austen lived till her death in 1817.⁷⁹

b. Lady Catherine de Bourgh (*Pride and Prejudice*)

Other than Mrs. Dashwood, Austen portrays widowed mothers as grasping and materialistic. Aside from Lady Susan, she portrays Lady Catherine (*Pride and Prejudice*), Mrs. Clay (*Persuasion*), Mrs. Thorpe (*Northanger Abbey*), Mrs. Stanhope ("The Three Sisters") and Eliza ("Henry and Eliza")⁸⁰ negatively. These women all "lose out" at the end – they fail to obtain their aims. If they had previously been accepted as part of a community, they are finally exposed and cast out of their social circle. If they have been powerful, looked up to and relied upon for advice - better natures win the power struggle over them. For example, Lady Catherine is a widow who fails to obtain her ends. She is the only one of Austen's widows who is financially secure and therefore

⁷⁹ Austen spent the last months of her life in Winchester where she moved to be near her physician.

⁸⁰ "The Three Sisters" and "Henry and Eliza" are from Austen's juvenilia.

possesses a good measure of authority. Lady Catherine takes advantage of this social authority to manipulate those around her. Austen portrays her as grasping and overly class-conscious. Despite her flaws, she genuinely wishes the best for her daughter. This, in her opinion, would be a marriage with Darcy, who represents the perfect gentleman in the novel. (Darcy is not only wealthy and good-looking, but generous and loving – according to Austen, an excellent potential husband for any young woman). Although she would have been unhappy with any woman Darcy chose over her daughter, even a titled and wealthy one, Lady Catherine is especially unhappy with Darcy's choice of Elizabeth, who has neither wealth nor title. The end of the novel shows Lady Catherine and the class-consciousness she represents, thwarted. Elizabeth stands up to her, rendering her speechless and proving herself worthy of Darcy's attentions. Darcy in turn marries Elizabeth despite the protests of his aunt and Lady Catherine grudgingly visits the new couple and makes the best of the situation. By going against his aunt's wishes, Darcy proves himself the true head of the family.

c. Mrs. Stanhope ("The Three Sisters")

Aside from exceptions like Lady Catherine and Lady Susan, widows in Austen's satires are usually not wealthy. In "The Three Sisters" for example, Mrs. *Stanhope*, a middle-class mother of three daughters, knows that her best "hope" for enriching her family is the marriage of one of her daughters to a wealthy neighbor. She attempts to convince her daughters to consider Mr. Watts. Like Lady Susan, Mrs. Stanhope has no consideration for her daughters' feelings. Mr. Watts is much older than the young women, physically unattractive and stingy. He is also a coarse man with a repellent

personality. The girls have high romantic ideals and equally high financial expectations of marriage. Their mother must realize how unhappy any one of them would be with such a husband. Despite all of these considerations, she encourages her daughters to consider him. Mary follows the example set by her parent. Her avaricious nature and disregard for emotional factors in the face of wealth are worthy of her mother. Yet Mrs. Stanhope is not so bad a mother as Lady Susan because at least she has her daughters' financial interests and not only her own in mind when she encourages the match. When Mary agrees to the marriage, her mother shrewdly negotiates the best settlement for her child. By the end of the story, it is clear that Mary's marriage is doomed to failure and contention between husband and wife is sure to become a cause of future suffering for both mother and daughter.

d. Mrs. Thorpe (*Northanger Abbey*)

Another middle-class widow with children on the marriage market is Mrs. Thorpe in *Northanger Abbey*. Mrs. Thorpe has a family to support and wishes to better her family's fortunes. She has pooled all her resources to buy gowns and accessories for her eldest daughter, in the hopes that Isabella will do well on the marriage market. She knows that Isabella has the best chance of making a wealthy match because she is the prettiest of her sisters. Mrs. Thorpe is also more concerned for Isabella because she is the eldest. In addition, Mrs. Thorpe is probably aware that her son's braggart ways and ungentlemanly personality are unlikely to land him a wealthy bride. Although she desires wealthy marriages for her children, Mrs. Thorpe seems to also genuinely desire Isabella's happiness. She believes that her daughter truly loves James Morland and seems surprised

at Isabella's change of heart when James reveals that he is not wealthy. On the other hand, Mrs. Thorpe knows that after being "out" for four years without making a suitable match, her daughter cannot do better than James. James is not only comfortably well-off (more so than the Thorpes), but he sincerely loves Isabella. Mrs. Thorpe therefore attempts to persuade Isabella to keep her engagement. Mrs. Thorpe cares for all of her children, of whom she brags to Mrs. Allen: "...she expatiated on the talents of her sons, and the beauty of her daughters, when she related their different situations and views--that John was at Oxford, Edward at Merchant Taylors', and William at sea--and all of them more beloved and respected in their different station than any other three beings ever were..." (*Northanger Abbey* 24). Not as unscrupulous as Lady Susan or Mrs. Stanhope, Mrs. Thorpe, along with her son and daughter, still fails to achieve her aims at the end of the novel. Austen punishes the family's pursuit of material comfort. Isabella and John are "revealed" to Catherine and James as cold and mercenary people. However, Mrs. Thorpe is never "revealed" as her children are. She never pretended to be anything other than a concerned mother. Austen's narrator describes her as "a good-humored, well-meaning woman, and a very indulgent mother" (*Northanger Abbey* 26).

e. "Henry and Eliza"

Austen began thinking about the desperate circumstances faced by widows with children early on in her writing. Although she means the "novel" of "Henry and Eliza"⁸¹ to be a burlesque parody of romance novels, the story makes a serious point. In the tale, when Eliza is widowed she and her children are imprisoned for debt. In a turn towards

⁸¹ In reality a brief vignette

the grotesque, the children become so hungry that they bite off two of their mother's fingers. To escape prison, Eliza throws her children out the window: "having given them strict charge not to hurt themselves" (*Minor Works* 37). Although the tone of the story is light-hearted, Eliza and her children still suffer because she did not pay enough attention to her financial situation. In *Persuasion*, Austen punishes Mrs. Clay because she does.

f. Mrs. Clay (*Persuasion*)

Persuasion depicts Mrs. Clay negatively as both widow and mother. She ignores her children, leaving them behind while traveling with the Elliots. She pretends to be a friend to Elizabeth in order to make herself a staple at the home, then, with her friend's approval, sets her sights on marriage with Sir Walter: "she was young, and certainly altogether well-looking, and possessed, in an acute mind and assiduous pleasing manners, infinitely more dangerous attractions than any merely personal might have been. Anne was so impressed by the degree of their danger, that she could not excuse herself from trying to make it perceptible" (*Persuasion* 286). Anne disapproves of Mrs. Clay as a wife for her father partly because of her class; Anne also sees that Mrs. Clay is slyly intelligent, having little in common with her dull older sister or silly father. Anne, and through Anne the reader, is expected to understand that Mrs. Clay is not emotionally attached to Sir Walter, but only follows financial gain.⁸² The novel shows her middle-class demeanor as "common": "Mrs. Clay had freckles, and a projecting tooth, and a clumsy wrist..." (ibid). Lady Russell, a respected voice in the novel, believes that Mrs.

⁸² At the end of the novel, Mrs. Clay does not achieve her aims of rising in social status because Sir Walter does not marry her.

Clay “ought to have been nothing to her [Elizabeth] but the object of distant civility... From situation, Mrs. Clay was, in Lady Russell's estimate, a very unequal, and in her character she believed a very dangerous companion” (ibid 268). Although she is portrayed in a negative light, as a none-too-wealthy widow, Mrs. Clay has no way to better her life and that of her children other than remarriage.

Austen was not against remarriage as a rule: “Lady Sondes’ match surprises, but does not offend me” she writes; “...had there been a grown-up single daughter, I should not have forgiven her, but I consider everybody as having a right to marry *once* in their lives for love, if they can, and provided she will now leave off having bad headaches and being pathetic, I can allow her, I can *wish* her, to be happy” (*Letters* 159). Austen disapproved when people remarry for mercenary reasons; remarrying for love is acceptable. In her letter, she jokingly refers to a hope that Lady Sondes’ sexual frustration will ease with a second marriage. On the other hand, she also quips that she would not approve of a woman marrying if she was a single mother with an unmarried daughter, as in the case of Lady Susan. Austen seems to imply that it is a mother’s duty first to marry off her daughter before considering remarriage herself. Perhaps she takes this point of view because she considers that duty to one’s family should take precedence over self-gratification. She also believes that mothers should look out for their daughters. Despite the autonomy her heroines display, in Austen’s time an unmarried young woman would find it difficult to arrange a marriage without her mother’s guidance.

