Jane Austen’s Philosophy of the Virtues
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Jane Austen’s Philosophy of the Virtues

Sarah Emsley
For my parents, John and Lorraine Baxter
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References to Jane Austen’s Works

References to Jane Austen’s works are to the following editions:


**Abbreviations Used**

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data-
\begin{array}{ll}
MW & \text{Minor Works} \\
LS & \text{Lady Susan} \\
NA & \text{Northanger Abbey} \\
SS & \text{Sense and Sensibility} \\
PP & \text{Pride and Prejudice} \\
MP & \text{Mansfield Park} \\
E & \text{Emma} \\
P & \text{Persuasion} \\
Letters & \text{Jane Austen's Letters} \\
\end{array}
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Near the end of *Pride and Prejudice*, there is a well-known scene in which Elizabeth Bennet and Lady Catherine de Bourgh clash in a battle of wills. The pompous and self-righteous Lady Catherine demands that Elizabeth promise not to marry her nephew Mr. Darcy, and the independent and strong-willed Elizabeth refuses to promise, asserting that “‘I am only resolved to act in that manner, which will, in my own opinion, constitute my happiness, without reference to you, or to any person so wholly unconnected with me’” (*PP* 358). Does this statement, coming as it does from one of Austen’s best-known and most-loved heroines—the character who many critics agree comes closest to articulating what may be Austen’s own lively opinions—does this mean that Jane Austen sees the happiness of her heroines as a matter of independence, dependent, that is, only on their own rational determination of what is good for them? Is this a selfish, or at least self-centered, notion of happiness? Is Elizabeth the model of the enlightened individual in pursuit of her own happiness? While Elizabeth does pursue happiness, Jane Austen’s idea of what constitutes happiness is not dependent solely on either a comfortable marriage as the goal of life, or on the personal fulfillment of the individual.

What Elizabeth says is not simply that she will act “without reference to you or to any [other] person,” but instead “without reference to you, or
to any person so wholly unconnected with me,” thereby suggesting that when she considers her own happiness, she will do so in the context of people who are connected with her. Like Anne Elliot in *Persuasion*, who finds hope and a degree of happiness in her involvement with the Musgrove family group when she goes to visit at Uppercross, and like Emma Woodhouse, in *Emma*, who suffers initially from “intellectual solitude,” but becomes happier when she is engaged in social life, Elizabeth values the community of those she cares about. Although she has a strong and independent mind, she does not act in accordance with her own reason alone, but instead learns to make decisions through, at different times, the help of dialogue with Jane, or the good sense of her uncle and aunt, Mr. and Mrs. Gardiner, or the information offered by Mr. Darcy. While working out how to live her own life, Elizabeth learns to think and act within her community—what in *Emma* is called “the small band of true friends” (*E* 484). She learns not to rely on her own critical (or at times cynical) judgment alone, but to work through ethical problems with a combination of her own analysis and the authority and judgment of others. She may question authority, but she doesn’t reject it outright, as sometimes the careful judgments of others can help her to know what her own happiness is.

This distinction between the easy acceptance or rejection of authority, and the complicated process of contemplation that helps determine when authority is right and when individual judgment is right, is at the heart of my argument about Jane Austen’s approach to philosophy. In this book I suggest that Jane Austen’s heroines confront the fundamental ethical question “How should I live my life?” and that the novels explore possible answers to this question. In contrast to critics who have argued that Austen’s novels are conservative in a relatively straightforward way—in that they argue for the value of tradition and are skeptical of reform—and in contrast also to those who have argued that the novels subvert patriarchal authority and advocate political change, I argue that Jane Austen is conservative, yet flexible. The ethical standpoint that Austen’s novels exemplify, therefore, is best understood in reference to the philosophical tradition in which the full range of the virtues is integral to character, and the process of negotiating the ethical life is challenging, but possible. The virtues are high standards, precise points, but they are also flexible and must be exercised to be learned—they must become habits. I argue that characters in the novels offer what may be termed “living arguments” for the classical and theological traditions of the virtues, and that the virtue of faith is what makes it possible for these characters to practice the range of the virtues.

A number of critics have suggested that Austen is a conservative writer, and have argued that, considering that her father was a clergyman
and she was brought up in the Church of England, it is not surprising
that her novels are about morality as well as manners, and that it is
traditional, conservative morality that interests her. But Austen’s reputation
as a conservative has been under attack in recent years, as feminist and
post-structuralist criticism has attempted to demonstrate ways in which
her novels subvert authority and represent a secular world of ethical
relativism. Many critics have been concerned to argue that Austen is
politically radical, arguing for revolutionary changes in marriage, eco-
nomics, and class. While I agree that she is critical of social institutions
and customs, my book proposes that the most radically innovative aspect
of her work is her emphasis on the centrality and the flexibility of the
tradition of the virtues.

Jane Austen was writing at the turn of the nineteenth century—she
was born in 1775 and her novels were published between 1811 and
1818, the year after she died. At a time when many writers regarded
virtue as a code of rules, a kind of monolithic system in which one either
obeyed or disobeyed the laws of virtue—which for women had to do
primarily with sexual virtue—Austen was doing something quite different.
Instead of adopting the conservative attitude of her time, which was that
women’s virtue depended almost solely on their chastity, and instead of
looking forward to the increasingly secular society of the future, in which
virtue would no longer be consistently held up as the ideal for men or
women, in her novels Jane Austen calls on a stronger philosophical tradi-
tion of a plurality of virtues, and represents the range of the virtues as
something that both men and women can learn and practice. Virtue, for
Austen, is not just about sex and chastity. Protecting a woman’s reputa-
tion is important in the novels, but despite the tendency of her society to
identify virtue as female chastity, Jane Austen did not define virtue in this
narrow sense. Instead, she opens up questions about the whole range of
the classical and theological virtues, and demonstrates how both men and
women must work at negotiating the appropriate balance that consti-
tutes virtue. In addition to showing how a virtue may be understood as
a careful balance between excess and defect, she also explores the
complex tensions between and among competing virtues.

In this book I challenge criticism that sees Austen as a revolutionary or
a relativist, arguing that Austen’s novels, while they are critical and often
satirical about society, nevertheless accept and promote the importance
of tradition. I begin by surveying the tradition of the virtues of prudence,
fortitude, justice, temperance, charity, hope, and faith, and I argue that
Jane Austen’s heroines learn to ask the philosophical questions about how
to live their lives. The answers they find are, I think, consistent with the
approaches to ethics proposed by Aristotle and St. Thomas Aquinas, rather than with a utilitarian or Kantian approach to ethics, as Austen’s fiction stresses the moral education of character as preparation for ethical action. Over the last several years literary theory has begun to focus on ethics, and moral philosophy has begun to turn to literature in order to illuminate what has been called “virtue ethics.” Ancient theories about the virtues can enrich our understanding of literature, ethics, and life, and my study of Austen’s novels therefore reads her work in light of the classical and theological traditions of the virtues.\(^1\) The central point of my argument is that while recognizing the importance of the classical virtues, Jane Austen writes from a firm foundation of Christian faith—thus for her virtuous characters there is a point to moral education.

**Philosophy and Politics**

Several of Austen’s critics have seen her as a conservative moralist and an advocate of rigid traditionalist principles.\(^2\) Yet although she may well be ideologically conservative, and is undeniably interested in the moral life of her characters, to say that her moral system is one of rigid prejudgments is to limit severely the scope of her art. It is widely agreed by now that although her literal focus in her novels remained on her “3 or 4 Families in a Country Village” (Letters, September 9, 1814; 275), her artistic vision of human life and character reaches much further than it at first appears to do.\(^3\) To label Austen simply as a conservative moralist is inadequate, and can imply a critic’s negative judgment of the code of conduct that operates in the novels. Similarly, to label her as a radical reformer who anticipates the feminist debates of our own time is also inadequate, even as it often implies a positive judgment of her work.\(^4\) An exploration of the classical and theological context for Austen’s philosophy of the virtues can help to broaden our understanding of what it means for her to be a moralist. Like other recent critics, such as Anne Crippen Ruderman, David Gallop, and David Fott, who have stressed that to consider Austen a moralist does not necessarily mean that she is a philosopher or an ethical theorist, I am concerned to investigate the philosophical underpinnings of her fiction rather than to explicate didactic lessons that emerge from the novels. Ruderman and Gallop both focus on the philosophical context of Austen’s novels, and my work draws on their analysis of Austen’s Aristotelianism; however, my argument demonstrates the equal importance of the theological context.\(^5\) Like Fott, in his article “Prudence and Persuasion: Jane Austen on Virtue
in Democratizing Eras,” I investigate both Aristotelian and Christian influences on Austen.6 In her novels Austen engages with the classical and theological virtues, and recognizes both the value of tradition and authority, and the necessity of independent critical judgment. The possibility of being ideologically conservative, yet open-minded and flexible, is, I think, realized in Austen’s fiction.

Some critics have interpreted Austen as an ethical theorist. Attempting to situate her work in a moral context that both reflects the increasing secularization of her time, and anticipates the atheism of the future, Jesse Wolfe, for example, claims to “translate” Austen’s moral “sense” from imaginative into expository form. Wolfe sees Austen as responsible not only for incorporating, but even for initiating, a transition from a metaphysical Christian ethic to a secular moral ethic, and finds, in her novels, a psychology in which pride is the prime secular sin of self-centeredness from which characters can be rescued only by faith in the salvation that comes from “internal dialogue,” not by faith in Christian grace and redemption. Wolfe argues that Austen anticipates the atheism of Iris Murdoch’s novels, and that she points the way to a secular world of Freud and Sartre that Murdoch inherits.7 Edward Neill similarly argues that Mansfield Park, for example, is “eminently self-deconstructing, patriarchy and the great good place being left in ruins by a textual perspective which seems to anticipate the mischievous wisdom of Freud, Marx and Nietzsche.”8 Looking at Austen’s contemporary context, some have argued that a historicized view of Austen will reveal that she is subversive, undermining contemporary absolutist ideals of virtuous conduct even as she appears to represent the conservative moral order. Mary Poovey instances Elizabeth Bennet as an example of such subversion, taking Elizabeth’s perspectives on the changes in human character—“‘But people themselves alter so much, that there is something new to be observed in them for ever’ ” (PP 43)—to mean that for Austen, virtue is relative, open to interpretation and not always governable.9 Poovey’s appeals to a historical, strict moral order against which Austen defines and develops her own supposedly relativist world resemble Wolfe’s argument for Austen’s originality in that both critics set Austen ahead of her time as a new radical.

Can Jane Austen seriously be considered as the precursor of Freud and Sartre, Marx or Nietzsche, breaking with Christian morality to inaugurate a subversive modern secular ethic? In sharp contrast to Wolfe, Neill, and Poovey, Alasdair MacIntyre has argued that while Austen’s historical age was indeed the time when a transition of this sort began to take place, she, far from being implicated in the shift away from traditional
conceptions of morality, is in fact one of the few people who identify “that social sphere within which the practice of the virtues is able to continue,” even while “[i]n most of the public and most of the private world the classical and medieval virtues are replaced by the meagre substitutes which modern morality affords.” MacIntyre is clearly at odds with Wolfe, Neill, and Poovey in assessing both Austen’s novels and her position in the history of ideas. I agree that Austen was doing something unusual for her time, and that she does respond to and in many ways react against the morality of her contemporaries, but I think it unlikely that the novels can be made to support Wolfe’s argument about atheism, Neill’s argument about deconstruction, or Poovey’s claim that judgment is always governed by desire in the interest of the self. Several passages point to the religious feeling that underlies Austen’s work, and the ending of Mansfield Park is not as resistant to closure as Neill suggests. It may be true at some or even many points in Austen’s fiction that judgment is dictated by self-interest, but it is not ultimately true of her admirable characters, especially her heroines, and it does not reflect her conclusions about human nature in general. Austen does not condone a world of ethical relativity. Far from cleverly anticipating and affirming the self-interest, ethical relativism, and secularism of our time, Jane Austen saw the dangers of contemporary absolutist morality and, perhaps, also of future relativism, and, instead of affirming either, wisely reached back to a stronger tradition of ethical debate about what constitutes the moral life. Testing MacIntyre’s assertion that “It is her uniting of Christian and Aristotelian themes in a determinate social context that makes Jane Austen the last great effective imaginative voice of the tradition of thought about, and practice of, the virtues,” I assess the ways in which Austen draws on, criticizes, and remakes this philosophical tradition.

Religious Faith

The question of the extent to which Austen’s art is Christian has perplexed many of her critics. Her brother Henry Austen tried to establish a firm answer to this question in his “Biographical Notice of the Author,” published with Northanger Abbey and Persuasion in 1818. He concludes his description of his sister’s life by saying that “One trait only remains to be touched on,” and that “It makes all others unimportant.” He declares that Jane Austen “was thoroughly religious and devout; fearful of giving offence to God, and incapable of feeling it towards any fellow creature. On serious subjects she was well-instructed, both by reading and
meditation, and her opinions accorded strictly with those of our Established Church.” Despite, or perhaps sometimes because of, Henry Austen’s confident pronouncement, critics of Jane Austen have continued to debate the question of her own faith, and of the relation of faith to her art. Archbishop Richard Whately in 1821 dubbed her a Christian writer, but noted that she is very reticent about religion: he wrote that she had “the merit . . . of being evidently a Christian writer: a merit which is much enhanced, both on the score of good taste, and of practical utility, by her religion being not at all obtrusive . . . . In fact she is more sparing of it than would be thought desirable by some persons.” Such reticence has led a number of writers to question Austen’s faith, at least as it is represented in her work. Margaret Oliphant, writing in Blackwood’s in 1870, suggested that Austen’s way of making allowances for the human weaknesses of her characters was “yet . . . not charity, and its toleration has none of the sweetness which proceeds from that highest of Christian graces.” She qualified this by saying that “It is not absolute contempt either, but only a softened tone of general disbelief—amusement, nay enjoyment, of all those humours of humanity which are so quaint to look at as soon as you dissociate them from any rigid standard of right or wrong.”