Most of Austen’s widows could not survive without being financially motivated, yet she seems to disapprove of such motives. Perhaps her satirically expressed disapproval is on the surface. Such condemnation fits in with the prevailing social view that it is not a

gentle-born woman's place to think about money, and that entertaining such thought makes her "common," like Mrs. Clay. Although she bows to Elizabeth and Sir Walter's every desire, Mrs. Clay is quite modern and independent in her desire for a better life for herself. Such a life is possible only for a wealthy and titled woman. At the end, when she becomes Mr. Elliot's mistress, the narrator speculates that Mr. Elliot may yet "be wheedled and caressed" into marriage (ibid 272). Perhaps she leaves Sir Walter for Mr. Elliot because her relationship with the former progressed too slowly. Also, Mr. Elliot is young, attractive and will inherit all of Sir Walter's wealth.

The fact that Austen portrays women like Mrs. Clay at all is an indication that she is interested in commenting on their social plight. Austen's narrator speaks in the sometimes-reproving voice of society. Through the narrator, Austen shows how society looks down upon single mothers who attempt to make their own way in the world. Although Austen shows most of the women I discuss as negative characters, I would like to analyze these women sympathetically from a feminist point of view. Most of them, with the exception of Mrs. Clay, profess to have their children's best interests at heart. Even Mrs. Clay's unnamed and unseen dependents profit by her connection with the Elliots and would greatly profit if she married Sir Walter.⁸³ Perhaps Austen presents us with the stories of these mothers in order to show the unattractive realities with which they must contend. They are drawn as secondary characters so as not to take away from her main object, which is to reach readers of romantic comedy. Austen gives her readers what they want in allowing her heroines their happy endings. Since her novels end with

⁸³ Sir Walter, an unreflective man, does not suspect Mrs. Clay's designs upon him just as he is ignorant of the depth of his own feelings for Mrs. Clay.

the heroine's marriage, Austen has been criticized for failing to show life after marriage. I believe that she shows such life quite clearly in portraying the problems widows and other single mothers face. She also implies that a flawed society has given rise to such widows. In Austen's society, widows can improve their fortunes only by remarrying well or having their children marry well. Such a system forces women into positions where they become desperate, grasping and materialistic. To be otherwise, they must be as resigned and ineffectual as Mrs. Dashwood. Such is the fate of the "good" widow in Austen's fiction.⁸⁴

2. The Case for Mrs. Bennet: Austen's Absentee Husbands

a. Mrs. Bennet (*Pride and Prejudice*)

In addition to widows, there are other "single mothers" in Austen. These women do not live alone with their children but are in reality raising their children alone. For example, Mrs. Bennet (*Pride and Prejudice*) and Mrs. Price (*Mansfield Park*) have what I term "absentee" husbands. These women are not widows, but their husbands are a physical presence only. These men do little to aid their wives in running a household or caring for children. In fact, they often hinder their wives' endeavors to do both. One such husband is Mr. Bennet, who does not seem to have either his family's financial nor emotional health in mind. As the supposed patriarch, his responsibilities are great, yet he locks himself in his study to escape his family. Austen comments on "the evils arising from so ill-judged a direction of talents; talents which, rightly used, might at least have

⁸⁴ Mrs. Smith is another example of a "good" widow whose acceptance of society's strictures places her in reduced circumstances from which she is not materialistically-minded enough to escape.

preserved the respectability of his daughters, even if incapable of enlarging the mind of his wife" (*Pride and Prejudice* 236).

Because Mr. Bennet's estate is entailed and there is no male heir, Mrs. Bennet knows that one of their five daughters needs to marry quickly. The estate stays in the family if the daughter has a son before Mr. Bennet's death; otherwise, a male cousin inherits it. In addition, Mrs. Bennet also knows that her daughters need to marry well. Although the family is local gentry, there is scant dowry to go around.

In Mr. Bennet's defense is the fact that he is aware of the situation, but is in good health and knows that he will most likely live to see his daughters married. In fact, three of his daughters are still too young to wed. He is rightfully embarrassed of his wife, who is a flighty, overly dramatic woman. (Mrs. Bennet does more harm than good in attempting to better her daughters' prospects). His three younger daughters, especially Kitty and Lydia, who have taken after their mother, also discomfit him. On the other hand, Mr. Bennet does little to help his wife manage the household or raise his daughters. Jane and Elizabeth seem to have grown up on their own, avoiding their mother's influence but receiving scant guidance from their father. Lydia and Kitty would greatly benefit from a father's firm discipline, but he leaves them to their mother's lenient care. Mr. Bennet's constant fun at his wife's expense regarding their daughters' marriage prospects makes her quite desperate. With such an "absentee" spouse, Mrs. Bennet must carry the burden of finding husbands for five daughters alone. Elizabeth initially follows her father in seeming to enjoy defying Mrs. Bennet. Later, she thinks more critically of her father, realizing that she "had never been blind to the impropriety of her father's behaviour as a husband. She had always seen it with pain...that continual breach of

conjugal obligation and decorum which, in exposing his wife to the contempt of her own children, was so highly reprehensible..." (*Pride and Prejudice* 236).

Despite the satiric presentation of Mrs. Bennet's character, Austen shows that the woman does what she believes to be the best for her family. Unlike most of the widows previously discussed, Mrs. Bennet does not operate from selfish motives. Like most mothers of this period, she wishes to see her daughters firmly established and well provided for. Her sense of urgency comes from the fact that there are few eligible men in the village. She knows that newcomers Darcy and Bingley will be popular with all of the marriage market mammas and senses that she must somehow quickly introduce her two eldest daughters to the young men.⁸⁵ Her husband plays a cruel "joke" on her when he states that he will not visit their new neighbor and proposes that she do so herself. He knows that it would be inappropriate for Mrs. Bennet, as a woman, to make such introductions. She must rely on him to make Bingley's acquaintance.⁸⁶

Elizabeth has little respect for her mother, partly because their ideas on marriage are quite different. Austen is sympathetic to Elizabeth's desire for a love match and satirizes Mrs. Bennet as what I call a "marriage-market mamma." Austen also shows Mrs. Bennet and her protégé Lydia as middle-class and common, while showing Jane and especially Elizabeth taking after their more genteel father. One of Mrs. Bennet's negative traits is her lack of understanding concerning her daughter's rejection of Mr. Collins' proposal.

⁸⁵ Although she was initially interested in Darcy as a potential husband for her daughters, she does not pursue him when she sees the high-handed manner with which he first treats her family. Unlike Sir Walter Elliot in *Persuasion*, who pursues an acquaintance with Mr. Elliot even after the latter has expressed no interest in his daughter, Mrs. Bennet is a parent with some pride regarding her family.

⁸⁶ Mr. Bennet eventually calls on Bingley and his wife calls him a good father for it.

She believes it is the best proposal Elizabeth is likely to get. (Although Elizabeth and Jane are attractive and pleasant, neither has yet received a proposal because they are not wealthy). Mrs. Bennet deftly steers Collins away from his preference for Jane, wishing her to make a better match with Bingley. She believes Elizabeth is acting selfishly in not accepting Collins, and does not understand her daughter's desire for a love match.

In Mrs. Bennet's defense, most marriages were not love matches at this time. Austen's portrayal of the woman as an ambitious mother of marriageable daughters is complex. The fact that Charlotte accepts Collins shows that although Austen views Elizabeth as admirable in standing firm in her desire for a love match, not every woman has this luxury. Elizabeth was fortunate in her marriage. Charlotte, not being the heroine of the novel, is not as fortunate. She makes a realistic marriage in which the parties are often romantically unsuited. In these cases, the woman must often compromise, and Charlotte does. Mrs. Bennet saw her second daughter as a "Charlotte," someone who should compromise her principles for lack of better prospects. Austen does not necessarily blame her for this; she was merely being realistic, and in her own way, a good mother. Although she is a caricature, Mrs. Bennet gets exactly what she wants at the end of the novel: three of her daughters married and good prospects for the other two because of the high standing the family will now possess through their new "connections."

b. Mrs. Price (*Mansfield Park*)

Like Mrs. Bennet, Mrs. Price also has an "absentee" husband. She is Austen's poorest "single mother" and her life is more difficult than that of Mrs. Bennet. Mrs. Price has "A large and still increasing family, an husband disabled for active service, but not

the less equal to company and good liquor, and a very small income to supply their wants..." (*Mansfield Park* 4). The Price household "was the abode of noise, disorder, and impropriety. Nobody was in their right place, nothing was done as it ought to be" (ibid 388). Mr. Price cannot work and provides little financial support and no help with their nine children. When Fanny returns home, she finds her father "more negligent of his family, his habits were worse, and his manners coarser, than she had been prepared for... he swore and he drank, he was dirty and gross..." (ibid 389).

His wife has overwhelming responsibilities and lacks not only her husband's support but that of any relatives. Her sister aids her by allowing Fanny to live with the Bertrams, but does little for her other children. Austen portrays Mrs. Price as a weak-willed woman, who "married, in the common phrase, to disoblige her family" (ibid 7) and did not think of the consequences of such a husband on her future children. Austen punishes Mrs. Price because she married so far beneath her; she lives with poverty, squalor and an indifferent and it is implied, abusive, husband. Austen does not mean for us to give her too much sympathy, for she is an indifferent mother and housekeeper. Her many children overwhelm her and she is not able to discipline them. She also has no control over the servants. Fanny believed that "her mother was a partial, ill-judging parent, a dawdle, a slattern..." (ibid 390). Fanny takes over the role of mother figure to her younger brothers and sisters and feels a sense of "shame" for her home. The second eldest daughter Susan takes on the mother role once Fanny leaves for Mansfield Park.

The lack of parental authority in the novels coincides with the fact that Austen's novels are so full of "absentee" fathers and husbands. Perhaps Austen was being ironic in painting a picture of a patriarchal society that practically speaking, was run by women.

In Austen, husbands and fathers have social power, yet do not often wield it. They prefer to leave the management of the household and children to the women. The separation of the sexes into “separate spheres” contributed to this, so that even women who had fathers and husbands in Austen’s novels often felt separated from them. In addition, Austen wrote for a primarily female romance-reading audience. Such readers were interested in male characters as potential suitors for the heroine’s affections; all others played minor roles.

3. Heroines with Absentee Parents: Austen’s Virgin Mothers

The final and most intriguing type of “single mother” in Austen’s novels is her heroine. Elizabeth Bennet, Elinor Dashwood and Fanny Price are all single women caring for children. They have “absentee” parents - parents who for various reasons do not provide guidance for their children. In their stead, these heroines bravely attempt to fill the mother (and sometimes father) role for their younger siblings.

a. Elizabeth Bennet

A young, unmarried heroine playing the role of single mother is a recurring pattern in Austen’s novels. Although Elizabeth is not the eldest daughter, she attempts to lead both her older and younger sisters. Jane is too softhearted to provide guidance for her siblings. She does not get involved in their activities, not because she lacks judgment, but because she lacks confidence. She cannot bear to criticize or reproach. In fact, she herself needs guidance with regard to Bingley and Elizabeth tries to advise her. Mary, Kitty and Lydia need a role model as well, but they neither respect nor listen to Elizabeth. She attempts

to warn her parents about Kitty and Lydia's inappropriate behavior, both concerning their excursions to Meryton and regarding Lydia's poorly chaperoned travel. Elizabeth's parents do not take her advice, with disastrous result in regard to Lydia.

Elizabeth does not receive guidance from her parents: "Had Elizabeth's opinion been all drawn from her own family, she could not have formed a very pleasing picture of conjugal felicity or domestic comfort" (*Pride and Prejudice* 236). Although Elizabeth fulfills some parental roles for her sisters, she is in several ways still a child in need of guidance. She makes errors in judgment regarding those she encounters, including Darcy and Wickham. Unfortunately, her parents do not help to correct her mistakes. Mr. Bennet is usually unavailable. Although Elizabeth is his favorite daughter, he provides little direction with regard to her life and does not take her concern for her siblings seriously. Elizabeth's father acts more like a friend than a counselor and she cannot confide in him. He takes nothing in life seriously and is too sanguine regarding the fate of his family. The young woman's mother, although overly concerned about her children's welfare with regard to marriage, overlooks issues such as propriety and genteel behavior in her daughters. She gravitates towards Lydia, who is most like her. Elizabeth cannot open her heart to her mother because she is Mrs. Bennet's least favorite child. The two women have completely opposite personalities, with each being unable to comprehend the things that are most important to the other.

Eventually, Darcy takes on a role that is, if not that of a father, that of a mentor and counselor. Elizabeth is fortunate in finding a man to lift the burden of pre-nuptial motherhood off her shoulders. Darcy solidifies Lydia's marriage and encourages his friend to propose to Jane. If he had not, Wickham would have ruined Lydia, spoiling her

family's reputation as well. Elizabeth comes very close to staying a single mother. She may have had to care permanently for her sisters, because if the family came to ruin, all of them would have remained unmarried.

Like Elizabeth, Austen's heroines are usually left to go through the process of choosing a mate without parental intervention. Even when parents or parental figures give strong opinions regarding potential marriage partners, Austen's heroines come to their own conclusions at the end, usually choosing someone they had favored from the beginning. This is the opposite of what happened in reality in the gentle-born class Austen describes. In the early nineteenth-century, parents were more involved in their daughter's marriage process. Perhaps Austen had so many absent parents (fathers especially), in her novels in order to be able to write them as fantasies of autonomy. In them, young women, despite initial setbacks, were eventually free to choose mates based upon love rather than forced to submit to parental guidance.

b. Elinor Dashwood

Despite having fewer siblings than Elizabeth, Elinor Dashwood has a greater amount of responsibility because she has a more uncertain future. Her family is unsure of how they will support themselves and where they will make their new home after her father's death. Elinor's mother is too resigned to take charge of the family. Her sisters take after their mother in their overly romantic view of the world. Marianne "was every thing but prudent. The resemblance between her and her mother was strikingly great." Meanwhile, Margaret "had already imbibed a good deal of Marianne's romance..." (*Sense and Sensibility* 6). Elinor is the most reasonable among them, exemplifying the eighteenth-

century virtue of “sense.” Her character is less lively and more maternal than Elizabeth Bennet’s. She lacks Elizabeth’s wit but has a cooler head. Like a mother, she cares for Marianne when she falls ill. When her father dies, she is the only one with presence of mind to play the role of mother, or woman-of-the-house in receiving her step-brother and his wife. She becomes her mother’s counselor and a surrogate mother to her two younger sisters. For example, she convinces her mother to stay when her step-son’s bad-tempered wife makes Mrs. Dashwood wish to leave their home. Not only did they not have anywhere else to go, but leaving would have caused a rupture in the family. Elinor’s “...advice was so effectual, possessed a strength of understanding, and a coolness of judgment which qualified her, although only nineteen, to be the counsellor of her mother, and enabled her to counteract, to the advantage of them all, that eagerness of mind in Mrs. Dashwood which must generally have led to imprudence” (ibid).

Marianne needs a mother’s counsel and Elinor attempts to persuade her sister to think realistically about Willoughby’s attentions. Margaret would benefit from greater discipline, something Elinor also tries to provide. Like Elizabeth, Elinor has trouble guiding her sisters. Both Elinor and Elizabeth must contend with the fact that younger siblings do not respond as readily to an older sibling’s authority as to that of a parent’s. In addition, Mrs. Bennet and Mrs. Dashwood counteract each daughter’s good intentions by spoiling their younger children.

c. Fanny Price

Austen’s youngest virginal single mother is also her poorest heroine. Although Fanny Price leaves home for Mansfield Park at age ten, it is evident that she was an aid to

her mother, helping with housework and younger siblings. Residing with the Bertrams, Fanny helps her family indirectly. For one, her parents must no longer provide for her. The start of the novel implies that if her association with the Bertrams goes well, she may come to mend the familial breach caused by Mrs. Price's unfortunate marriage. Although separated from her siblings, Fanny worries about her brothers and sisters more than her parents do. She is most successful in guiding Susan and has a close relationship with her eldest brother William. Her marriage to Edmund Bertram will benefit her entire family, with immediate benefits already evident in Susan coming to take Fanny's place at Mansfield Park.