John Odmark writes that the “religious dimension of Jane Austen’s fiction has usually been neglected, with the result that the author’s system of moral values has been misinterpreted.” Certainly the character of the clergy is prominent in the novels, from the pompous Mr. Collins in Pride and Prejudice to the conscientious Edmund Bertram in Mansfield Park, and yet members of the clergy are often mocked, and the heroines and heroes of the novels are rarely seen to talk about the Church, let alone discuss their faith in God. Nevertheless, there are many indications throughout the novels that these characters are neither simply neoclassical figures who exist in a world where virtue is a common ideal, nor Enlightenment skeptics who inhabit a world where virtue is an external goal rarely achieved. An exploration of how religion and faith form the grounding of everyday life for Austen’s characters can help to explain moral decisions in the novels. As Stuart M. Tave rightly suggests in Some Words of Jane Austen,

Of the three duties, to God, to one’s neighbors, to oneself, specified in the Book of Common Prayer and innumerable sermons and moral essays, duty to God would not be for Jane Austen the proper subject of the novelist; but the other duties are, and they become gravely important, not as they might be in a later nineteenth-century
novelist, because they are substitutes for religion, but because they are daily expressions of it in common life.\textsuperscript{15}

Focusing on the ethics of ordinary life in her novels, Austen explores what it means to fulfill one’s responsibilities to one’s neighbors and one’s self in the context of religious as well as philosophical principles.

Outside the world of the novels, we have the evidence of the three prayers composed by Jane Austen. The virtue of faith is central to Austen’s understanding of the full range of the cardinal and theological virtues, and the novels can be read in light of the three prayers she composed.\textsuperscript{16} As Bruce Stovel notes, the prayers have been neglected, relative to the amount of attention paid to other details of Austen’s life and work. The manuscript, which is undated, is apparently partly in Austen’s own hand, and partly in another hand, and the prayers are inscribed—probably by Cassandra Austen—“Prayers Composed by my ever dear Sister Jane.” They appear to be intended for family use in daily evening prayer, and are meant to be followed by the Lord’s Prayer. Stovel argues convincingly for the pervasive presence in Austen’s writing of a strong Christian faith. He says that in both the prayers and the novels “morality and religion coincide,” and invokes Archbishop Whately’s judgment of Austen’s work, concluding that “Whately’s conception of the interdependence of fiction, morality and religion is, I believe, shared by Austen herself.”\textsuperscript{17}

These three prayers can help to illuminate Jane Austen’s novels. What is central to the story of Elizabeth Bennet, and to the stories of Emma Woodhouse and Marianne Dashwood, is the process by which the heroine arrives at, in the words of the first prayer, the “knowledge [of] every fault of temper and every evil habit in which we have indulged to the discomfort of our fellow-creatures, and the danger of our own souls” (\textit{MW} 453). The moment at which Elizabeth, after reading Darcy’s letter, says, “‘Till this moment, I never knew myself’” (\textit{PP} 208), is one in which she realizes how her temper, her habits, and her actions have been in error—blind, willful, and prejudiced. For Emma, the feeling that “Never had she felt so agitated, mortified, grieved, at any circumstance in her life” is the result of her recognition that she has caused the discomfort of her fellow-creature Miss Bates: “She felt it at her heart. How could she have been so brutal, so cruel to Miss Bates!” She also recognizes that she has caused pain to Mr. Knightley: “How could she have exposed herself to such ill opinion in any one she valued!” (\textit{E} 376). And Marianne, confessing to Elinor, says that “‘My illness has made me think—it has given me leisure and calmness for serious recollection. . . . I considered the past; I saw in my own behaviour . . . nothing but a series of imprudence
towards myself, and want of kindness to others” (SS 345). Reflecting on the past, these heroines examine their judgment of, and behavior toward, the people around them: in the language of the first prayer, they fulfill the injunction to “consider how the past day has been spent by us, what have been our prevailing thoughts, words and actions during it, and how far we can acquit ourselves of evil” (MW 453–54).

Although Austen does not explicitly show her characters considering their relation to God or Christ—in the words of the first prayer “Have we thought irreverently of thee[?]”—she does show them contemplating “have we disobeyed thy commandments, have we neglected any known duty, or willingly given pain to any human being?” (MW 454). Elizabeth, Emma, and Marianne, through the course of each novel, become inclined to ask their hearts these questions, in order to be saved from deceiving themselves in future by pride or vanity. Elinor Dashwood, Anne Elliot, and Fanny Price are from the beginning of each novel already inclined to examine their hearts and contemplate their judgments and actions carefully.

When an Austen heroine recognizes where she has erred, she invariably repents, and often confesses her error to another person. Elizabeth exclaims, “‘How despicably have I acted!’” (PP 208) and through confessing to Jane her error in judgment regarding Wickham and Darcy, “The tumult of [her] mind was allayed” (PP 227). Emma resolves, regarding Miss Bates, that “If attention, in future, could do away the past, she might hope to be forgiven. She had been often remiss, her conscience told her so; remiss, perhaps, more in thought than fact; scornful, ungracious. But it should be so no more. In the warmth of true contrition, she would call upon her the very next morning, and it should be the beginning, on her side, of a regular, equal, kindly intercourse” (E 377; emphasis added). When she thinks of the possibility that Mr. Knightley will see her paying this contrite visit to Miss Bates, she thinks “She would not be ashamed of the appearance of the penitence, so justly and truly hers” (E 377–78; emphasis added). Marianne tells Elinor that “‘The future must be my proof,’” promising that “‘my feelings shall be governed and my temper improved’” (SS 347), because she is grateful to have survived her illness and lived “‘to have time for atonement to my God, and to you all’” (SS 346; emphasis added).18 Contrition, penitence, atonement: these are the outward signs of a deeper faith in God. Elizabeth, Emma, and Marianne all feel that they have been uncharitable in thought and action, as Austen writes of kindness, prudence, and justice.

These examples of self-examination, confession, and repentance, central to the action of Pride and Prejudice, Emma, and Sense and Sensibility,
help to demonstrate my argument that Jane Austen’s novels are grounded in the tradition of the virtues, and that it is the virtue of faith that makes possible the other virtues of charity, hope, prudence, and justice, as well as temperance, and fortitude or strength. There are very few explicit prayers in Jane Austen’s novels, admittedly, but the form of Christian prayer, and therefore of Christian faith, is evident in many passages. The most important aspect of prayer represented is that of the confession that follows self-knowledge, but, as I have suggested, there are moments of supplication and moments of thanksgiving as well. What is absent from the novels with respect to the forms of Christian belief is the idea of adoration and worship of God. Austen’s characters are not evangelical and they are not preachers: there is no Miss Clack, as in Wilkie Collins’s *The Moonstone*; there is no Dinah Morris, as in George Eliot’s *Adam Bede*; Austen’s clergymen are often mocked, and rarely set a Christian example for their congregations. Yet because of the evidence of the prayers Austen wrote, as well as the evidence of self-examination followed by confession and repentance within the novels, I maintain that Christianity, not just the forms of the religion but also the deep faith in Christ’s atonement for the sins of the world, underlies the way Jane Austen understands the virtues and shows them in action and in tension in her fictional characters.

### The Unity of the Virtues

In contrast to critics who have argued that Austen represents primarily the classical virtues, some of whom have argued that she does this in a purely secular way, and in contrast to those who would claim her as primarily a Christian writer, I argue in this book that in her novels, Jane Austen represents a union of the classical and the theological virtues, deftly negotiating the tensions among the virtues, dramatically portraying the moments at which her characters achieve practical knowledge or higher wisdom, and pointing toward the understanding and acceptance of divine grace. Fott concludes his discussion of classical and Christian virtue in the novels by suggesting that it is up to the reader to determine whether or not Austen reconciles Aristotelianism and Christianity. Like MacIntyre, however, I argue that her reconciliation of the two is not indeterminate but clear and conclusive.¹⁹

To what extent does Austen’s focus on virtue appear as part of a conscious technique, and to what extent is it simply a part of the way she approaches the world? In what degrees do her heroines learn practical wisdom or the higher wisdom of philosophical contemplation? What is
her philosophy of the good life? What makes her heroines happy, and what is the difference between happiness and contentment? How can the perfections of virtue be represented in a dramatically interesting way, and does Jane Austen succeed in making the virtues interesting? If Austen unifies the classical and Christian virtues, how does she do so?

My strategy in this book is to analyze the process of moral education in the novels, highlighting the ways in which Austen’s heroines come to learn about the ethical life first as a moment of philosophical illumination, and thereafter as a lifetime dedication to practicing careful judgment and considered moral action. As Austen’s novels make clear, there is a point to moral education. It is possible to correct moral failings and learn from mistakes. Focusing on Austen’s seven completed novels, including the brilliant short novel Lady Susan, I examine primarily the lives of the heroines, while incorporating commentary from time to time on secondary characters. This book first explores the history of the classical and theological traditions of the virtues, and Austen’s engagement with the tradition she inherits, and then examines the dramatic representation of the virtues in each of her novels. Each chapter begins with a relevant epigraph from Austen’s juvenilia, which I quote, out of context, in a lighthearted way, with the intention of highlighting her early preoccupation with the concept of virtue, rather than with the intention of tracing specific connections between the juvenilia and the particular novel under discussion.20 In each of the novels, Austen emphasizes different virtues, but one of the recurring tensions is the problem of how to unite the virtues of charity and justice. In Pride and Prejudice, for example, Elizabeth confronts the difficulty of trying “to unite civility and truth in a few short sentences” when speaking to Mr. Collins (PP 216). In addition to these tensions between civility and honesty, charity and justice, Austen explores several competing and complementary virtues in each novel. Like Joanna Baillie, whose Plays on the Passions (1798) each focus on a particular passion, Austen sometimes focuses more intently on one virtue in a particular novel, but she also explores the full range of the virtues throughout her work.21

Chapter one, on “The Virtues According to Aristotle, Aquinas, and Austen,” outlines the background for Jane Austen’s philosophy of the virtues, surveying the classical virtues, the biblical virtues, and the tradition of ethical thought founded upon the union of the four cardinal virtues of justice, temperance, prudence, and fortitude with the theological virtues of faith, hope, and charity. I analyze Austen’s approach to philosophical and religious tradition, focusing on the process of moral education into practical and philosophical wisdom and on the relation of the practice
of the virtues to the pursuit of happiness. The chapter outlines some of the main ideas of Aristotle’s *Nicomachean* and *Eudemian Ethics*, and explores Christian thought about the synthesis of classical and biblical virtues, especially in the *Summa Theologica* of St. Thomas Aquinas. I argue that although it is possible that Austen read Plato, Aristotle, Augustine, Aquinas, Dante, Chaucer, or Spenser on the virtues, she inherits the tradition of the classical and theological virtues primarily through her reading of and active engagement with the works of Shakespeare, Samuel Johnson, and Henry Fielding. In order to demonstrate the difference between heroines who possess “virtue” and heroines who practice a range of “the virtues,” this chapter then surveys some of the ways female virtue is characterized in novels of Austen’s time. Austen’s “Plan of a Novel” caricatures a potential fictional father and daughter: “He, the most excellent Man that can be imagined, perfect in Character, Temper & Manners . . . —Heroine a faultless Character herself—, perfectly good, with much tenderness & sentiment, & not the least Wit” (*MW* 428). Austen’s best heroines combine the virtues with ready wit, which Aristotle identifies as one of the virtues of social life. But for many of the virtuous heroines in contemporary novels by writers such as Ann Radcliffe, Eliza Fenwick, Elizabeth Inchbald, and Samuel Richardson, virtue and wit are mutually exclusive, as female virtue is defined primarily as sexual purity. In contrast, moral education in Austen’s novels involves contemplation about choosing and acting with reference to the full range of the virtues, and thus the chapter concludes by analyzing the difficulty of moral choice.

In chapter two, “Propriety’s Claims on Prudence in *Lady Susan* and *Northanger Abbey*,” I argue that these two early novels show Austen trying out opposing perspectives on human nature through the use of different narrative techniques. In *Lady Susan*, Austen creates a heroine who is prudent in the sense of worldly wisdom and worldly calculation. Prudence here is a matter of strategy, manipulation, and coercion, and in its excessive form, prudence gives way to the vices of covetousness and selfishness. Lady Susan studies the forms of propriety even while calculating to manipulate morality. Catherine Morland, on the other hand, is ignorant of many of propriety’s outward forms, yet she has an innate sense of honesty and honor; one of the things Henry Tilney aims to teach her is how to reconcile the form and the essence of propriety. *Lady Susan* and *Northanger Abbey* are less polished than the later novels, and the moral world they represent is much less complex, but they serve as useful examples of Austen’s early attempts to explore the first of the virtues, prudence, the virtue without which no other virtue is possible.
the wisdom and courage that come with prudence, it is not possible to begin to practice the other virtues.

Chapter three, “Sense and Sensibility: ‘Know Your Own Happiness,’ ” initiates a discussion of the tensions that arise when one begins to practice more than one virtue and discovers that it is difficult to keep them simultaneously in balance. These tensions are at the heart of Austen’s flexible conservatism: what Elinor Dashwood knows and what her sister Marianne discovers is that to be moral one must be active, not passive, and exercise one’s judgment constantly to find an ethical balance in social life. The negotiation of this balance is what Marianne learns to call “practis[ing] the civilities” (SS 295). In contrast to the many critics of Sense and Sensibility who claim that passionate Marianne is betrayed by the narrator’s desire to educate her into behaving more like her reserved sister, and also in contrast to those who argue that each heroine’s virtue is improved by being tempered by the other’s ruling force—that is, that while Marianne must indeed learn some of Elinor’s sense, it is beneficial as well for Elinor to adopt some of Marianne’s strong feeling—I argue both that Elinor is less static than she is usually supposed to be, and that there is ultimately something she needs to learn from Marianne apart from sensibility, and that is divine grace. Through an exploration of the virtue of fortitude and the process of discovering happiness, my line of argument comes to new conclusions about what the ending of Sense and Sensibility means for Elinor, Marianne, and the representation of virtues in the novel.