Austen sympathizes with all single mothers who have their charges' best interests at heart. She ridicules them only when their motives are selfish and/or mercenary. If they are grasping and materialistic, they "lose out" at the end. Better natures, usually those of the heroines, thwart their best efforts. Because Austen's single mothers are poorer than Wilde's, she considers financial issues more often, especially with regard to the mothers' desire to have their children marry well. There are more "single mothers" in Austen's novels than in Wilde's plays. This is not surprising considering that Austen writes specifically about women's issues. The historical reason for this originates from the fact that novel-reading was originally the province of women and Austen writes with an eye for her audience.

PART B: Women of Some Importance: Oscar Wilde's Single Mothers

1. Unwed Mothers: Mrs. Arbuthnot (*A Woman of No Importance*) and Mrs. Erlynne (*Lady Windermere's Fan*)

Austen never addresses the ideology of unmarried woman with illegitimate children, although these situations were well-known and quite prevalent during her time. Wilde is quite modern in his portrayal of single mothers in his comedies, treating these women with compassion. In "Fallen Women, Lost Children: Wilde and the Theatre of the Nineties," Wendell Stacy Johnson states that:

Wilde has made of the fallen woman and her child not something trivial, not a ridiculous vehicle for irresponsible paradox, any more than he used the subject to exploit sensational and pathetic possibilities...He is recording an actual world, a strictly limited society, with its falsehoods and pretenses and, in spite of everything, its comic possibilities.... (203)

Mrs. Arbuthnot in *A Woman of No Importance* and Mrs. Erlynne in *Lady Windermere's Fan*, both unwed mothers, shine as the plays' true heroines. They sacrifice their own happiness in order to conceal the "stain" of illegitimacy from their children. Both give up their children as infants. However, unlike widows and wives with "absentee" husbands, these mothers were not able to see their children at all. The fact that they had to spend life alone and in shame, longing for children whose lives they could know nothing about, already makes them sympathetic characters in Wilde's comedies.

According to Wilde, the women have not "sinned" because they fell in love and believed they would marry the men who abandoned them. Mrs. Arbuthnot has always loved her son Gerald and the motherly senses of the scheming Mrs. Erlynne reawaken

when she perceives her daughter's reputation is in jeopardy. Each saves her child from scandal. Mrs. Arbuthnot prevents Gerald from traveling the world with his father, the unscrupulous Lord Illingworth. Mrs. Erlynne prevents her daughter from abandoning her husband and child in order to run away with an acknowledged rake. Each mother is revealed to her long-lost child and subsequently embraced, forgiven and accepted. By the end of the plays, Gerald and Lady Windermere no longer hold the prevalent social view on "fallen" women and wish to live closely with the older women.

In comparison, Mrs. Arbuthnot proves a less complex character than Mrs. Erlynne. Her motives are clear from the onset. She wishes to expose her seducer for a villain. When she finds out Lord Illingworth⁸⁷ has become a kind of sinister mentor to her long-lost son, she places her son's interests above her own. For Mrs. Arbuthnot, her son's honor is more important than denouncing his father and clearing her own name in the process. I agree with Ellmann, who explains how "Lord Illingworth, who long ago had abandoned her, now offers to marry her. She does not intend to have him make her an honest woman. In the end, Gerald and Hester are to marry, and Mrs. Arbuthnot will live with them. Society is wrong and she is right" (*The Picture of Dorian Gray and Other Writings* xv). It is interesting that Wilde sides with the woman against the dandy/aesthete in the play. By doing so, he highlights the plight of unwed mothers. Wilde purposely represents Mrs. Arbuthnot as a plainspoken, unexciting woman who has little, while he shows Lord Illingworth as a witty, exciting, wealthy and titled man who seems to have it all. Yet the unwed mother "wins out" at the end. Lord Illingworth may not be socially ruined as Mrs. Arbuthnot was, but he is discredited in the eyes of his peers. Mrs.

⁸⁷ whose very name suggests that he is of "ill worth"

Arbuthnot on the other hand, achieves her desires: she discredits her seducer and restores her reputation somewhat. She also unexpectedly becomes part of a family. Gerald, as head of the family consisting of Hester and his mother, will consider Mrs. Arbuthnot's future wishes. Although she did not raise him, she can now ensure that he is honorably successful. After a lifetime spent chasing dreams of "ill worth," Gerald willingly becomes a "mamma's boy."

Mrs. Erlynne is a more complex single mother. As Johnson notes, "Wilde's play is essentially a comedy...But the comedy has melodramatic and distinctly moral aspects" (199). Mrs. Erlynne seems at first to be an archetypical Restoration female wit and villain, like Austen's Lady Susan. She is a strong character, the equivalent of a dandy. Like Austen's antiheroine, Wilde presents Mrs. Erlynne as a levelheaded, clear-sighted woman. Lady Susan and Mrs. Erlynne are the most vibrant, interesting characters in their respective fictional settings, both to those around them and to the reader/ audience. The satirists mean for us to be appalled at Lady Susan and Mrs. Erlynne's underhanded schemes, but also amused by their wit, impressed by their intelligence and titillated by the success of those schemes. For example, despite their chequered pasts, both scheme to get a husband and become accepted into society. Both are willing to lie in order to accomplish these things. The shrewdness with which they carry out their "mission" and the wit they employ to disarm those around them is appealing. But while Lady Susan is a cruel and unnatural mother whose daughter fears her terribly, Mrs. Erlynne turns out to be a good mother. She had initially abandoned her daughter and husband for her lover, then was herself abandoned in turn. Afterwards, she found she could not return to her family.

Nineteenth-century “fallen” women were seen as little better than prostitutes. In a discussion of *Mrs. Warren’s Profession*, Johnson states that “Shaw is playing with and against the stage convention of so much nineteenth-century melodrama, that which has the harlot with a tender heart or at best the erring woman who now seeks redemption” (196). According to Johnson, Shaw follows Wilde in his play with melodramatic convention regarding unwed mothers. I see Mrs. Erlynne as Wilde’s “harlot with a tender heart,” but with a twist. She had originally blackmailed her son-in-law, bargaining the ruin of her daughter’s reputation for re-entry into polite society. Once she gets to know her daughter, she is ready to sacrifice her progress towards respectability as well as a chance at a wealthy marriage. Mrs. Erlynne’s motherly senses rise up and she is “redeemed” as she prevents her daughter from making a fatal social mistake, one that had ruined her own life. She later urges her daughter to care for her son regardless of her husband’s behavior: “if he [Lord Windermere] was harsh to you, you must stay with your child. If he ill-treated you, you must stay with your child. If he abandoned you your place is with your child” (*Lady Windermere’s Fan* 413). *Lady Windermere’s Fan* is subtitled “A Play About a Good Woman,” but in Wilde’s case it is less clear whether he is advocating for the dynamic, but “bad” mother Mrs. Erlynne is at the beginning of the play, or the “good,” but stereotypical and static character she becomes.

I would like to compare Mrs. Erlynne’s injunction to Lady Windermere to Anne Elliot’s answer to Mary Musgrove’s complaint in *Persuasion*. Mary complains when her husband goes out to dinner, leaving their sick child’s care to her care. “If there is anything disagreeable going on men are always sure to get out of it” she says (*Persuasion* 308). Anne answers that “Nursing does not belong to a man, it is not his province” (ibid).

Her answer is a statement about gender roles. She believes that it is somehow “unnatural” for a man to stay home with the children. Mary’s son is only slightly ill, and Mr. Musgrove is not overly concerned about him when he goes out. According to Anne, it is “natural” for Mary, as a mother, to be more concerned and to *wish* to stay home with him. Anne, who is portrayed as having more womanly feeling than Mary, offers to look after the boy. Although Mary’s view that her husband should help with their son is more feminist in tone, Austen’s seems to side with Anne against Mary, a whiny woman who is a poor wife and mother.

Ironically, Mrs. Erlynne achieves her initial aims at the end: a wealthy marriage to a man she can easily manipulate. Like Lady Susan, she remarries to please herself; both women’s reasons are mercenary. In the process of successful re-entry into society, she saves her daughter’s marriage and reputation and pleases the audience as well: “At the end she wins Lord Augustus and worldly status, not only to save a comedy but also to display a truth [that]...natural generosity (the unsentimental essence of a mother’s love) or good sense, which is learned...[is] a matter of wit in the two and ultimately identical senses of wisdom and style. Mother knows best” (Johnson 203). Mrs. Erlynne seems content, although we are left with the possibility that this unwed mother would have given up all of her newly found fortune and social status for a chance to become part of her daughter’s family, as Mrs. Arbuthnot became part of her son’s.

Paradoxically, “Mrs. Erlynne is both the play’s most consistent individualist and an example of the kinds of compromises society exacts” (Sammells 89). Although she ends materially victorious, the play forces her to give up her daughter for the second time. She also loses the chance to know her grandson. *A Woman of No Importance*, on the other

hand, allows Mrs. Arbuthnot to stay with her son. This is because Wilde presents Mrs. Arbuthnot as a sympathetic character and good mother from the beginning, while he tricks the audience with Mrs. Erlynne. He presents her as a villain at the start then transforms her into a heroine. She is initially sinister. The start of the comedy means for us to believe that she is having an affair with Lord Windermere; we see none of her good qualities until later in the play. This is not the only time that Wilde plays with the “dirty minds” of his audience. In *An Ideal Husband*, the audience, along with Lady Chiltern, also wrongly assumes her husband is having an affair. The difference is that, although not adulterous, the play proves the woman Lady Chiltern suspects is a malefactor. Mrs. Erlynne is innocent and Wilde seems to chide us for our social prejudices, making us feel guilty for misjudging as Lady Windermere does. Wilde loves to play with the audience in this way, making us understand that appearances can be deceiving. However, in order for the audience to accept her as a “good” woman and mother, it seems that in the end Wilde must punish as well as reward Mrs. Erlynne. He punishes her because she originally had only her own interests in mind. Therefore, she poignantly finds a family only to have to give it up immediately. Wilde punishes Mrs. Erlynne in order to comment on society, which looks down upon women who do not have completely pure motives, like Mrs. Arbuthnot. Although Mrs. Arbuthnot is also a “fallen woman,” she never attempted to get what she wanted by foul means. She had more cause for complaint against Lord Illingworth than Mrs. Erlynne does against Lord Windermere, but she did not attempt blackmail, as Mrs. Erlynne does.

2. What Young Puritans Can Learn from Unwed Mothers

In the process of discussing single mothers, Austen and Wilde also show young, earnest protagonists, whom I call “young puritans,” learning that life is more complex than they had previously believed. These naïve characters learn that the world is not black and white. They learn that one must first come to understand oneself and one’s own motives before pronouncing judgments on others. All of Austen’s heroines, from the most naïve Catherine Morland to the ostensibly clever Emma Woodhouse learn this. For example, Elizabeth Bennet learns that marriage is more complex than falling in love when she must accept her friend Charlotte’s highly imperfect union.⁸⁸ In *Northanger Abbey* the narrator articulates Catherine’s thoughts that “Among the Alps and Pyrenees, perhaps, there were no mixed characters, such as were not as spotless as an angel might have the disposition of a fiend. But in England it was not so; among the English, she believed, in their hearts and habits, there was a general though unequal mixture of good and bad” (174).

In Wilde, initially close-minded young people like Lady Windermere, who was raised as a “Puritan” by a strict aunt, Gerald and Hester Worsley, who is a puritan from the United States, change their minds about women with sullied reputations when confronted with the reality of such women. These characters had taken pride in their uncompromising views, believing that “all women who have sinned [should] be punished” (*A Woman of No Importance* 449). All three learn a lesson regarding passing

⁸⁸ Wilde would see such a marriage as “dragging out some false, shallow, degrading existence that the world in its hypocrisy demands” (*Lady Windermere’s Fan* 404).

harsh judgment too quickly. All change their views not only about morality but about society. For example, Lady Windermere states:

I don't think now that people can be divided into the good and the bad as though they were two separate races or creations. What are called good women may have... mad moods of recklessness, assertion, jealousy, sin. Bad women, as they are termed, may have in them sorrow, repentance, pity, sacrifice. (*Lady Windermere's Fan* 421)

What Wilde wants the audience to come away with is evident in the conclusion of the play:

There is the same world for all of us, and good and evil, sin and innocence, go through it hand in hand. To shut one's eyes to half of life that one may live securely is as though one blinded oneself that one might walk with more safety in a land of pit and precipice. (ibid 429)

As Gerald forgives his mother and Hester forgives the indiscretions of the woman who is to be her mother-in-law, so the society in Wilde's plays seems to forgive the single mothers as well. In presenting his fictive society's forgiving attitude, Wilde encourages his audience to take the same forgiving view towards unwed mothers.

a. Illegitimate Children

Wilde refutes the statement that "The sins of the parents should be visited on the children. It is God's law" with "God's law is only Love" (*A Woman of No Importance* 476), but the social status of illegitimate children is complex. Being illegitimate in the nineteenth century seriously harmed one's public standing. Johnson explains how

“Disaster, which threatens women who too openly break the sexual code in the Victorian drama, is the disaster of not being received in the best houses. But what they may fear more is that decent society will exclude their children” (197). This is Mrs. Arbuthnot and Mrs. Erlynne’s fear as well as the fear of Lord Windermere.⁸⁹ Both mothers protest against their children’s desire to be close to them. They sense that their children’s illegitimate status will lower them in society’s eyes. Gerald convinces his mother that society’s opinion no longer matters to him, while Mrs. Erlynne convinces Lady Windermere that she would do well to retain her high social position and not openly acknowledge her as a friend. Lord Windermere convinces Mrs. Erlynne to keep the truth from her daughter. Although Lady Windermere now likes and respects the older woman, according to Lord Windermere, the shame of finding out she is an illegitimate child would “kill” her. According to Dariusz Pestka, Lady Windermere’s “ignorance ironically seems to be conducive to her marital happiness” (*Oscar Wilde* 189). Johnson explains that:

Lady Windermere must remain Mrs. Erlynne’s unacknowledged daughter, as Gerald is Mrs. Arbuthnot’s child but must be Lord Illingworth’s unacknowledged son, because both children are illegitimate. A contrast [exists] between these women now beyond the social pale (if the truth

⁸⁹ Only in 1872 did the Bastardy Laws Amendment Act give mothers of illegitimate children the right to sue the children’s fathers for child support. Before this time children were wholly the mother’s responsibility, implying that the blame for the seduction that produced the children lay at the mother’s feet. The fact that the law did not require fathers of illegitimate children to acknowledge them implied that these children were not worth acknowledging.

were known) and the children quite comfortably within it still (so long as the truth is not known).... (199)

Lady Windermere remains part of fashionable society only because her mother and husband keep the secret of her birth. Gerald's mother has kept his father's identity from him in order to protect his feelings. Gerald will probably no longer move in the same circles as Lord Illingworth, although he is happy to remain domestic with his newfound mother and fiancé: "I don't want to see the world, I've seen enough of it" he says (*A Woman of No Importance* 471).

Irony comes into play when overly righteous younger characters must admit to serious mistakes in judgment regarding single mothers. Formerly naïve young people learn that the world is not black and white, and that they cannot easily categorized people as good or evil. Johnson observes that "Wilde makes an illegitimate daughter see something of the hard facts of life and accept not the moral purism but the moral good sense of comedy..." (205). Lady Windermere, the woman who had heretofore believed that no lie is ever justified must now lie to protect her mother, a woman she had previously maligned. She concludes of Mrs. Erlynne: "She is better than I am" (*Lady Windermere's Fan* 429).⁹⁰ Wilde seems to agree that the "fallen" woman is better than the "pure" one in this case, because Mrs. Erlynne is sincere in her desire to protect her daughter. She is honest about the danger of adultery that Lady Windermere faces. Lady

⁹⁰ There are other examples in Wilde's satires that show young, earnest protagonists who learn that life is more complex than they had previously believed. In *An Ideal Husband*, Lady Chiltern learns that she cannot simply divide the world into good and evil when she must admit to a lie while having expected moral perfection from her husband. In *The Picture of Dorian Gray* Dorian learns that despite the pleasures of indulgence, a life lived purely for oneself is not worth living.

Windermere, on the other hand, was hypocritical in believing that she could never commit adultery, could never become a “fallen” woman. In presenting the “good” woman as mistaken, and the “bad” one as correct, Wilde shows the audience that it is impossible to form blanket moral judgments of “good” or “bad” without knowing all of the details of a situation.