The idea in Sense and Sensibility of coming to know one’s own happiness is also a crucial part of the development of Pride and Prejudice, in which both Elizabeth and Darcy learn what constitutes the fulfillment of their intelligence and their capacity to love, and thus are able to bring about justice within the world of the novel. My analysis of “Pride and Prejudice and the Beauty of Justice” in chapter four begins by countering feminist assumptions that the education of Elizabeth Bennet involves humiliation into submission to patriarchal expectations. I argue, instead, that because both Elizabeth and Darcy must undergo the painful process of learning to admit their mistakes and rectify their wrong judgments, the novel is in fact centrally concerned with the role of love in the pursuit of justice. Looking in particular at the first proposal scene at Hunsford, I analyze the recurrent problem of tensions among competing virtues, and I focus on the ways in which such concepts as anger, prejudice, and discrimination, while certainly potentially dangerous, are not necessarily completely incompatible with the virtues. I argue that Pride and Prejudice, in its dramatization of the philosophical awakening to justice that both Darcy
and Elizabeth experience, offers Austen’s most comprehensive commentary on the process of learning to practice the virtues.

In *Mansfield Park* many virtues compete for prominence and perfection: at times Austen’s focus is on Fanny’s heroic fortitude under pressure, or on the value of faith, as for example in the Sotherton Chapel scene in which Fanny and Edmund defend the importance of household prayers and clerical guidance in spiritual life. The question of balance in this novel involves not only a harmonious balance among competing virtues, but also the possibility of balancing desires temperately. Fanny Price consistently pursues the virtuous life, in the way that Radcliffe’s or Richardson’s heroines do, but her virtue is not static. She desires growth and development, a temperate balance between contemplation and action. Throughout my analysis in chapter five of “Fanny Price and the Contemplative Life,” I emphasize the significance of habit with respect to moral behavior, and I argue that Fanny is Austen’s contemplative heroine.

In contrast to Fanny, whom Austen treats seriously, Emma Woodhouse is the heroine she determines to mock from the beginning. In chapter six, “Learning the Art of Charity in *Emma*,” I analyze the painful process Emma is subjected to by her own conscience, prompted at times by Mr. Knightley, before she reaches a point at which she understands how the virtue of charity works. At first Emma’s charity consists in good works; later she comes to recognize that charity has to do first with attitude and then with action, and she learns to practice uniting charitable words and actions toward others, as a priority above trying to ensure that she is in narcissistic love and charity with herself. Like Elizabeth Bennet, Emma experiences a profound awakening to philosophical contemplation. This mode of existence has already become a habit for Fanny Price before her character is revealed in any detail, and although Catherine Morland does learn something in *Northanger Abbey*, it has to do with the practical and prudent world rather than with the philosophical world. Lady Susan is not interested in any philosophy other than the philosophy of getting ahead, and the only things she learns are the subtleties of manipulation. *Emma* is second only to *Pride and Prejudice* in its brilliant dramatic representation of the awakening to moral wisdom. A number of critics have argued that *Emma* is Austen’s masterpiece, yet the way Emma’s moral education is diffused because it is partly directed by the already almost perfect Mr. Knightley detracts from its narrative power. The figure of Mr. Knightley functions for Emma in the way that the figure of Elinor functions for Marianne: each provides a moral standard for the less morally aware heroine, and consequently takes some of the drama out of the heroine’s discovery of the moral life for herself.
Anne Elliot resembles Mr. Knightley and Elinor Dashwood more than she does Emma Woodhouse or Elizabeth Bennet. Like Fanny Price, too, she is already virtuous. Anne and Fanny, like Mr. Knightley and Elinor, do experience tests of their virtue, their patience, their fortitude—but there is never any real danger for any of them that they will stray very far from the virtuous path. Elizabeth's passion—at first for Wickham, and later for wit at the expense of justice—and Emma's imagination—regarding Frank Churchill and Harriet Smith especially—are constant reminders that these heroines' powers may also constitute their failings, and this is what makes their triumphant engagement with the philosophical pursuit of wisdom and virtue so compellingly instructive. Like St. Augustine, they must confess their past transgressions before they can move on to a wiser and more blessed life. Anne is already living that life, even if it is not an entirely happy one. In Persuasion, Austen starts her story long after the crucial test of strength has passed. Anne may have failed to assert her claims to romantic happiness with Wentworth, in opposition to Lady Russell's practical and financial persuasions, but she has learned how to be strong in the face of disappointed love. It is not, therefore, in the moment of Wentworth's proposal or Anne's anguished refusal that the dramatic interest of their story lies, it is in the process by which Anne learns to sustain not only stoic fortitude, but also a more profoundly Christian hope. Chapter seven, “Balancing the Virtues in Persuasion,” examines the qualities of firmness, flexibility, and fortitude in light of Anne's constancy, and assesses MacIntyre's claim that Austen extends the tradition of the virtues through her development of the centrality of constancy. While I agree with MacIntyre that constancy is important to Austen's heroines, I argue that what is more fundamental to both her male and her female characters, and indeed to the whole vision of human nature expressed in her novels, is faith. Constancy is not the root of virtues, but the outgrowth of virtue—it is a subcategory. What the value of constancy in Persuasion points to is the fundamental importance of faith—Christian faith—in all the novels. Faith inspires moral growth, and Austen's focus on moral education implies that redemption is possible.

The concluding chapter of the book is a coda entitled “After Austen,” and could well be subtitled “The Loss of Faith.” This chapter returns to MacIntyre's claim that Austen is “the last great representative” of “the tradition of the virtues,” and offers an analysis of some of the possible candidates for the continuation of that tradition, including such writers as George Eliot, Henry James, and Edith Wharton. Through looking at possible literary inheritors of Austen's ethical mode, I work toward an
assessment of the value of her artistic achievement. Is Austen the last representative of the tradition of the virtues, or is she the last great representative? Although some of the great writers after Austen, especially Eliot, James, and Wharton, represent significant parts of the tradition, MacIntyre is probably right that Austen’s novels represent the philosophical tradition of the virtues as a coherent and harmonious whole in a way that has not since been equaled.
Arm yourself my amiable Young Freind [sic] with all the philosophy you are Mistress of.


The theories of ancient philosophers with regard to the practice of virtue were adopted and adapted by early Christian thinkers to become part of the theological tradition: Jane Austen inherits this tradition, and responds to it creatively. Plato’s Republic provides the first recorded articulation of the idea that there are four cardinal virtues: Socrates says that “our city, if it has been rightly founded, is good in the full sense of the word,” and that it will therefore be “wise, brave, sober, and just.” Aristotle’s systematic approach to virtues in the Nicomachean Ethics divides them into the categories of moral, intellectual, and social virtues. In the Summa Theologica, Aquinas interprets the classical tradition in the context of the Christian faith, uniting the cardinal virtues of prudence, fortitude, temperance, and justice and the biblical virtues of faith, hope, and charity.

In this chapter, I survey classical and theological writings, along with works by Austen’s contemporaries, in relation to her ideas about the virtues. Austen’s novels are not schematic about defining virtue, yet her work does address the full range of the virtues, offering a comprehensive analysis of virtue as not merely theoretical, but actively lived. The chapter begins by discussing how Austen inherited the Aristotelian tradition and how she engages with it in her writing, considering moral education
and the pursuit of happiness, practical versus philosophical wisdom, and the importance of process, habit, and choice in the practice of the virtues. I focus on the theological virtues, especially faith, and discuss ways in which Aquinas and other writers saw the theological virtues in tension or in harmony with the classical virtues. The chapter then analyzes some eighteenth-century novelists and their representation of virtue, particularly female virtue. I connect some of these writers with the influence of Hume’s theory that virtue is inspired by the passions and, to a lesser extent, with the influence of Kant’s idea that the moral life is founded solely on the rule of reason. In contrast to novelists and thinkers who locate virtue in either feeling or duty, Austen finds, praises, and cultivates the virtues in character. For her fictional characters, virtue (or its absence) is demonstrated through their Aristotelian or Christian moral deliberations and judgment (or lack thereof), and thus I argue that Austen participates in a tradition of the virtues that stresses character and action, and that her understanding of that tradition includes a complex understanding of equality. For Austen, as for Aristotle, virtue is a disposition and is chosen, acquired, and practiced through habit: the process is important, and there is an end in view.

Jane Austen: Philosopher

Jane Austen’s concept of the virtues is closely related to Aristotle’s formulation of the virtuous mean: whether she illuminates his principles or he anticipates her characterizations of virtue, the two follow similar patterns of thinking about ethics. Several Austen critics have analyzed what she is known to have read, and whether she read Aristotle and other philosophers or absorbed their ideas in a more indirect way. David Gallop cites Coleridge’s declaration that “Every man is born an Aristotelian or a Platonist” and proposes that Austen must have been born an Aristotelian. While Margaret Doody suggests that Austen was probably not interested in classical literature, Mary DeForest argues that she may in fact have had something of a classical education, and speculate that she probably did learn Greek and Latin from her father, who tutored other people’s sons in these and other subjects. If Austen did know Greek, she might have read Aristotle’s *Ethics*, and if, like Anne Elliot, she knew Italian, she might have read Dante’s *Divine Comedy*, but she could also have read them in translation. Dante’s journey through *Purgatory*, with its close analysis in Cantos 9 through 28 of the hierarchy of vices and virtues, is an especially powerful example of the classical and
theological virtues in imaginative literature. Austen may have been influenced by the tradition of the moral exemplum, particularly as it appears in Chaucer’s works—for example, in the Parson’s Tale—and Spenser’s *Faerie Queene*, with its attempt to portray “the image of a brave knight, perfected in the twelve private morall vertues, as Aristotle hath devised,” is another possible influence.5 We do know that she read Shakespeare, however, and her ethical standpoint is strongly influenced by her reading of his work. As A. Walton Litz suggests, it is the “harmony between characters and the base of reality—which is but to say, between characters and action—that made Jane Austen’s nineteenth-century critics appeal so often to Shakespeare, and in Aristotelian terms: a critical comparison that may, in the long run, yield more profound insights than the twentieth century’s penchant for comparing her art to Henry James’s.”6

In addition to Shakespeare, Samuel Johnson was a strong influence on Austen’s approach to ethics. For one thing, her novels bear out the truth of his maxim that fiction is able to “convey the knowledge of vice and virtue with more efficacy than axioms and definitions.” Johnson also provides an account of the neglect of the classical and Christian virtues in “The Vanity of Human Wishes” (1749), in which “With distant voice neglected Virtue calls / Less heard and less, the faint remonstrance falls,” and yet supplication to heaven “for a healthful mind, / Obedient passions, and a will resigned”; “For love, which scarce collective man can fill; / For patience sovereign o’er transmuted ill”; and “For faith” may be successful. The poem concludes,

These goods for man the laws of heaven ordain,
These goods he grants, who grants the power to gain;
With these celestial wisdom calms the mind,
And makes the happiness she does not find.7

Here the emphasis is on the search for happiness, but happiness can only be discovered through wisdom and grace, and through faith, hope, and charity. Johnson provided more than balanced structure and style as an example for Austen in her own work: he also made the virtues, plural, vivid in contemporary writing in a way that many eighteenth-century novelists, writing about the sexual purity of women as virtue, did not.

Gilbert Ryle suggests that another possible eighteenth-century source for Austen’s Aristotelian thought may have been the works of Anthony Ashley Cooper, third earl of Shaftesbury and the author of *An Inquiry Concerning Virtue or Merit* (1699), while D.D. Devlin argues instead that Bishop Butler, along with Johnson, would have been the most likely
source for what Ryle calls “Aristotelian oxygen.” Henry Fielding is another writer who made the vices as well as the virtues vivid in the literature of Austen’s time, and his frequent references to Aristotle and Plato in *Tom Jones* (1749) suggest a source for Austen’s familiarity with ancient theories of ethics. Like Fielding, Austen frequently describes ironically “domestic Government[s] founded upon Rules directly contrary to those of Aristotle,” and she shares with him a desire “to laugh Mankind out of their favourite Follies and Vices.” There is more than one character in Austen’s novels who resembles the philosopher Mr. Square who, although he is “deeply read in the Antients, and a profest Master of all the Works of *Plato* and *Aristotle*,” nevertheless regards “all Virtue as Matter of Theory only.” Jane Austen’s Mr. Bennet is one example of the learned man who prefers to contemplate morality in theory, usually with irony and cynicism, rather than to act in a way that is consistent with ethical principles.

Austen may have absorbed her knowledge of Aristotelian thought by reading Aristotle himself, through the poetry of Dante, Chaucer, or Spenser, or through the works of Shaftesbury or Butler, but she certainly knew Shakespeare, Johnson, and Fielding, and she could well have learned Aristotelian principles from their work. Although it can be interesting to speculate about how Austen’s reading may have influenced her writing, the answer to how, or even whether, Austen knew Aristotle and other ancient, medieval, and early modern writers is still not essential to an understanding of her representation of the virtues. The question that is always the beginning of ethical thought is “How should I live my life?” and Jane Austen addresses this question directly in the characterization of her heroines. As Julia Annas suggests, this question “is not taken to be in origin a philosopher’s question; it is a question which an ordinary person will at some point put to herself.” While Austen’s answers to questions about how to live will often be sophisticated, it is not necessarily because she has absorbed the theories of philosophers. She has asked the question herself and she brings to her consideration of it the authority of her experience, as well as of her reading.

**Moral Education and the Pursuit of Happiness**

For an Austen heroine thinking about how to live her life, marriage is always part of the question. Both moral education and marriage have been discussed many times before by her critics, but what is the relation between the two? Is it really so clear that marriage is the reward the heroine deserves because she has learned to be virtuous? Six novels end
in marriage for at least one virtuous heroine, sometimes two, and even Lady Susan ends with a marriage, although “Whether Lady Susan was, or was not happy in her second Choice—I do not see how it can ever be ascertained—for who would take her assurance of it, on either side of the question?” (LS 313). In the Aristotelian framework, the life of an agent is thought to have a telos, an end or goal, and for Aristotle that telos is eudaimonia, often translated as “happiness” or “human flourishing.” Aristotle says that “we have practically defined happiness as a sort of good life and good action.” This way of viewing the ethical life is “teleological,” and it is common to associate “virtue ethics” with teleology.

In contrast to exponents of the teleological view of moral life, Kant in the eighteenth century reformulates ethics as necessary actions having strikingly little to do with happiness; for him the moral life is often achieved only at the expense of happiness. In his view, we are to aim not at happiness, but at moral dignity. His insistence that moral choices be made as if each one could and would be extended as a universal law—“I should never act in such a way that I could not also will that my maxim should be a universal law”—means that the life of the individual is subordinate to the institution of moral law. Austen’s characters, however, experience morality as a positive, if difficult, choice, not as a sacrifice, for even when they do choose to defer or renounce gratification (e.g., Fanny Price in her ascetic mode) it is in the service of a greater good, a Christian good that sustains them, rather than in the sense of irrevocable secular loss.

Alasdair MacIntyre argues that Jane Austen “restores a teleological perspective” in turning “away from the competing catalogues of the virtues of the eighteenth century.” For him, Austen’s heroines accomplish their telos in marriage: they “seek the good through seeking their own good in marriage.” But although marriage certainly has a great deal to do with the pursuit of happiness in Austen’s novels, to imply that her heroines fulfill themselves solely or ultimately in marriage leaves MacIntyre open to charges such as that of Susan Moller Okin, who objects—in relation to MacIntyre’s larger project—that the moral narratives he regards as essential to an education in virtue are problematic in their reliance on gender stereotypes. MacIntyre does not, for example, suggest that Mr. Darcy and Mr. Knightley fulfill their ultimate good through marriage. I disagree with MacIntyre that the telos for Austen’s heroines is marriage, and I also disagree with Okin’s implication that an education in virtue would simply require the heroine to conform to gender stereotypes and submit to the hero’s power.

Judith Lowder Newton argues that Elizabeth Bennet moralizes too much at the end of Pride and Prejudice, and that the reason for this is that...
“marriage requires her to dwindle by degrees into a wife.” However, Elizabeth, treating Darcy after they are married with a “lively, sportive, manner of talking” and making him “the object of open pleasantry” (PP 387–88), has hardly lost her wit or her independent spirit. She does not moralize more at the end of the novel than she did at the beginning, either. Her moral pronouncements early on—“Implacable resentment is a shade in a character”; “And your defect is a propensity to hate every body” (PP 58)—are far more absolute than the things she says at the end of the novel, and toward the end she begins to “wish that her former opinions had been more reasonable, her expressions more moderate!” (PP 376). Moderating excess is not “dwindling”: Elizabeth moralizes less at the end of the novel because she has learned about judgment and ethical fairness, not because she has subjugated her opinion to her husband’s.

Newton’s main evidence for suggesting that Elizabeth is obliged to “dwindle” in marriage is that according to Mr. Bennet, Elizabeth “could be neither happy nor respectable, unless [she] truly esteemed [her] husband; unless [she] looked up to him as a superior.” However, Newton neglects to quote Mr. Bennet’s next line, which is that “Your lively talents would place you in the greatest danger in an unequal marriage” (PP 376). He does not stop at the idea that Elizabeth must see Darcy as her superior, and thus subordinate herself to him; instead, he suggests that any marriage that is not between equals is dangerous. Allan Bloom argues persuasively that this idea means Elizabeth and Darcy must each learn to regard the other as superior, in a complex understanding of both hierarchy and equality. I raise the issue of complex equality in Pride and Prejudice in the context of analyzing moral education because the role of equality is central to my argument about Austen’s work as a whole. For those of Austen’s characters who begin their education in moral knowledge in the course of a novel, marriage may be the goal through which they fulfill their telos. This category would include Emma, Catherine, and Marianne. But the heroines who know how to be virtuous when their novels begin—Elinor, Fanny, and Anne—can be seen as happy in their virtue, if not in their romantic attachments, throughout their histories, and thus not exclusively dependent on their choice of prospective husbands for moral goodness or happiness. The wise marriage may increase that happiness, even exponentially, but it is not the sole condition or end of the practice of virtue. The marriage of Elizabeth and Darcy is one of fulfillment and happiness, and yet both of them, like Elinor, Fanny, and Anne, are obliged to find fulfillment in the exercise of their own independent happiness first.

How do these characters work toward eudaimonia, happiness or human flourishing, and discover the right telos? Plato’s Symposium offers compelling arguments for the role of eros, erotic desire, in ethics. In the first speech,
Phaedrus makes the case for the importance of shame: because we are loath to do something that is shameful in the eyes of the beloved, he says, the fear of shame motivates us to act ethically so as to please the beloved. This speech helps to illuminate Darcy’s reasons for writing his letter of explanation to Elizabeth: because he loves and desires her, he wants to make sure that she does not see his actions as shameful. Frank Churchill, by contrast, has no shame, ridiculing other people and leading Emma to question the relation between Jane Fairfax and Mr. Dixon. Even though Jane is his own beloved and betrothed, he flirts with Emma publicly and treats Jane badly. Later in the Symposium, Socrates reveals what Diotima has taught him about love: instead of simply desiring to avoid shame, she says, what eros wants is wholeness and completeness. Erotic love, therefore, can have as its telos the good. In the initial stages of love, desire may lead us simply to avoid shame, but as love matures, desire moves us to act positively in the service of the good. Eros then becomes the active pursuit of good rather than the avoidance of shame.

The Platonic notion of erotic desire as the moving force behind virtuous action can be useful in understanding Austen’s work, but for her characters it is love more than desire that inspires virtue. Our contemporary expectations of desire in novels may lead us to undervalue the kinds of passion that Austen does explore, and so it is important to recognize that it is the Aristotelian idea of love more than the Platonic idea of desire that motivates the actions of her virtuous characters. The virtue of Mr. Darcy is exercised when he acts to preserve Lydia’s reputation (and thereby Elizabeth’s) from ruin: he is motivated partly by the fear that shame will injure his beloved; yet the higher motive that moves him is the desire to act justly. The dilemma of Lydia’s elopement with Wickham has been possible partly because of Darcy’s own concealment of Wickham’s past actions, and he seeks to restore justice to the injured Bennet family. It is his love of honor that led him to conceal Wickham’s past behavior; it is his love of honor combined with his love for Elizabeth that leads him to bring about Lydia’s marriage. Love and virtue, more than desire, inspire Darcy’s actions. The distinction between acting virtuously to avoid pain and acting virtuously to promote the good is further illuminated by Plato’s other dialogues.

**Practical Versus Philosophical Wisdom**

In the Meno, Plato distinguishes between the philosopher’s virtue and ordinary virtue, and the Phaedo takes up this distinction: Socrates says in this dialogue that ordinary virtue has more to do with the practicalities
of life, whereas philosophical virtue involves wisdom.\textsuperscript{20} Ordinary virtue has to do with avoiding pain in order to increase pleasure: Socrates calls this kind of adherence to principle illusory, and suggests that it is actually a kind of self-indulgence that forces one to be temperate for the sake of later pleasure. Those who possess ordinary virtue “are afraid of losing other pleasures which they desire, so they refrain from one kind because they cannot resist the other.”\textsuperscript{21} Ordinary virtue is practical, and has to do with action. The philosopher’s virtue has to do with the heart and mind, with transcending and mastering fear and desire. Austen’s heroines, particularly Elinor, Fanny, and Anne, tend not to think of their behavior in terms of desire resisted and pleasure postponed, but as a harmonious way of acting under the quotidian and the exigent pressures of their lives. Even for the heroines who are required to further their educations in virtue, making moral choices is all along more a matter of doing what is right than of avoiding what is wrong. Austen’s heroines are more likely to do what is right because it is right, but do they reach philosophical wisdom or greatness of soul? Both Gallop and Fott argue that Austen’s characters do not reach the level of philosophical wisdom because they act within the social world, which has more to do with practical wisdom than with higher philosophical contemplation.\textsuperscript{22} Although this is true of Jane Bennet, Charlotte Lucas, Lady Russell, and Catherine Morland, who all function as virtuous figures as far as the practical realities of moral and social life are concerned, none of them ever thinks beyond these practicalities to a greater good. However, Anne Elliot, Fanny Price, and Elinor Dashwood are already wise and exercise their wisdom, while Marianne Dashwood, Emma Woodhouse, and Elizabeth Bennet learn how to be wise and contemplate higher realities. Marianne does not have adequate time to develop her newfound wisdom, but the potential is there. These heroines possess philosophical wisdom in varying degrees, but as Austen’s mature heroines they are all closer to it than Catherine Morland, even though she was “in training for a heroine” (\textit{NA} 15).

The maturity of the heroine is determined by the extent of her moral education. Moral education, even for the ancient philosophers, was seen as in the service of God. Whether he says it explicitly or not, Aristotle implies throughout his ethical treatises that the contemplation of God and the contemplation of the good are one, and that this is the \textit{telos} of the virtuous person. He describes this role in the \textit{Eudemian Ethics}:

Therefore whatever mode of choosing and of acquiring things good by nature—whether goods of body or wealth or friends or the other goods—will best promote the contemplation of God, that is
the best mode, and that standard is the finest; and any mode of choice and acquisition that either through deficiency or excess hinders us from serving and from contemplating God—that is a bad one.23

And in the *Nicomachean Ethics* he says that “the activity of God, which surpasses all others in blessedness, must be contemplative; and of human activities, therefore, that which is most akin to this must be most of the nature of happiness.”24 The highest virtue is contemplative, and, as I argue in chapter five, Fanny Price is the character who best exemplifies the contemplative life, and who is the closest to philosophical wisdom.

The *telos* for Austen’s virtuous characters, then, is not the achievement of a certain state—that is, as MacIntyre suggests, marriage—but a way of existing in a kind of harmony with life as a whole, whether that harmony has ultimately to do with practical wisdom or philosophical wisdom. In the Cyrenaic school of philosophy, on the other hand, the end of life is pleasure in experience; this attitude is very much a modern one too, and it defines happiness more as a sense of satisfaction achieved than as an ongoing process. Annas argues that we need to study the ancients to learn to “interpret happiness in a more indeterminate and flexible way than we are used to.”25 Richard Simpson accurately describes Austen’s attitude toward the moral life: “she contemplates virtues, not as fixed quantities, or as definable qualities, but as continual struggles and conquests, as progressive states of mind, advancing by repulsing their contraries, or losing ground by being overcome.”26 As Juliet McMaster suggests, Austen “is interested in virtues and vices, but she is more interested in defining the limits of each, in showing just at what point a virtue tips over into excess, or just to what extent a vice may be tolerable or even necessary to redress a balance.”27 Virtue, for those Austen characters who practice it, is a process.

Aristotle says that happiness “is something final and self-sufficient, and is the end of action,” and that human good is “activity of soul in accordance with virtue, and if there are more than one virtue, in accordance with the best and most complete,” and he adds, “‘in a complete life.’”28 Austen suggests that self-sufficiency is part of the equation, as her virtuous characters such as Elinor, Fanny, Anne, or Mr. Knightley, are initially self-sufficient, yet they maintain their virtue by constantly exercising good judgment. For Austen it is both process and goal. Like Plato, Austen sees virtue as something other than the avoidance of vice for the gratification of later pleasure; like Aristotle she sees its goal as a form of happiness, and yet she also sees virtue as more of a continuous process of attaining
happiness, even small degrees of happiness, than as a final end. In contrast to the argument that Austen is morally conservative in a straightforward and inflexible manner, and also in contrast to the notion that she is a revolutionary writer, my argument is that she comes close to hitting the mean. Though she celebrates wise marriage as one of the rewards of virtue, she is aware of the possibilities of virtue for its own sake; and yet her critique of marriage does not lead her to reject conventional life altogether. Questioning the excesses of both conservative convention and radical change, she explores the ways in which her heroines and heroes might reach the center of the harmonious ethical life.

**Practicing the Virtues**

Finding the center or the ethical mean is not a matter merely of moderation, but a question of degree. Virtue consists in action, and Aristotle argues that “no function of man has so much permanence as virtuous activities . . ., and of these themselves the most valuable are more durable because those who are happy spend their life most readily and most continuously in these.”29 Anne Elliot, for example, is quiet, she is reserved, and yet she is not passive. She is happy in the activity of helping others, sharing her strengths in charitable actions and duties such as cataloguing her father’s collections at Kellynch, looking after her nephews at Uppercross, or making decisions in the moments after Louisa’s fall at Lyme. She demonstrates, in addition to her constancy in love for Wentworth, her constancy in her love for her neighbor through virtuous action.

Aristotle admits that virtuous actions seem to require some kind of “external goods” such as wealth, friends, beauty, because “it is impossible, or not easy, to do noble acts without the proper equipment.”30 Prosperity, at least to some extent, would seem to be a precondition of virtue. In the Christian tradition, poverty, loneliness, and ugliness do not preclude virtuous behavior, and sometimes they even make it easier to reach purity of soul, but in the *Ethics* virtue is easier if supported by favorable material conditions. Anne’s old school friend Mrs. Smith is an example of Christian perseverance and hope despite unfavorable conditions, but at the same time Fanny Price’s poor family in Portsmouth exemplifies some of the difficulties of finding the time, energy, or inclination to be virtuous and well-behaved, and it is evident that Fanny’s material condition at Mansfield Park, in concert with her education there, make it easier for her to practice the good life, even the contemplative life.
Austen is interested in both questions, exploring both the Christian ideal of the poor widow giving away her last mite, and the classical ideal of using one’s material circumstances to benefit others.

Aristotle outlines the distinction between intellectual and moral virtue, and describes how we come to be virtuous: “Neither by nature, then, nor contrary to nature do the virtues arise in us; rather we are adapted by nature to receive them, and are made perfect by habit.” The practice of the virtues, like the cultivation of any good habit, involves constant exercise in order to increase adaptability and flexibility: “the virtues we get by first exercising them, as also happens in the case of the well. For the things we have to learn before we can do them, we learn by doing them . . .” As with exercise, music, and other arts, the cultivation of such habits from the earliest stages of life is essential, because “states of character arise out of like activities”: “It makes no small difference, then, whether we form habits of one kind or of another from our very youth; it makes a very great difference, or rather all the difference.”

It is not habit itself that is good or bad, but the kind of habit that is chosen. Intellectual virtue questions the authority of desire and seeks to understand it, not merely to conquer it. Education, whether to good or bad ends, is always the cultivation of certain kinds of habits of body and mind. Exercise and practice make it possible to learn skills and arts; the character, like the body, requires exercise to make it healthy. The importance of education and learning even for those who are already wise is stressed in the Bible in Proverbs 9, verse 9: “Give instructions to a wise man, and he will be yet wiser: teach a just man, and he will increase in learning.” For those who are ready to learn and eager to discern the truth, the habit of learning can lead to an increase in wisdom. Practicing the flexibility of the intellect in education makes the mind more readily adaptable to necessity and contingency. Perhaps Lady Catherine de Bourgh is not so far wrong in worrying about the neglect of the Bennet sisters’ education—though her incivility in expressing this fear publicly can hardly arise from her own complete education in virtue.