In addition, both *Lady Windermere’s Fan* and *A Woman of No Importance* seem to comment not only on the plight of single mothers, but on how being overly concerned about social propriety causes harm. In *A Woman of No Importance*, Mrs. Arbuthnot wishes for her son’s parentage to remain anonymous for the sake of social propriety. This almost forces her to give up Gerald and allow him to travel the world with her hard-hearted former lover. In *Lady Windermere’s Fan*, a similar misunderstanding occurs when Lady Windermere’s mother does not wish to reveal herself to her daughter. Because of this concealment, Lady Windermere believes Mrs. Erlynne to be her husband’s mistress. In her anguish over her husband’s “affair,” she almost compromises her reputation.

b. The Sexual Double Standard

In the process of vindicating unwed mothers, Wilde addresses the sexual double standard that allows men sexual freedom while severely limiting that of women. Ironically, “aristocratic women police the sexual double-standard which makes Mrs. Erlynne unacceptable, and Lord Darlington ‘a charming wicked creature!’” (Sammells 90). These same women decide that Mrs. Arbuthnot is socially unacceptable while Lord Illingworth is. They gently chide rogues like Darlington, Illingworth and Algernon (*The*

Importance of Being Earnest) for being shocking, yet repeatedly invite them to dinner parties, while even the hint of scandal can ruin their female counterparts. Even women who consider themselves models of propriety enjoy the company of such men. For example, Johnson explains Lady Windermere's rationalization of her "friendship" with Lord Darlington:

The "bad" Darlington, she insists, is really "better than most other men" — because she finds him naturally attractive and socially agreeable. Her allowing of "no compromise," her insisting that life is a "sacrament" of love, of sacrifice, is bitterly ironic: she is too shallow to realize that she compromises constantly, accepting Darlington's attentions while denying that she does, or that she will not for a moment consider sacrificing for love a vain conception of herself as saintly, with a heavenly home and perfect husband. (201)

Lady Windermere will not entertain Darlington's open declarations of love, considering them inappropriate, yet she will accept covert flirting and innuendo on his part. On the brink of running away with Darlington later in the play, Lady Windermere discovers that she is not as "proper" as she believed herself to be, just as she discovers Mrs. Erlynne not as "fallen."

The double standard also allows men to sire children out of wedlock with few social repercussions while ruining the lives of women who bear them.⁹¹ *The Importance of*

⁹¹ Wilde wrote a positive, praise-filled letter to George Bedborough, Secretary of the Legitimation League (for the legal recognition of children born out of wedlock) (*Letters* 1037). Bedborough was also editor of *The Adult* magazine, which promoted sex outside of marriage.

Being Earnest melodramatically satirizes the idea of the double standard: “*Earnest* would pose for Victorian audiences at once the question of the foundling, his legitimacy, his parentage. [The play expresses] Wilde’s ideology of legitimate family relationships, of love in kinship but also the need for links of definition – for both fallen woman and a lost child...” (Johnson 209). Jack believes Miss Prism to be his mother; when she denies being married, Jack assumes she bore him out of wedlock: “Unmarried! I do not deny that is a serious blow. But, after all, who has a right to cast a stone against one who has suffered? Cannot repentance wipe out the act of folly? Why should there be one law for men and another for women? Mother, I forgive you” (*The Importance of Being Earnest* 470). In a hilarious move, Jack then attempts to embrace Miss Prism, who is horrified.

Jack’s words are melodramatic; only the situation makes them comic. Here Wilde is deliberately self-reflexive, parodying not only a typical scene in Victorian melodrama but similar episodes in *Lady Windermere’s Fan* and *A Woman of No Importance* that deal seriously with this issue. Johnson sees in this scene “the perfectly ironic version of the old familiar ideology, the fallen woman and lost child” (210). The foundling or “lost child” is Jack, who Miss Prism mistakenly left in a handbag at the Left Luggage department of Victorian Station. The “fallen woman” is Miss Prism, a prudish “old maid” governess. The play’s plot revolves partially around the question of Jack’s parentage; whether he is a “legitimate” son will determine whether he can be a “legitimate” suitor. The end of the play re-establishes family relationships: the “lost child” is found, not by the mistakenly identified “fallen woman,” but by the matriarchal single mother, Lady Bracknell. Although she had disapproved of Jack, she now takes her new nephew under her wing.

3. The Matriarchs: Mothers with Absentee Husbands in Wilde

a. Lady Bracknell

In Wilde's comedies, two examples of married women with "absentee" husbands caring for children present themselves, that of Lady Bracknell and the Duchess of Berwick (*Lady Windermere's Fan*). Lady Bracknell is a matriarch in a patriarchal society. The play hardly mentions Lord Bracknell. When the comedy refers to him, it is with derision. According to Pestka, his wife states that "she will not tell the truth to her husband, for she has 'never undeceived him on any question' (463). Her utterance is the next in the series of running jokes about Lord Bracknell, a symbol of masculine passivity" (Pestka 190). Lord Bracknell provides no help in finding a suitable husband for Gwendolyn and does not seem involved in his daughter's upbringing. For example, although Lady Bracknell tells Jack that it is up to a girl's *parents* to choose her fiancé, *she* has the "list" of potential candidates for Gwendolyn. In addition, Lady Bracknell feels responsible for her nephew Algernon's moral and social guidance, of which her husband takes no part. On the other hand, if Lord Bracknell does not play a large role in his wife's life, perhaps it is by her own choice and through her own strong-minded influence.

Like Austen's Mrs. Bennet, Lady Bracknell is mercenary-minded, but purports to be so in the name of her dependents' best interests. Unlike Mrs. Bennet, Lady Bracknell is hypocritical and mercenary in her own interests as well, i.e. her wealthy marriage to Lord Bracknell. Both women finally obtain their ends with the marriage of their dependents. Although Wilde portrays Lady Bracknell as the antagonist in the play, pitting her will against the desires of the two young couples, he does not show her as vanquished at the

end. In fact, she gets exactly what she wants: her daughter marries a gentleman of “good name” and connections - her own nephew Earnest, and Algernon marries an heiress. Lady Bracknell’s desires conform to the desires of the four young people, although they may see the matter differently. On the surface, Jack and Gwendolyn, Algernon and Cecily are satisfied that they have married for “love,” thwarting the matriarch’s wishes that they marry for good name and/or wealth. The fact that their “earnest” wishes are plot-twisted to equal Lady Bracknell’s materialistic desires and that her materialistic desires are plot-twisted to equal the young people’s wishes is proof that Wilde sees this matriarch’s character as an unavoidable social reality. There is no getting away from Lady Bracknell’s wishes - somehow they become one’s own.

b. The Duchess of Berwick (*Lady Windermere’s Fan*)

The Duchess of Berwick, Agatha’s mother in *Lady Windermere’s Fan*, is another married woman with an absentee husband, in effect, a single mother. Lord Berwick does not aid her in finding a mate for their daughter. At the “end of the season,” the Duchess becomes desperate to do so. Wilde portrays her as a caricature of a society mamma, just as he draws her daughter as a caricature of a dutiful debutant. Agatha’s answers are limited to two words: “Yes Mamma.” The Duchess is a hypocritical and mercenary woman who almost throws her daughter at Mr. Hopper, a wealthy Australian. When she finally arranges a match for her daughter, she complacently tells Lady Windermere: “I’m afraid it’s the old, old story, dear. Love – well, not love at first sight, but love at the end of the season, which is so much more satisfactory” (*Lady Windermere’s Fan* 406).

The Duchess relishes gossiping to Lady Windermere of what she believes is an affair between Lord Windermere and Mrs. Erlynne. Although Wilde presented her in a negative light, she achieves her goal at the end of the play, managing an engagement between Agatha and Mr. Hopper. Lord Berwick is useful only at the conclusion of the comedy, when Mr. Hopper must see him to announce the engagement and most likely work out financial details regarding dowry. These details are legalities that society does not allow the Duchess to undertake officially, although it is obvious that it is she, and not her husband, who is head of the family.

4. Wild(e) Widow: The Case for Mrs. Vane

Mrs. Vane (*The Picture of Dorian Gray*) is an example of a widow caring for a child. Mrs. Vane is unlike Mrs. Erlynne or Mrs. Arbuthnot, Wilde's other widows. Unlike them, she has raised her child from birth. She is also from the lower class, while Mrs. Erlynne and Mrs. Arbuthnot mix in upper-class society. Although class-wise she is most closely related to Austen's Mrs. Price (*Mansfield Park*), her mercenary behavior puts her more on par with widows such as Lady Catherine (*Pride and Prejudice*) and Mrs. Stanhope ("The Three Sisters"). Like them, she avidly pursues a suitor for her daughter. Unlike Austen's widows, she would be satisfied if her daughter was well-provided for, regardless of whether her daughter's suitor actually married her child.