What are the circumstances that make possible the cultivation of virtue? Aristotle speaks of “potentiality for virtue”: he recognizes that the power of moral excellence is not all dependent on individual choice, but that it is affected to a large extent by nature and fortune. It is incumbent on the agent, therefore, to practice virtue in a given circumstance to the best of his ability: “For the man who is truly good and wise, we think, bears all the chances of life becomingly and always makes the best of circumstances. . . . And if this is the case, the happy man can never become miserable—though he will not reach blessedness, if he meet
with fortunes like those of Priam.” Thus Anne Elliot, educated by disappointment, learns to make the best of the situations in which she is placed: when it seems that she must accompany her father and sister to Bath, she thinks that though she would rather not go immediately, “It would be most right, and most wise, and, therefore, must involve least suffering, to go with the others” (P 33). It is revealing that while she is in fact concerned with avoiding suffering, she gives pride of place to the reasons of what is “most right” and “most wise”—the “therefore” in her reasoning is telling. Upon her sister Mary’s insistence that she requires Anne’s presence at Uppercross Cottage, Anne readily revises her acceptance of her family’s wishes in order to see Mary’s claims now as a duty, for “To be claimed as a good, though in an improper style, is at least better than being rejected as no good at all” (P 33). Making a virtue of necessity, Anne avoids Bath and will be slightly happier at Uppercross—though her strength of mind would help her to avoid misery and despair in either place. It is divine grace, not effort or fortune alone that makes it possible for an individual to sustain a virtuous disposition.

Distinguishing between virtues that are voluntary and the practice of virtue that involves choice, Aristotle suggests that the voluntary covers a wider range, as children and animals participate in voluntary actions, but choice involves deliberation, not just inclination or appetite. Although Anne is not able to choose where to go, she is free to choose how to respond to her family’s demands. Another distinction is between voluntary and involuntary: “Since that which is done under compulsion or by reason of ignorance is involuntary, the voluntary would seem to be that of which the moving principle is in the agent himself, he being aware of the particular circumstances of the action”; “Further, the doing of an act that is called involuntary in virtue of ignorance of this sort must be painful and involve repentance.”

Ignorance is not an excuse for transgressions against virtue, as “we punish a man for his very ignorance, if he is thought responsible for the ignorance, as when penalties are doubled in the case of drunkenness; for the moving principle is in the man himself, since he had the power of not getting drunk and his getting drunk was the cause of his ignorance.” At the same time, wishing to do good is not enough either. Aristotle says that wishing to be just and wishing to be healthy are inadequate, as to some extent each of these states depends on nature and on choice. Actions that are in our power are necessary for the education in virtue to be effected. While we do not blame those who are weak or infirm or ugly by nature, “we blame those who are so owing to want of exercise and care.” This passage may help to explain Austen’s description in
Persuasion of Mrs. Musgrove’s “large fat sighings over the destiny of a son, whom alive nobody had cared for” (P 68). Many readers have objected to Austen’s criticism of Mrs. Musgrove here, and have either condemned the author for uncharitableness, or comforted themselves by reassurances that she must have intended to revise this passage. But in light of Aristotle’s view of the power of choice in health, wealthy Mrs. Musgrove is judged for excessive eating as well as for excessive grieving. For Anne and Wentworth, therefore, who witness her grief, the virtue of honesty is in tension with the virtue of charity. As Isobel Grundy points out, for Wentworth “the comic resides in the gulf between Dick [Musgrove] in fact and Dick in memory; like Anne, he overcomes the momentary ‘self-amusement’ of his own clearer memory, to offer serious and respectful sympathy to the grieving, misremembering mother.” Sympathy for grief wins out, over truthful assessment of character, as the virtuous action.

By analogy with the body, the action of the soul is judged in the same way: “Of vices of the body, then, those in our own power are blamed, those not in our power are not. And if this be so, in the other cases also the vices that are blamed must be in our own power.” Early in Pride and Prejudice, during her stay at Netherfield, Elizabeth says to Mr. Darcy that she feels some faults are fair game for criticism and laughter, but that she recognizes there are limits to what can be mocked: she says, “‘I hope I never ridicule what is wise or good. Follies and nonsense, whims and inconsistencies do divert me, I own, and I laugh at them whenever I can’” (PP 57). In the Republic, Socrates says that it is idle to think things are ridiculous except when they are wrong. What is wise and good is beyond reproach, just as what is weak or faulty by nature is beyond reproach. But what is faulty by design or neglect is blamable. The art is to learn how to distinguish the differences, and to cultivate good judgment.

The Virtue of Faith

In the Ethics, Aristotle gives some direction about moral education and the development of good judgment. Christian scriptures, however, do not offer explicit analysis of methods for making ethical decisions. In the Old Testament, while the Ten Commandments are obviously fundamental to the subsequent tradition of Judeo-Christian thought about the virtues, there is no Hebrew term that corresponds to virtue. The emphasis is on law and rules, not on modes of ethical choice. As John Barton explains, “What the Bible thinks about is not moral progress but conversion,” and “Hebrew culture differs from Greek on
precisely this issue: the Hebrew Bible does not operate with any idea that one can grow in virtue, but sees virtue as something one either has or lacks.” Although the idea of “virtue” is not explicit in the Old Testament, Barton argues that something like a “virtue ethic” may be implicit; he says he has in mind primarily Old Testament narratives, because “What we have in these stories is exactly that presentation of human beings in all their singularity which has been the subject of several virtue ethicists.” One example, Barton suggests, is the story of David judged by God for adultery with Bathsheba: although adultery is judged as absolutely wrong, “David is not an *exemplum* but a person like ourselves, who illustrates the difficulties of the moral life not by what he teaches but by what he does and is.”

The New Testament includes a number of explicit references to character traits that are particularly appropriate in the Christian life: the Apostle Paul lists traits such as love, joy, peace, longsuffering, gentleness, goodness, faith, meekness, and temperance (Galatians 5:22–23). The most influential biblical passage for Christian thought about the virtues is, quite simply, “And now abideth faith, hope, charity, these three; but the greatest of these is charity” (1 Corinthians 13:13). In his first letter to the Thessalonians, Paul invokes these three when he writes that he remembers “without ceasing your work of faith, and labour of love, and patience of hope in our Lord Jesus Christ, in the sight of God and our Father” (1 Thessalonians 1:3). Thomas Aquinas points to 1 Corinthians 13:13 and Wisdom 8:7 for the lists of the virtues; the latter passage states that wisdom “teacheth temperance and prudence and justice and fortitude.”

The Christian tradition of the virtues, therefore, is the integration of these four cardinal virtues into a system in which the three theological virtues are paramount, and the greatest virtue is love. Uniting the Apostle Paul’s formulation of faith, hope, and charity with the four classical virtues, patristic and medieval scholastic writers from Augustine to Peter Abelard, Peter Lombard, William of Auxerre, and Aquinas analyzed and developed the Christian view of the ethical life in accordance with both reason and divine love.

Because these thinkers relied on the Aristotelian tradition to illuminate the workings of natural reason, Aristotle’s theories are still central in Christian ethics. Jane Austen’s heroines discover the necessity of acting according to reason, but for them reason is always understood in relation to faith, hope, and love. The novels are about judgment and discernment, and heroism in the face of folly, but Austen’s heroines also learn to practice the theological virtues, and the educative power of love in the novels is related in some degree to Augustine’s theory that all the virtues
are expressions of love. Aquinas cites Augustine’s view that “the soul needs to follow something in order to give birth to virtue. This something is God, and if we follow Him, we shall live the good life.” He describes how virtue exists in God before it exists in humans, “so that in God the divine mind itself may be called prudence; while temperance is the turning of God’s gaze on Himself, even as in us temperance is that which conforms concupiscence to reason. God’s fortitude is his unchangeableness, and His justice is the observance of the Eternal Law in His works.” The beginning of virtue may be prudence, but as Aquinas outlines it, the foundation of virtue is faith (1 Corinthians 3:11), because “the imperfect precedes the perfect”: faith and hope have to do with things not yet seen or realized, and thus are imperfect, but “it is by faith that the intellect apprehends what it hopes for and loves.” God’s love is virtue perfected, and the end of virtue is God’s love exemplified in Christ’s sacrifice: as Timothy McDermott points out, “Christian ethics is above all act-centred and end-centred. The act in which it is centred is an act of passion, Christ’s passion, his passover from life through death to a new life.” In the Christian tradition, the greatest virtue is love, and Austen shows how, while it can be difficult to practice charity at the same time as practicing justice, it is not impossible.

Like Aristotle, Aquinas sees the moral and intellectual virtues according to the doctrine of the mean, but he argues that the theological virtues are not in the mean. Cardinal virtues, then, must be balanced, while theological virtues must be all-pervasive. Again following Aristotle, he believes that virtues are best understood as habits. As I discuss in subsequent chapters, Austen sees prudence as primary and faith as foundational and all-pervasive, for both the active and the contemplative life. Summarizing Aquinas’s view of how virtue works in the life of the individual, McDermott writes that “the principles are not present as articulate rules but present as the love of good in the will . . . and in the educated love of good in the virtues.” He concludes, eloquently, that “The human being must become the living argument moved by her virtues and her will to bring herself to action.” McDermott’s phrase offers an excellent way to describe the way Austen’s novels work to illuminate virtue: the very choice of the genre of the novel makes it possible for Austen’s heroines to become “living arguments” for virtue, as they are not case studies, but dramatic examples of the process by which a life may be moved by the virtues and a will may be used to practice prudence and faith, thereby bringing each heroine to action, and some to contemplation. Despite the move on the part of Protestant reformers to downplay Catholic catalogues of specific vices and virtues, and to emphasize
instead a more general sense of the workings of salvation, the influence of the older tradition of Christian virtues and vices persisted in literature and was absorbed and revivified by Austen.48

Medieval scholastic philosophers, such as William of Auxerre, for example, distinguish between the theological virtues as dependent on grace, and the cardinal virtues as political and based on natural law. William suggests that the cardinal virtues serve as preparation for the theological virtues.49 Thus the two traditions may be seen in a dialectical relation: the theological virtues act as a foundation for the cardinal virtues, while at the same time the cardinal virtues prepare us to receive the theological virtues. Aquinas makes a distinction between infused virtues and acquired virtues. The theological virtues are infused, and their aim is union with God through virtue; the cardinal virtues can be acquired, but it is also possible for them to be infused. It depends on the end to which each virtue is directed. Unlike Augustine, who thought that the pagan virtues could not be true virtues, Aquinas grants that the acquired virtues are real, though limited.50 For Austen, the virtue of love is explicitly necessary for fulfillment in the practice of virtue, but one of the reasons that religion is not often explicit in the novels is that for her, for her created world, the foundation of the virtues is faith.

Some of Austen’s reticence about religion in her writing can be attributed to a customary Church of England reserve about spirituality. It is because Christian faith is fundamental to her outlook that it does not need to be debated in her novels. As I suggest in my concluding chapter, novelists later in the nineteenth century were increasingly explicit about religion and faith because for the Victorians, it no longer seemed possible to rely on the common language of the Christian tradition. While Austen’s novels do rely on traditional approaches to ethics, her heroines also question authority, and in this resistance to dogmatic authority Austen may be aligned with Enlightenment thinkers who sought intellectual freedom. Both Austen and René Descartes, for example, would argue that to be grown up means to do one’s own thinking. Descartes does not mention faith in his Discourse on Method (1637), yet despite his skepticism, he presupposes faith. Austen too presupposes faith, though she is not nearly so skeptical and in her quest for intellectual liberty she does not reject custom and habit outright, in the way that Descartes does. For her, there is always a combination of tradition and independent judgment. After Descartes, it is hard to see thinking as something that can be clear, because thought in the Enlightenment consciousness is caught in the subjective. Although Austen does share some similarities with Descartes, her work is not confined by subjectivity. Despite her historical
moment, she writes of heroines for whom thinking is undeniably hard, but definitely not impossible. The reason for this belief in possibilities is that her writing begins from the firm ground of faith. It is in this way that she resembles Dante, Chaucer, and Shakespeare—her critical, ironic, comic, and sympathetic picture of human nature is both more confident and more understanding because it grows out of a tradition of faith and hope in love.

One of Austen’s primary concerns in her novels, therefore, is with how the cardinal and theological virtues proceed from the basis of faith. As I argue in chapter seven, Emma Woodhouse needs to learn about love and charity, but she begins with faith in future possibilities, even if her faith in her own imagination and judgment is overconfident. As I argue in chapter eight, Anne Elliot has had to learn the virtue of hope, even when love falters, and what has enabled her to do this is strong faith. Both Emma and Anne learn these virtues of the will. Love, both eros and caritas, comes for them some time later. For Austen’s mature and maturing heroines, from Elinor and Marianne through Fanny and Elizabeth to Anne and Emma, love is a crowning virtue, just as marriage is a crowning reward. Faith, in education, and in themselves, as an intellectual virtue, added to a fundamental faith in God and in the Christian desire for the good, comes before—even if sometimes just before—love. This is why marriage is not ultimately the telos for these heroines. Faith must be there for the intellectual awakening to the range of virtues they can, and ought to, practice. From that basis, with the aid of prudence, and in different degrees in each novel, these heroines become able to learn and develop strength, fortitude, and hope, with the goal of practicing temperance and working toward justice. Justice and peace are the rewards of virtue, but through grace even these qualities are crowned by love. The difference between most of Austen’s heroines and the heroines of sentimental romances of her time and ours is that for the majority of the latter, love is paramount, while for the former, love is both preceded by and accompanied by faith and the development of the mind.

Austen’s Originality

To demonstrate the uniqueness of Austen’s conception of the flexibility of the virtues, it will be useful to investigate how the tradition of the virtues was reinterpreted in the eighteenth century and the early nineteenth century. As Harriet Guest suggests, at the beginning of the eighteenth century “virtuous femininity is often identified in privacy,
and in freedom from all but pious desires and ambitions, but by the end of the century virtue is identified more closely with industriousness.”51 In Austen’s time, private virtue was now expected to have a public use. By the turn of the nineteenth century, virtue was for the most part seen as something that could be achieved by following a list of rules. Even more specifically, for women, in life and literature, virtue meant sexual virtue, and it was an absolute standard. The other traditional virtues were easily elided, thus creating a monolithic idea of virtue (in the singular) that was meant to hold for all cases.

One of the most well-known writers of the eighteenth century who wrote of and practiced a scheme for virtuous behavior was Benjamin Franklin. Like Austen, he was interested in Pride, the first of the seven deadly sins: he writes in his Autobiography (1793) that “there is perhaps no one of our natural Passions so hard to subdue as Pride. Disguise it, struggle with it, beat it down, stifle it, mortify it as much as one pleases, it is still alive, and will every now and then peep out and show itself.” Franklin concludes this passage by saying that “even if I could conceive that I had compleatly [sic] overcome it, I should probably by [be] proud of my Humility.” His approach to the virtues was systematic: he announces that he “conceiv’d the bold and arduous Project of arriving at moral Perfection.” He conceives of perfection as something to attain, to arrive at, rather than something to work on or practice. Franklin lists twelve virtues that he intends to achieve, adding a thirteenth—“Humility. Imitate Jesus and Socrates”—when a Quaker friend suggests to him that he is “generally thought proud,” and he implements a scheme of focusing on one virtue per week, examining his conduct at the end of every day and recording it in a notebook in order to gauge his success in attaining each of his ideal virtues.52 Franklin’s plan is a worldly one that aims for virtue to be rewarded with success on earth and riches in heaven as well; it has little to do with faith and even less to do with divine grace. Yet it represents a common attitude toward virtue—prevalent both then and now—that sees virtue as a list of authoritative rules to be followed (or not) and as a strict code by which conduct is judged.53

In An Enquiry Concerning the Principles of Morals (1751), David Hume stresses the importance of chastity as a useful virtue—not just one of a list of virtues, either, but the main virtue by which women are judged. He writes of women that

The greatest regard, which can be acquired by that sex, is derived from their fidelity; and a woman becomes cheap and vulgar, loses her rank, and is exposed to every insult, who is deficient in this
particular. The smallest failure is here sufficient to blast her character. A female has so many opportunities of secretly indulging these appetites, that nothing can give us security but her absolute modesty and reserve; and where a breach is once made, it can scarcely ever be fully repaired.

Hume suggests that male honor, on the other hand, can be restored, and fairly easily at that: “If a man behave with cowardice on one occasion, a contrary conduct reinstates him in his character.” And men’s infidelities, too, are not as serious as women’s: Hume says that “An infidelity of this nature is much more pernicious in women than in men. Hence the laws of chastity are much stricter over the one sex than over the other.” Although Hume’s theory of moral behavior includes other virtues as well, it is significant that he stresses a woman’s chastity as the first and most important virtue of her character, without which any other form of virtue is rendered worthless.

Mary Wollstonecraft, in her *Vindication of the Rights of Woman* (1792), criticizes the rule-oriented version of useful virtue as it is portrayed in literature:

For, in treating of morals, particularly when women are alluded to, writers have too often considered virtue in a very limited sense, and made the foundation of it solely worldly utility; nay, a still more fragile base has been given to this stupendous fabric, and the wayward fluctuating feelings of men have been made the standard of virtue. Yes, virtue as well as religion has been subjected to the decisions of taste.

Female virtue is most useful, and therefore, implicitly, most virtuous, when it guarantees that women in the marriage market are sexually pure. Wollstonecraft is here thinking particularly of Samuel Richardson’s novel *Clarissa Harlowe* (1747–48), and she objects that “When Richardson makes Clarissa tell Lovelace that he had robbed her of her honour, he must have had strange notions of honour and virtue. For, miserable beyond all names of misery is the condition of a being, who could be degraded without its own consent!” Instead of being thought of as an action or disposition of character, virtue was conceived of as a state of being that could be acted on by others. Despite the tendency of many writers and much of society to characterize virtue in this way, both Wollstonecraft and Austen resist the idea that virtue is or should be primarily sexual virtue, and they both offer alternatives to conventional
taste. Wollstonecraft rightly complains that even when the existence of other virtues in women is acknowledged or encouraged, they are the passive virtues, or “negative virtues,” of “patience, docility, good humour, and flexibility,” and what she calls “spaniel-like affection.”

These virtues are along the lines of what Hume values as the “softer affections,” which for him include variations on the highest virtue of benevolence, or the ability to be “sociable, good-natured, humane, merciful, grateful, friendly, generous, beneficent.” In contrast to Hume, Bishop Butler writes in his Dissertation: Of the Nature of Virtue (1736) that “benevolence, and the want of it, singly considered, are in no sort the whole of virtue and vice.” For Hume the foundation of all virtue is feeling, and the value of virtue is judged by its usefulness. He writes of utility that it is the sole source of that high regard paid to justice, fidelity, honour, allegiance, and chastity; That it is inseparable from all the other social virtues, humanity, generosity, charity, affability, lenity, mercy, and moderation: And, in a word, that it is a foundation of the chief part of morals, which has a reference to mankind and our fellow-creatures.

Although Hume speaks of virtues in the plural, he advocates a different standard of virtue for women than for men, and while he allows women the “soft” virtue of mercy, he reserves justice apart. This reservation makes it possible then for men to judge the virtue of women based on the criterion of utility. Female virtue is most valued not when it represents a number of excellent qualities, but when it is useful, grateful, and good-natured.

A typical example of the ideal of passive virtue in literature is the heroine of Ann Radcliffe’s The Romance of the Forest (1791), Adeline. Constantly praised for her virtue, Adeline rarely acts, and her virtue is never tested. She is pure and perfect, and acutely sensible to beauty and suffering, but she is not actively virtuous. R.F. Brissenden notes that the problem of representing virtue is the “fundamental flaw” in Radcliffe’s novels, because “the distresses to which the virtuous are subjected are not, in the main, brought upon them by the fact that they are virtuous: the virtue and excessive sensibility of her heroines are used merely for the sake of heightening the horror and ugliness of the situations in which she places them.” Adeline’s virtue is like her aesthetic taste: it is codified by the canons of sensibility. She is the static virtuous heroine of the sentimental novel, and Marianne Dashwood resembles her in many ways; however, Marianne proves capable of practicing the virtues, rather than simply following the rules.
Like Adeline, Richardson’s Pamela Andrews is virtuous from beginning to end: as Mr. B—says of her, “her Virtue is all her Pride,” and as Pamela herself says in defense of her insistence on chastity as the supreme female virtue, “to rob a Person of her Virtue, is worse than cutting her Throat.” Although Pamela; or, Virtue Rewarded (1740) concludes with a list of Pamela’s other qualities, including Kindness, Prudence, Charity, Meekness, and other virtues, which the narrator suggests make “her Character worthy of the Imitation of her Sex,” the novel bears witness that the most important in the list is not Prudence or Charity, but “Her Maiden and Bridal Purity, which extended as well to her Thoughts as to her Words and Actions.” To the narrator’s emphasis on the equal importance of Pamela’s other virtues one might reply, as Pamela does to Mr. B—about his interpretation of her letters, “Well, Sir, said I, that is your Comment; but it does not appear so in the Text.”

Pamela and Adeline preserve their sexual virtue and resist the advances of libertines, Mr. B—and the Marquis de Montalt, whereas Elizabeth Inchbald’s Miss Milner and Eliza Fenwick’s Sibella Valmont are tempted to abandon their sexual virtue and therefore, as Hume predicts of any unchaste woman, their characters and even their lives. In Inchbald’s A Simple Story (1791), Miss Milner is unfaithful even to the husband she loves, Mr. Dorriforth (later Lord Elmwood), and her infidelities lead her, as they do Austen’s Eliza Brandon, into ruin and death. Fenwick’s Secresy; or, The Ruin on the Rock (1795) dramatizes the choice of Sibella to enter into a private marriage contract with her childhood friend Clement Montgomery; like many another libertine in fiction he denies the marriage and she deteriorates in health and reputation, dying shortly after her child is born. While it is true that Austen’s virtuous heroines also value their chastity and, like Adeline or Pamela, avoid the loss of sexual purity before marriage, and while the women who succumb to seduction—or, as in the case of Lydia Bennet or Maria Bertram, even do the seducing themselves—do either risk their lives or at least their reputations, the representation of virtue in Austen’s novels involves many virtues other than passivity and sexual purity.

One of the key points of Wollstonecraft’s Vindication has to do with the education of judgment:

whilst women are educated to rely on their husbands for judgement, this [womanish follies and weakness] must ever be the consequence, for there is no improving an understanding by halves, nor can any being act wisely from imitation, because in every circumstance of life there is a kind of individuality, which requires an exertion of judgement to modify general rules.
Following the rules means relying on the judgment of others rather than judging for one’s self, and slavishly imitating models of virtue. Practicing the virtues, on the other hand, means negotiating situations as individual cases, judging how best to act in those circumstances. This does not mean, however, that the virtues are changable or relative. They are flexible: they are principles rather than rules; they are the basis for reasoning, rather than a preconceived plan of action. In order to practice these principles rightly, one must be educated, so Wollstonecraft’s main point is that women must be educated in order to be virtuous. This is Inchbald’s conclusion in *A Simple Story* as well—the value of “A PROPER EDUCATION”—but in her novel it is first of all education in the service of chastity as an ideal, rather than education that develops the understanding in the service of a broader notion of honor. Faith makes education possible, and moral education is rewarded with love. For Austen’s heroines, one of the most important aspects of education is the development of moral judgment. This chapter concludes, therefore, with an analysis of how judgment works to determine what kind of behavior is most virtuous.

**Ethical Deliberation and Judgment**

In Austen’s novels, ethical deliberation is shown to be a careful process of working toward moral choice. Austen’s heroines learn not to choose hastily. Deliberation is necessary in order to choose the most virtuous thing. The process of deliberation is not infinite, however, because, as Aristotle says, “If we are to be always deliberating, we shall have to go on to infinity.” Since the ethical life has to do with practice and not just with theory, the agent has to make choices. What is an ongoing process for Austen’s most virtuous characters is the necessity of careful, attentive judgment in a series of actions that constitute the unity of the ethical life. As an example of inconsistent judgment, Lady Russell’s determination not to judge Captain Benwick before she sees him is quickly followed by her declaration regarding Mr. Elliot that “‘He is a man . . . whom I have no wish to see’” (*P* 133); thus she exemplifies her prejudices even while she denies them. Anne, on the other hand, carefully weighs the judgments of her father and sister as they praise Mr. Elliot, considers at some length whether or not he can be a sensible man (*P* 140), and although her initial judgment is too quick (ten minutes) (*P* 143), she spends a good deal of time thereafter weighing his merits (*P* 147–48; 160–61), and develops suspicions of his imperfections before his vicious character is
revealed to her by Mrs. Smith as “‘hollow and black’” (p 199). Despite the fact that Anne is obliged to her friend and not to her own judgment for the truth, the point still holds that she has tried to distinguish his character as best she can, though with limited knowledge, and perhaps too much charity.

Because the virtues are “modes of choice or involve choice,” they are not passions, but “states of character.” Like Aristotle, and also the Stoics, Cicero emphasized that virtue is best understood as a disposition to act according to reason; in the Hebrew Scriptures there is a similar focus on interior disposition and character rather than on exterior observances; and both Abelard and Aquinas follow this same line of thinking of virtue as a “stable disposition” toward moral action. As Hermione Lee writes of Jane Austen’s descriptions of disposition, the use of words such as “temper,” “understanding,” and “taste” make it possible to “convey with great care and precision the constant underlying themes of her work, which are that virtues and vices are the result of innate disposition as well as of acquired understanding, that the head and the heart must work together, and that external accomplishments should reflect inner integrity.”

Aristotle defines virtue as that which “will be the state of character which makes a man good and which makes him do his own work well.” This state, he says, is the intermediate state between the excessive form of behavior and the defective form. The intermediate point is determined not by a mathematical formula for equidistance, but in each case it is determined “not in the object but relatively to us.” In moral virtue, the right choice is the one that is appropriate to the person and the circumstances; this does not mean that morality is subjectivity, but that it must be practiced with reference to individual lives, not just abstractions. Aristotle offers the example that both fear and confidence and appetite and anger and pity and in general pleasure and pain may be felt both too much and too little, and in both cases not well; but to feel them at the right times, with reference to the right objects, towards the right people, with the right motive, and in the right way, is what is both intermediate and best, and this is characteristic of virtue.

The virtuous way is the middle way that avoids extremes. Juliet McMaster highlights how this balance works in Pride and Prejudice: she says, “It matters what you say, how much you say, and how well you say it; and also what you leave unsaid. ‘Frankness’, like ‘firmness’ in Persuasion, is
a trait which, ‘like all other qualities of the mind, . . . should have its proportions and limits’ (P 116).”

That there is a plurality of extremes that deviate from the limits of the middle way is important, because, Aristotle says, “it is possible to fail in many ways (for evil belongs to the class of the unlimited, as the Pythagoreans conjectured, and good to that of the limited), while to succeed is possible only in one way.” It is easy to go wrong, and hard to hit the center. We tend to think of virtues and vices as pairs of opposites, as for example, Hope and Despair, Justice and Injustice, Love and Hate. Franklin’s projected book on the *Art of Virtue* (never published) would have included, he says, “a little Comment on each Virtue, in which I would have shown the Advantages of possessing it, and the Mischiefs attending its opposite Vice.” Aristotle says, however, that each virtue has more than one opposite. Each virtue has excessive forms and defective forms. The virtue is the intermediate, perfect state. The reason we fall into seeing opposites is that one of the opposites is more common to human nature than the other.