Mrs. Vane pushes Sibyl towards Dorian almost like a pimp. In this respect she can be compared to the Duchess of Berwick (*Lady Windermere's Fan*) who constantly places her daughter in the way of Mr. Hopper. Wilde presents Mrs. Vane as a grotesque rather than satirical character. Although the author presents Mrs. Vane as an unsavory character

with lower-class manners, her daughter would be practically and emotionally lost without her. Sibyl is a naive young woman who has no head for life's day-to-day obligations. She would not have been able to manage her meager earnings without her mother's help. In addition, without her mother's protection, men would have sexually taken advantage of her long before Dorian broke her heart. Mrs. Vane knows that the family's only chance at a better life is through Sibyl's involvement with Dorian Gray. The Vane family is poor: James is a sailor and Sibyl an actress at a second-rate theater. Mrs. Vane assumes Dorian wants Sibyl for his mistress and is ready to agree to such an arrangement. She is overjoyed when "Prince Charming" wishes to marry her daughter. Mrs. Vane does not look into Dorian's background; the fact that he appears to be a wealthy "gentleman" is enough to recommend him. Dorian seemed to have everything Mrs. Vane could wish in a suitor for Sibyl: wealth, good looks, youth and an amiable personality. He also seemed genuinely in love with Sibyl. Because Mrs. Vane trusted appearances, she did not expect Dorian to abandon her daughter so suddenly or to be the cause of her son's death. Wilde seems to punish her for her mercenary desires with the deaths of her children. He also seems to employ her as a warning of not accepting things at face value, for *The Picture of Dorian Gray* is a novel about how appearances can be deceiving. It is an idea he reiterates in all of his plays: *A Woman of No Importance*, *An Ideal Husband* and *Lady Windermere's Fan* play with the notion that appearances of good and evil can be deceiving. *The Importance of Being Earnest* also plays with the idea that one's appearance may be deceiving – even to oneself.

PART C. Mother Knows Best: What Single Mothers Can Teach Us About Austen and Wilde's Social Views

In observing Austen and Wilde's treatment of single mothers in their comedies, one can conclude several things about their views on marriage. Wilde's "characters satirize not the abuses of the institutions, but the institutions themselves. Thus, while 'the satirist accepts the social norm to criticise deviations from it' (Ganz 1963: 45), Wilde's personages criticise the social norm itself" (Pestka 186). In this way, Wilde's social critique is different from Austen's, whose satire is more in line with Ganz's description: she concentrates on berating specific abuses of a system that does not provide for women with children, rather than the social system as a whole. Austen criticizes the shaky legal and financial ground widows and their dependents stand on and the lack of legal power wielded by wives whose husbands are "absent" in one way or another. Wilde on the other hand, employs mothers of illegitimate children, widows and wives with "absentee" husbands to send up the social structure itself, one that relies on marriage to keep society together. What Wilde does not discuss are single woman with "absentee" parents taking over the mother role for their siblings, a major issue in Austen. This may be because Wilde does not concentrate on the plight of individual characters, but rather employs standard "types" to make his point. He also does not address the issue of divorced mothers although he refers to divorce satirically in his plays.

While in Austen's time, unwed mothers were portrayed as women who at best, could only be seen as objects of pity, Wilde portrays them as also worthy of respect. Wilde may have been able to speak more freely than Austen about the respect due to unwed mothers with illegitimate children because by the end of the nineteenth century, women

were asking for more freedom in general. "The Woman Question," regarding the political rights of women and women's changing role in society was a matter of cultural debate.⁹² There was talk of the "New Woman," referring to women not bound by domesticity who venture into roles that are more public.⁹³ Mrs. Erlynne and Gwendolyn are examples of this type of woman. Mrs. Erlynne initially seeks her fortune through Lord Windermere. She wishes the world to see her as a society woman rather than a wife. When she makes a wealthy match with the bumbling Lord "Tuppy" Augustus, the comedy implies that her ambitions will not change with marriage. Gwendolyn defies her mother and social convention by paying an unchaperoned, unannounced visit to Jack at his country estate.⁹⁴ In Austen, women who showed such independence were looked down upon and portrayed negatively. Lady Susan is looked down upon for attempting to make her own way in the world while independent-minded Lady Catherine comes off as meddling and imperious when she concerns herself with her nephew's affairs. Although not single mothers, Lydia Bennet (*Pride and Prejudice*) and Mary Musgrove (*Persuasion*) are also looked down upon Austen. Lydia is portrayed as imprudent when she shows juvenile independence in her desire for amusement and Mary is depicted as

⁹² The Married Women's Property Act of 1870 allowed women to keep money willed to them as well as funds from personal investments. In 1882, the law finally allowed women to own most of their money and property. They could now file lawsuits or enter into contracts regarding their assets.

⁹³ In "Oscar Wilde and the 'Daughters of Decadence'" Sally Ledger asserts that "Wilde's downfall had a damaging effect on the New Woman because of the moral and political rearguard action which followed the Wilde trials: decadence and feminism being closely associated in the public mind" (qtd. in Sammells 52 note 61).

⁹⁴ The best examples of Wilde's "New Women" are Mrs. Cheveley and Lady Chiltern in *An Ideal Husband*.

selfish when she wishes, like her husband, to go out instead of staying home with her child.

In conclusion, although actively seeking material gain is the only way these women can survive and be successful in a patriarchal society, both authors disapprove of such methods. There are other connections between the authors' views of single mothers as well. Both show strong as well as weak single mothers, to different effects. Wilde sympathizes with unwed mothers who give everything up for their children; Austen is also on the side of single mothers who have only their children's best interests at heart. The authors look down upon mothers who think only of materialistic benefits for themselves and/or their children, just as they look down upon women who make mercenary marriages. Austen, for example, criticizes single mothers who actively attempt change their financial state even as she comments on how society has not sufficiently provided for these women. Wilde also critiques single mothers who are out to enrich themselves as well as the social structure that formed them.

Conclusion

Conclusion

Austen and Wilde's humorous writings are more similar in both topic, theme and style than is generally accepted. This similarity is highlighted when one studies their marriage texts. While the specifics of satire vary, there are parallels among the differences along with recurrent themes such as courtship, marriage and motherhood. In addition to using humor subversively, they also concentrate on serious issues having to do with the treatment of women from youth to middle age. I believe that a social critique can be read in Austen and Wilde's writing regarding these issues. A feminist reading of character and plot proved useful throughout this project in addressing how both writers saw women's lives.

In researching the authors' comic writing style for Chapter 1, I discovered a relationship between the comic tools that Austen and Wilde employ for social criticism. When addressing marriage, they are similar in comic spirit. I saw this most closely when I compared Austen's juvenilia and *Lady Susan* to Wilde's comedies of manners. Observing similarities in their comic styles helped me see relationships between the themes that they employ for social criticism. While researching the ways in which the authors employ wit, irony and paradox, I realized that Austen and Wilde not only address marriage satire in their social criticism, but also tackle themes surrounding marriage such as the process of courtship. I saw that they also deal with the problems women face after marriage. Both exercise their humor politically to point out contradictions within their respective societies with regard to women's lives.

In addition to the satiric way Austen and Wilde present marriage, I also discovered a seriousness behind their wit. Nineteenth-century women faced often overwhelming social and economic pressure to marry well and have their children marry well. This is evident in Austen and Wilde's work, but though they address similar themes, their conclusions differ. In Chapter 2, I researched how the authors present the problems nineteenth-century women faced in choosing a husband, and therefore, their social and financial future. I found that while Austen believes that a successful courtship should, for the most part, follow social dictates, Wilde shows that individual wishes should take precedence over society's. In Chapter 3 I take up the financial theme again in presenting how mercenary marriage is an often necessary evil for Austen and Wilde's characters. I discovered that a feminist reading agrees with Austen's analysis of mercenary marriage and goes slightly against Wilde's view of the subject. Because Austen views marriage as a vital part of the social order, she allows for some leeway with regard to marrying for money, though she usually condemns doing so. Wilde on the other hand sees marriage as superfluous and therefore does not excuse any mercenary unions.