Aristotle is careful to say that some things are just simply wrong, thus distinguishing his ethical theory and practice from subjective morality. Likewise, Aquinas outlines that some things are always in opposition to natural law. Aristotle says that in the case of some actions and passions, “It is not possible, then, ever to be right with regard to them; one must always be wrong. Nor does goodness or badness with regard to such things depend on committing adultery with the right woman, at the right time, and in the right way, but simply to do any of them is to go wrong.” It is the right kind of actions, at the right time, and in the right way, that constitute virtuous behavior; it is extremely difficult to figure out what these actions and choices are, and yet it is essential to try. The virtuous life is arduous, but the possibility of making the right choices is open.

In her novels, Jane Austen begins with the Aristotelian idea of the mean, and her virtuous characters work to find the mean in a world of extremes and temptations and vices. As I demonstrate in chapters three and four especially, Austen explores the implications of what happens when the virtues come into conflict with each other, and she exploits the dramatic potential of these moments of tension. Here she differs from Aristotle in that she sees virtues in tension with one another rather than as coexisting peacefully. Austen is Aristotelian in her idea of a balance in virtuous action, the varieties of failing, the difficulty of judgment, the problem of hitting the center, the problem of constant vigilance, and the problems of ignorance and involuntary lapses; however, in her reliance on love and hope, and especially on faith, her novels are fundamentally
Christian. MacIntyre thinks it is a weakness of Aristotle’s view of virtue that he does not foresee conflicts among the virtues: he says that “Aristotle’s portrait is at best an idealization and his tendency is always, so it might be said, to exaggerate moral coherence and unity.”75 Austen goes further than Aristotle in exploring the dramatic moments when virtues compete with one another in creative tension. While she sees tensions among the virtues, she also suggests that the unity of the virtues resides in attempts to balance these tensions. In her novels, the virtues are inherited as a relatively complete and harmonious system, but the fact that she is writing fiction means she can do things that philosophers writing treatises cannot: she can take an ethical concept and turn it into a “living argument.”
CHAPTER TWO

Propriety’s Claims on Prudence in Lady Susan and Northanger Abbey

All I wished for, was to breed you up virtuously; I never wanted you to play upon the Harpsichord, or draw better than any one else; but I had hoped to see you respectable and good; to see you able & willing to give an example of Modesty and Virtue to the Young people hereabouts.

—Jane Austen, “Catharine,” Volume the Third (MW 232)

Jane Austen’s only vicious heroine is the eponymous heroine of Lady Susan. Lady Susan Vernon is coldhearted, cruel, scheming, and delightfully wicked. She is lively in the spirit of Austen’s juvenilia, and yet this novella cannot quite be classified with the juvenilia, as it is more accomplished, longer, and more serious even in its ironic humor. It has been argued that Austen abandoned the first person epistolary style of Lady Susan because it had brought her too close to identifying with her transgressive heroine. While this may be part of the reason she changed her technique, it is also true that in the limited omniscient narrative voice she found a way to sympathize with her characters while still maintaining the critical distance from them that was necessary to judge them fairly: that ironic distance is what enables her to create the voices of characters such as Lady Susan, and judge them too, yet without the didactic voice of characters such as Mrs. Vernon, who explicitly condemns Lady Susan.

From the moment Lady Susan first confesses to her friend Mrs. Johnson that “‘The Females of the Family are united against me’” (LS 244), to the author’s prediction for her chances at future happiness that “She had nothing against her, but her Husband, & her Conscience” (LS 313), her
character is clearly in opposition to any accepted model of female virtue and decorum, and her letters throughout reveal her lack of consideration for anyone but herself. Although she makes a pretense of conforming to conduct-book rules of propriety, for her propriety has nothing to do with morality, except insofar as it can help to conceal immorality. Whereas Catherine Morland in *Northanger Abbey* possesses innate virtue and must learn social propriety, Lady Susan appears to be innately selfish, directing all her powers of pleasing in the service of worldly prudence and the sheer love of power. In this chapter, I contrast *Lady Susan* and *Northanger Abbey*, arguing that while both works share a concern with the notion of prudence, Austen’s focus in each is on the varieties of villainy in human nature, more than on the virtues of a heroine, and that her critique of power and of propriety points to her growing concerns about how virtues come into conflict with one another. While Catherine tries to make virtue conform to propriety, Lady Susan tries to make vice conform to propriety.

**Lady Susan and Vice**

Lady Susan’s power derives from the combination of her beauty and her language. Even her hostess at Churchill, Mrs. Vernon, who has reason to mistrust Lady Susan, initially admits that “‘I cannot help feeling that she possesses an uncommon union of Symmetry, Brilliance, and Grace,’ ” even while she is critical of her guest’s conversation: “‘She is clever & agreable [sic], has all that knowledge of the world which makes conversation easy, & talks very well, with a happy command of Language, which is too often used I beleive [sic] to make Black appear White’ ” (LS 251). Lady Susan praises her own conversational skills freely, as she writes to Mrs. Johnson that “‘If I am vain of anything, it is of my eloquence. Consideration & Esteem as surely follow command of Language, as Admiration waits on Beauty’ ” (LS 268). She attributes her ability to attract the young and principled Reginald De Courcy to her language more than to flirtatious behavior: “‘I have subdued him entirely by sentiment & serious conversation, & made him I may venture to say at least half in Love with me, without the semblance of the most commonplace flirtation’ ” (LS 258). It does not hurt that Lady Susan still looks about twenty-five, even “‘tho’ she must in fact be ten years older’ ” (LS 251); nevertheless, it is fascinating to see Austen experimenting with a character whose words are so powerful that they can change even the strongest prejudices. The title of *Lady Susan* was chosen by its first editor.
in 1871; it could perhaps have been called *Prudence*, or if the title had not already been in use, *Persuasion*.

Prudence in this novella is persuasion. It is the strategy of convincing others that what appears to be improper is in fact perfectly explicable and acceptable. Lady Susan takes as her maxim the rule described in Book Three, Chapter Seven of Henry Fielding’s *Tom Jones* (1749): the Author says, “Let this, my young Readers, be your constant Maxim, That no Man can be good enough to enable him to neglect the Rules of Prudence; nor will Virtue herself look beautiful, unless she be bedecked with the outward Ornaments of Decency and Decorum.”³ Lady Susan bedecks virtue and vice alike with beautifying ornaments, and has little trouble passing off her own interpretations of propriety on her brother-in-law Mr. Vernon or on her conquest Reginald De Courcy, and none at all on Sir James Martin. Women, however, find it easier to see through her, although Mr. Johnson and Reginald’s father do so as well. Mrs. Vernon, her mother, and Lady Susan’s daughter Frederica all understand Lady Susan’s way of calculating things, but they have little power to make others resist her, or to persuade her to their own ends. When Frederica does try to run away from Miss Summers’s school in London, she gets only two blocks away before she is captured and obliged to return to her mother. Contemplating this escape, Lady Susan muses that “‘I had not a notion of her being such a little Devil before; she seemed to have all the Vernon Milkiness’” (LS 268). It is clear that she is thinking of Frederica inheriting her devilishness, despite her daughter’s appearance of innocence—thus she implicitly acknowledges her own devilishness.

But she convinces Reginald, for example, that allowances should be made, and that perhaps the general reports of her transgressions are the result of prejudice and slander. He parrots this in his letter to his father, explaining that “‘we must not rashly condemn those who living in the World & surrounded with temptation, should be accused of Errors which they are known to have the power of committing’” (LS 264).⁴ Lady Susan tries to make Mrs. Vernon believe she is sensible to Frederica’s situation, using the rhetoric of acknowledging she knows what she should feel in order to absolve herself of not feeling it: she exclaims to Mrs. Vernon, “‘Do you think me destitute of every honest, every natural feeling?’” (LS 289). Mrs. Vernon is not deceived, but Lady Susan’s pretense of saying the right things does help smooth things over, as propriety obliges Mrs. Vernon at least to be civil to her guest. With disingenuous irony, Lady Susan says at the end of her explanation of her treatment of Frederica, “‘I trust I am in no danger of sinking in your opinion’” (LS 290), while Mrs. Vernon writes that “‘I could have said “Not much indeed;”—but
I left her almost in silence. It was the greatest stretch of Forbearance I could practise. I could not have stopped myself, had I begun’’ (LS 291). Mrs. Vernon’s own sense of propriety urges her not to cross that boundary—it would not be polite, it would not be wise. But would it be prudent on her part? Should she speak openly to her careless, trouble-making guest? Like Edmund Bertram in *Mansfield Park*, she is trying to avoid “Family squabbling [*sic*]” (MP 128), especially as there is a possibility that her brother Reginald might marry Lady Susan.

Lady Susan not only bows to propriety when necessary, but also makes use of propriety to screen her own actions when it is convenient to her to do so. Despite her open flirtation with Reginald, when she wishes to keep him at bay so as to continue her affair with Manwaring, she invokes the claims of propriety in her defense. She writes to him that “‘We have been unguarded in forming this hasty Engagement, but we must not complete the imprudence by ratifying it, while there is so much reason to fear the Connection would be opposed by those Friends on whom you depend’” (LS 300). Retreating behind the modest veil of widowhood, she puts Reginald off with her concern that society would disapprove of their engagement: “‘I cannot forget that the indelicacy of so early a second marriage, must subject me to the censure of the World, & incur what would be still more insupportable, the displeasure of Mr. Vernon’” (LS 300). In each of these sentences, Lady Susan advances propriety as her weapon and then alludes to the financial imprudence of proceeding hastily. Writing to her friend Alicia Johnson to ask her to convince Reginald to leave town, she calls on the social god of propriety once more, entreatying her friend to “‘say all that you can to convince him that I shall be quite wretched if he remain here; you know my reasons—Propriety & so forth’” (LS 302). Writing to Reginald she puts the opinion of the world first, and her financial interest second; writing to Alicia, she stresses, “‘do not forget my real interest,’ ” first—before she refers to propriety (LS 302). As she proclaimed early on in Letter 16 to Alicia, “‘Those women are inexcusable who forget what is due to themselves & the opinion of the World’” (LS 269).

Clearly putting herself first and others second, Lady Susan exemplifies a desire for power. To the extent that she thinks of others at all, it is merely to be interested in what they think about her. She sees Reginald not as a person but as something that amuses her; the only thing she loves about him is her power over him. She toys with the idea of how to punish him for his own proud spirit, saying she is “‘doubtful whether I ought not to punish him, by dismissing him at once after this our reconciliation, or by marrying & teizing [*sic*] him for ever’” (LS 293).
Although she contemplates punishing Reginald by tormenting him for life, she considers death as a punishment for Mrs. Manwaring, simply for being married to Mr. Manwaring. Engaging in contemplation of conspiracy to commit murder, Lady Susan descends even further morally. Because she doubts she could resist an offer of marriage from Manwaring, she hopes that his current wife will meet a speedy end. She encourages Alicia Johnson, therefore, to assist her: “‘This Event, if his wife live with you, it may be in your power to hasten. The violence of her feelings, which must wear her out, may be easily kept in irritation. I rely on your friendship for this’” (LS 308). As the narrator concludes, Lady Susan has no shame.

After Reginald has terminated his connection with Lady Susan, once he has learned of her affair with Manwaring, Mrs. Vernon visits Lady Susan in town to see if she can get Frederica “‘removed from such a Mother, & placed under her own care’” (LS 311). She discovers that Lady Susan has apparently a short memory, or else no consciousness of how much she has been responsible for. Mrs. Vernon “was met with such an easy & cheerful [sic] affection as made her almost turn from [Lady Susan] with horror. No remembrance of Reginald, no consciousness of Guilt, gave one look of embarrassment” (LS 311). Lady Susan is unmoved by guilt, unaffected by conscience, and deaf to the voices of other human beings. She hears only the promptings of her own greed, her own envy, and her own pride.

In *Persuasion*, firmness is shown to be important, but flexibility also proves to be valuable. Lady Susan, however, appeals to her inflexibility as one of the most important aspects of her character. With apparent high-minded seriousness, she writes to Mrs. Johnson that “‘I beleive [sic] I owe it to my own Character, to complete the match between my daughter & Sir James after having so long intended it.’” She asks for her friend's opinion, but stresses that “‘Flexibility of Mind, a Disposition easily biassed [sic] by others, is an attribute which you know I am not very desirous of obtaining; nor has Frederica any claim to the indulgence of her whims, at the expense of her Mother’s inclination’” (LS 294). Like Frederick Wentworth in *Persuasion*, Lady Susan values firmness of mind, but whereas Wentworth learns that firmness is not always a good or even a pragmatic ideal, Lady Susan persists in valuing the power of firmness in the prudent choices she makes, and learns nothing, because she does not believe that she could ever be wrong.

What are the claims of prudence? It is one of the classical virtues, also defined as wisdom, but both words, wisdom and prudence, are complicated in Austen’s time and ours, since in today’s terms prudence is often
thought of as wisdom in financial matters. Lady Susan is courageous in some respects—she is independent, outspoken, and seemingly fearless—but her bravery is directed toward the wrong ends. She is worldly-wise rather than virtuously wise. She loves no one, protects no one, and fights for nothing but her own gain. Her prudence is a mode of survival, but it is questionable whether it leads her to happiness. In the narrator’s Conclusion to *Lady Susan*, Austen says,

> Whether Lady Susan was, or was not happy in her second Choice—I do not see how it can ever be ascertained—for who would take her assurance of it, on either side of the question? The World must judge from Probability. She had nothing against her, but her Husband, & her Conscience. (*LS* 313)

She may not feel the naggings of her conscience very deeply, but even the fact that she recognizes elsewhere what she should feel toward a daughter or a lover suggests that she does have a sense of what is right, even if she feels no shame when she does wrong. Her husband, Sir James Martin, is too ignorant to teach her anything, but she may yet be drawn to reconsider her way of manipulating the world for her own purpose. However, within the confines of the novella, this is one Austen heroine who does not learn anything, least of all about virtue.