While rereading the authors' marriage satires I came upon an inordinate amount of female characters who face the burden of caring for children and households alone. I discovered that in Austen and Wilde's works, marriage does not guarantee women financial security, since they must rely on their husbands to provide for them. In discussing the issues these women face in Chapter 4, I realized that the term "single mother" can be applied to women in a variety of circumstances. I saw that some "single mothers" are young women who must assume maternal roles to care for siblings in absence of parental guidance. Several such women are Austen's heroines. Wilde does

not address the theme of young women assuming mothering roles, but he treats the issue of unwed mothers, a theme Austen does not address. I found that Wilde treats unwed mothers ambiguously, sometimes lauding their courage and sometimes punishing them, if not for their “sin” than for subsequent actions.

While looking for similarities in the authors’ treatment of marriage themes, I discovered notable differences. I was surprised to find that while successful marriages exist in Austen, one cannot find examples of happy marriages in Wilde. I also realized that Austen’s characters do not achieve marital happiness until they come to a level of self-understanding. Also, in addition to the more obvious differences in genre and audience, Austen and Wilde use satire for different purposes. Though both use similar comic tools such as wit to make fun of marriage, Austen uses her wit to draw attention to flaws in society while encouraging strong marriage ties while Wilde does the opposite. Wilde wishes to humorously show social hypocrisies while pointing to what he believes to be the impossibility of marital happiness.

In Austen a main character’s flaws, which may include excessive pride, snobbery, short-sightedness or naiveté are balanced by intelligence, personal attractiveness, wit, good intentions, generosity and/or genteel behavior. The reader grows to love the character despite his or her flaws. The narrator, despite revealing a main character’s flaws, seems to love the character as well. In Austen’s world, status depends on a combination of intelligence, morality, wealth, social standing, health, physical attractiveness and a sense of humor. In Wilde, wit and beauty also give characters status; these are usually accompanied by wealth but Wilde’s most attractive and witty characters lack generosity and good intentions.

Austen uses her heroine and hero, the man the heroine will eventually marry, to show positive human qualities. She shows social hypocrisy through secondary characters, who are usually the most comic and are social climbers, nouveau riche, old guard snobs, dotty old maids, or nosy neighbors. In discussing Austen's "comic imagination," Polhemus sees Austen as attempting to justify the existing order while imagining a way of creating a better social order (*Comic Faith*). He sees her comedy as a release of social resentment, necessary in order to reconcile herself to life as a member of early nineteenth-century society. I believe this idea can be seen in the character of Elizabeth Bennet, who is lighthearted yet a point of stability in a society whose ideals interfere with the marriage plot of *Pride and Prejudice*. According to Polhemus, Austen wished to remain part of conventional society while being comic. Her writing is full of this tension between the satiric impulse and maintaining conventional norms, between incorporating the best that the past had to offer and looking forward towards social change for women. This makes sense if one looks at her penchant for conventional happy endings, which stands in opposition to her creation of unconventional heroines. For example, Elizabeth is a heroine who is spirited and knows her own mind. She wishes to marry based on love and to be prized not only for her beauty and "accomplishments," but for her wit and intelligence. In this way, Austen's character looks towards social change for women. Yet Elizabeth also makes a wealthy marriage to a chivalric nobleman. Her rags-to-riches tale is also one of old-fashioned romance.

I agree with Polhemus' analysis, one that sees Austen as a marriage-affirming novelist who reinforces the establishment, but also believe that Austen is almost as subversive as Wilde in her work. I also side with Gillooly and feminist critics who assert

the radical nature of Austen's writing, although I do not believe in their view that Austen was wholly contemptuous of the society in which she lived. In this way she is unlike Wilde, who in his humorous writing wished to break with the past. This conservative quality in Austen's humor is sometimes a problem for feminist critics who see her as radical.

Wilde made *his* radical social ideas palatable to his audiences by drawing on well-known theatrical styles with which his audiences were familiar and adding comic zest. His works may be characterized by what I call "comic melodrama." Wilde takes familiar Victorian melodrama and adds a subversive comic element, adding hilarity to what would otherwise be serious situations.⁹⁵ Through his often melodramatic social comedies, Wilde went against the status quo by satirizing marriage and society. He believed that although society must accept the individual, because of all of the negative aspects of society this acceptance need not be reciprocal. This means that according to Wilde, one need not follow social strictures in order to be a successful member of society. In *The Importance of Being Earnest*, his sharpest and most hilarious critique of society, he shows that embracing social values through marriage can be destructive to the individual because one must sometimes sacrifice personal happiness in marriage. For example, the play opens with Algernon speaking with his servant about the "demoralizing" effect matrimony has upon a person.

Wilde prided himself on his amorality and wished to show that despite his characters' "good" intentions, their marriages would fall apart if not bolstered by a measure of deception. In Wilde's cynical view of marriage there are hardly any relationships that are

⁹⁵ The melodramatic parts of his plays are not as memorable as the works' comic aspects.

not based on lies and deception. For example, in *The Importance of Being Earnest*, Cecily and Gwendolyn are willingly deceived into marrying their “ideal” mate, one named Ernest. In *An Ideal Husband* and *Lady Windermere’s Fan* wives admit that it is often necessary for spouses to deceive one another for the good of the marriage, while in *The Picture of Dorian Gray* Lord Henry and his wife know so little of each other’s whereabouts that they are surprised to run into one another at a party, to great comic effect. In *Lady Windermere’s Fan*, the Duchess of Berwick thinks negatively of all men and tries to convince Lady Windermere that Lord Windermere is having an affair. She then cynically and humorously advises the younger woman to take the infidelity in stride, explaining that this is the way of the world. In the same play, Lady Plymdale is in danger of having her affair discovered by her husband, so in a funny plot twist, she attempts to have a woman seduce him so that he will be busy with an affair of his own.

Like his life, Wilde’s writing seems paradoxical because he incorporates the prevalent styles of his time, especially that of the “society comedy” and potboiler melodrama while seemingly parodying them. Wilde incorporates the suspense, fast pacing and surprise revelations of melodrama while adding comedy into the melodrama and thereby undermining it. He defended his “borrowings” by asserting that “I have given them [the public] what they like, so that they may learn to appreciate what I like to give them” (qtd. in Ellmann 359). Late-Victorian audiences enjoyed viewing familiar crises that reaffirmed their values, but Wilde turns these familiar patterns around through paradoxical speech, epigrams and ideas taken to extremes.

In Austen, when a marriage, like that of Elizabeth to Darcy occurs, it is not only the small society of the newly married couple that is formed, but one that touches the larger

society which allowed and accepted the marriage. According to Polhemus, this is when the heroine's "self" merges with the surrounding community (*Comic Faith*). The opposite seems to occur in Wilde, whose characters elide merging with the community by avoiding marriage altogether or by remaining individuals within marriage. Such is the case of Mrs. Erlynne in *Lady Windermere's Fan*, who is not only beautiful, witty and charming, but possess dignity and good-nature. Yet to Wilde's audience, Mrs. Erlynne would be a "fallen woman." Eltis sees her as a radical creation on Wilde's part: a woman who has consciously given up motherhood for a more independent existence and will most likely continue to act independently within her new marriage to the foolish Lord Augustus (*Revising Wilde*). Within the same play, Lord Darlington is another example of individuality. It is through him that Wilde's theories on the individual are voiced:

I won't tell you that the world matters nothing, or the world's voice, or the voice of society. They matter...far too much. But...one has to choose between living one's own life, fully, entirely, completely or dragging out some false, shallow, degrading existence that the world in its hypocrisy demands." (*Lady Windermere's Fan* 404)

At first glance it seems that Darlington, by preaching "to thy own self be true," is advocating a hedonism through which it is possible to be moral. But Darlington draws on the above argument in attempting to persuade Lady Windermere to have an affair with him, negating the moral undertone of his words. Conversely in *An Ideal Husband*, the independent-minded dandy is ironically, the voice of reason. Lord Goring urges the Chilterns to be more realistic in their marital standards so that they may live happily

together in the real world. One feels that even after marriage to Mabel, independent-minded Lord Goring will retain his individuality.

Although Austen critiques marriage, she believes it to be a worthy social pillar that benefits both the individual and society. Ultimately, Austen attempts to show that although the community must learn to love the individual, the individual must find a place for him or herself within the community. My belief is that unlike that of Wilde, Austen's laughter is not usually bitter or cynical. She laughs at society without betraying her basic social standards. Conversely, Wilde asserts the idea that individuality and personal happiness should always win out over duty and social conformity. By having Algernon paradoxically state "My duty as a gentlemen has never interfered with my pleasures in the least" (*The Importance of Being Earnest* 341), Wilde privileges enjoying oneself over any obligations to society.

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