**The Problem of Power**

*Lady Susan* is a parody. As Anne Crippen Ruderman argues, the novella “can be seen as a satire on Rousseau’s thesis that ‘to be a woman means to be coquettish, but her coquetry changes its form and its object according to her views.’” Because Reginald is a relatively serious and virtuous character, Lady Susan alters her coquetry to seeming virtue, and seduces him with “‘sentiment & serious conversation’” (*LS* 258). Ruderman acknowledges that “Rousseau would require the woman to be truly, and not just seemingly, virtuous; nevertheless, Austen makes fun of the way in which a coquette obscures the difference.”6 Although Mary Poovey, for example, has argued that the parody is not so obvious in *Lady Susan*, this argument requires so much blindness to the comedy of the novella that Ruderman is right to conclude that “Austen’s most thoroughgoing critique of feminine power is in the portrayal of the heroine of her early *Lady Susan*.” Ruderman argues that Austen “seems to consider such a coquettish woman only fit for a quite funny parody, and then she rejects
female power as a central subject for her mature novels.” While I agree that *Lady Susan* criticizes female power, I disagree that Austen abandons the idea of female power in later novels. Instead, I see the heroine’s pursuit of virtue in these later novels as a quest for a different kind of power. Given that older definitions of *virtue* (or *vertu*) had to do with strength and power, it is important to emphasize that the virtues are moral excellences, and therefore may be seen as more powerful than aggression or manipulation.

Maaja A. Stewart argues that Elizabeth Bennet’s wit recalls *Lady Susan’s* aggressive sexuality, and that Elizabeth’s wit must be subdued because it is a sign of female power. But, as I have argued in chapter one, and as I argue again in chapter four, on *Pride and Prejudice*, Elizabeth does not give up her spirit, her wit, or her power. What she gives up is her folly in misjudging character, which was a misdirected aspect of her power, and certainly not the whole of it. Lady Susan never relinquishes her power, but her kind of power does not make her happy, and it harms others; she is not a model of female assertiveness worth following. Like Stewart, Audrey Bilger argues that transgressive heroines such as Lady Susan pose a challenge to stereotypes of women. She suggests that such characters are “trickster” figures who allow authors to ridicule “the authority of the conduct-book dictates,” and she concludes that “We might even say that the female trickster stands in for the author; after all, a trickster can only be as witty as her creator.” This argument, however, presupposes a simplistic identification of authors with their characters that undermines the power of imagination in fictional creation.

In *Lady Susan*, it is admittedly hard to establish where narrative approval and disapproval lie in the epistolary novel, just as it is difficult to establish a poet’s perspective on a character created in a dramatic monologue, because there is no outside frame of reference against which to judge the voices of characters. But Austen clearly determined that the epistolary novel was not the right genre for the kind of work she wanted to do, and not only did she break off the sequence of letters that comprise *Lady Susan*, she added a Conclusion, with a narrator who analyzes, judges, and mocks the letter-writers. Ironically, the only character for whom the narrator expresses sympathy is Miss Manwaring, who did not write any letters at all: “For myself, I confess that I can pity only Miss Manwaring, who coming to Town & putting herself to an expence [*sic*] in Cloathes [*sic*], which impoverished her for two years, on purpose to secure [Sir James], was defrauded of her due by a Woman ten years older than herself” (*LS* 313). William Galperin argues that although Lady Susan cannot be regarded as a role model, her challenges “to the normative
cultural order . . . go largely unmet in this text,”11 but the very fact that the epistolary narrative is abruptly silenced by the ironic voice of the narrator is a way of meeting those challenges. Austen does not approve of Lady Susan’s variety of prudence, and her disapproval is evident in her loss of interest in the letters, her desire to incorporate the narrative voice of authority, even of ironic authority, and in her eventual focus in her major works on combining the voices of characters with narrative commentary and analysis. Neither the genre nor the heroine of Lady Susan suited Austen’s purpose, which was ultimately moral as well as artistic, and so she abandoned both the genre and the heroine.

The Place of Love

What is absent in Lady Susan is the virtue of love. Lady Susan is prudent in a worldly sense, and she is incapable of love. Her daughter Frederica is able to love, but her story gets short shrift. Frederica seems to be inherently principled, despite her mother’s comment about a touch of devilishness. She rebels against her mother’s decisions because of her own sense of what is right, not because she resembles her mother. Mrs.Vernon writes of her that “‘She is extremely young to be sure, has had a wretched Education & a dreadful example of Levity in her Mother; but yet I can pronounce her disposition to be excellent, & her natural abilities very good’” (LS 273). She concludes that “‘There cannot be a more gentle, affectionate heart, or more obliging manners, when acting without restraint’” (LS 273). Later on, Mrs.Vernon says that she does not fear for Frederica’s principles, even if she were in her mother’s company or under the influence of her mother’s friends (LS 297). Frederica, like Catherine Morland in Northanger Abbey, has natural virtue, not yet molded by either propriety or impropriety, and most engaging when acted out “‘without restraint.’” Frederica and Catherine represent the almost blank slate of human nature—not yet educated in the ways of the world, either for good or bad. Lady Susan’s view of her daughter’s innocence is that it will be harmful to her, especially in love affairs. She writes, “‘Artlessness will never do in Love matters, & that girl is born a simpleton who has it either by nature or affectation’” (LS 274). In contrast, artlessness in Northanger Abbey is seen as a potential blessing in love. One of the main reasons for Henry Tilney’s love for Catherine Morland is that he is taken by her openness and honesty.

As D.D. Devlin argues, Frederica “is another of Jane Austen’s young women who . . . must overcome the faults of their upbringing.” Both
Frederica and Catherine, like Marianne, and even Elizabeth and Emma, are at a starting point in their moral education, and need to engage with the social world and even the world of ideas in order to develop their potential. In *Lady Susan*, Devlin suggests, Austen has discovered for perhaps the first time how she wishes to trace the path by which her heroines come to maturity and insight, and overcome the deficiencies of a bad education. But the tracing is uncertain, partly because it is obscured by the amoral energy and interest of Lady Susan herself, and partly because Frederica and Reginald are too stupid to make Frederica's improvement convincing.¹²

*Lady Susan* is an early example of Austen's investigation of moral education, in which Austen approaches morality through the lens of vice. She satirizes conduct-book virtue and the tricks of the coquette, but she offers little in the way of moral positives. Practicing the aesthetic representation of morality in *Lady Susan*, Austen learns about ways to improve the dramatization of virtue and vice in fiction. Through *Lady Susan* she finds her real story, which is the relation of the as yet unfixed character of the daughter to the fixed but varying vices and virtues of people, including her parents, in the social world around her.

Instead of simply parodying selfish vice, Austen writes about love as moral education, incorporating satire of the folly and vice of secondary characters such as Fanny Dashwood, Mr. Collins, Mrs. Elton, and Sir Walter Elliot into comic stories of serious moral growth through faith, hope, and love. Just as pure virtue can be dull in art, so can uncomplicated vice, and this is why Austen abandons *Lady Susan*, both its heroine, and its technique. Frederica's love for Reginald provides her with the courage to appeal to him to help prevent her mother from marrying her to Sir James, as Devlin suggests,¹³ and I would argue that the power of her love is an early example in Austen's work of how a theological virtue can lead to the practice of a cardinal virtue. However, it is not only love that is missing from *Lady Susan*: the work itself does not represent or offer faith in anything positive. Prudence in *Lady Susan* is present, but it is a calculating kind; the theological virtues are almost entirely absent. Austen's more developed novels focus much more on the benefits and the rewards of virtue. In *Northanger Abbey*, for example, Austen follows the education of her young and innocent heroine and begins to analyze what it means to try to live a good life in the social world.
Catherine Morland, famously, is “in training for a heroine” (*NA* 15). Her mind is “about as ignorant and uninformed as the female mind at seventeen usually is” (*NA* 18). In fact, she is so far from being proud of herself that even her vanity is humble (*NA* 24). She is not clever; neither is she particularly strong. In one passage comparing her ironically with the typical heroine of romance, Austen writes that Catherine is obliged to sit down without a dancing partner because John Thorpe has not yet arrived. For moment, it seems as if her fortitude will be tested:

To be disgraced in the eye of the world, to wear the appearance of infamy while her heart is all purity, her actions all innocence, and the misconduct of another the true source of her debasement, is one of those circumstances which peculiarly belong to the heroine’s life, and her fortitude under it what particularly dignifies her character. Catherine had fortitude too; she suffered, but no murmur passed her lips. (*NA* 53)

Of course, the trial lasts only ten minutes, as Henry Tilney (much better than John Thorpe) arrives shortly. This is a far cry from the sufferings of, for example, the distressed Adeline in Ann Radcliffe’s *The Romance of the Forest*, and nothing compared with the trials of Marianne Dashwood’s fortitude in *Sense and Sensibility*. Catherine does not think much, understand much, or suffer much, and yet she is virtuous.

Unlike Lady Susan, she is capable of genuinely caring for other people. In the course of the novel, Catherine begins to learn the kind of prudence that propriety requires, but the natural courage it takes to be honest and open with others is hers already. Her education consists in learning to balance what society expects in the way of respectable virtue, with what she feels to be right, without sacrificing virtue to propriety. This process is complicated by the fact that although she often senses what is right, she does not necessarily use her judgment to determine if her intuition is correct. And that is where Henry Tilney comes in, to remind her that she needs to think about what is right as well as feel it. Juliet McMaster asks, “Does Catherine need Tilney’s instructions?” and suggests that “He is certainly not the infallible authority she believes him to be, and there is plenty of irony at his expense. In some matters, such as the judgment of his father, she is more right than he is.” She concludes, however, that “Catherine does need Tilney, and precisely in [the] area of
refining her own speech and extending her understanding of others.’”

While Henry does teach Catherine, her honesty and lack of artifice also teach him about the kind of courage that is superior to mere propriety. As was the case with *Lady Susan*, in *Northanger Abbey* Austen satirizes conduct-book propriety and the literature of romances based on this kind of morality.

Near the start of *Northanger Abbey*, Catherine is not “in the habit of judging for her self” (*NA* 66), but she can see that John Thorpe is not entirely agreeable, and with regard to her conversation with him, she “could not tell a falsehood even to please Isabella” (*NA* 67). Her mind may be unformed and her opinions unfixed, but her principles are instinctively good. When she sees Henry Tilney at the theatre following the mix-up about the planned walk with him and his sister, she is drawn to explain and apologize, rather than to play elaborate romantic games by attempting to be mysterious, because “Feelings rather natural than heroic possessed her” (*NA* 93). Henry later comments on her way of reacting to difficult situations: when she acknowledges that she is not excessively distressed to have lost Isabella as a friend, he announces that “‘You feel, as you always do, what is most to the credit of human nature’” (*NA* 207).

Even allowing for the strength of his regard for Catherine at this point, he does not praise her excessively, but urges her to think carefully about her reaction: “‘—Such feelings ought to be investigated, that they may know themselves’” (*NA* 207). Just as Mrs. Vernon judges Frederica to be naturally good, Henry judges that Catherine’s “‘mind is warped by an innate principle of general integrity, and therefore not accessible to the cool reasonings of family partiality, or a desire of revenge’” (*NA* 219).

Catherine’s first explanation to Henry, in the scene at the theatre, about how she came to be driving away with her brother and the Thorpes when Henry and Eleanor were on their way to call for her, tests his reserve and politeness. The directness of her address—“‘Oh! Mr. Tilney, I have been quite wild to speak to you, and make my apologies’”—is a bit much for him at first, as he replies “in a tone which retained only a little affected reserve,” but eventually her openness breaks down his strict adherence to “calm politeness” (*NA* 93) and he engages happily in conversation with her once more. Schooled in the expectations of propriety, he prudently guards his reputation and affections from injury by affecting reserve. But fortunately he is not reserved for long, for, as Mr. Knightley says in *Emma*, “‘One cannot love a reserved person’” (*E* 203). Catherine’s courageous honesty is what Marianne Dashwood aims for in *Sense and Sensibility*, but because Marianne does it consciously, it is less natural. Just as in *Pride and Prejudice*, Darcy must learn to be lively while
Elizabeth learns to be more careful, Henry learns from Catherine’s openness even while he teaches her to be more prudent about social life.

“The Trial of Judgment”

As Henry says to Catherine later, firm adherence to principle is not always a good thing: “To be always firm must be to be often obstinate. When properly to relax is the trial of judgment” (NA 134). Lady Susan is an example of obstinacy; so is John Thorpe. So, for that matter, is Frederick Wentworth. Firmness is valuable to a point, but flexibility is necessary too. Although Catherine usually accepts Henry’s instruction and trusts his judgment (NA 114; 153; 211), she is busy learning to make up her own mind and does not simply adopt his views. She acknowledges in conversation with John Thorpe that “as to most matters, to say the truth, there are not many that I know my own mind about”—but at least she knows that she should probably know her mind, whereas Thorpe replies ignorantly, “By Jove, no more do I. It is not my way to bother my brains with what does not concern me” (NA 124).

Once Catherine’s country walk with the Tilneys is rescheduled, her resolve is tested by the persuasions of her brother James, Isabella, and John Thorpe. The fact that she can resist makes her brother object that she used to be more easily persuaded (NA 99–100), and despite his arguments against her, despite Isabella’s tears, and despite John Thorpe’s angry “if you do not go, d—me if I do” (NA 99), “Catherine felt herself to be in the right” (NA 98). She says firmly, trusting in her own judgment for once, that “If I am wrong, I am doing what I believe to be right” (NA 100). Like Anne Elliot, who decides that she was right to take Lady Russell’s advice even though the advice turned out to be wrong, Catherine sees morality as a matter of acting in character. She chooses to act in the way she believes a virtuous person would act, despite the limits of knowledge and the possibility that her choice may prove to be wrong. Even when John Thorpe resorts to trickery, conveying a spurious message to the Tilneys that Catherine is otherwise engaged, Catherine’s honesty triumphs above her fears, and she quickly follows the Tilneys to their home, bursting in without waiting for the servant to announce her. Again, her directness is irresistibly engaging, as “Whatever might have been felt before her arrival, her eager declarations immediately made every look and sentence as friendly as she could desire” (NA 102). In Northanger Abbey, as in no other novel, Jane Austen gives honesty full credit, above the strictures of propriety, above considerations of protecting her heroine’s reputation.16
After Catherine has explained herself to the Tilneys, she does have some doubts about “whether she had been perfectly right” (NA 103). One of the problems for her here is that she believes that “A sacrifice was always noble”; her doubts arise because she thinks that “if she had given way to their entreaties, she should have been spared the distressing idea of a friend displeased, a brother angry, and a scheme of great happiness to both destroyed, perhaps through her means” (NA 103). The morality of sacrifice is a subject George Eliot brings up in her novels, often suggesting that “All self-sacrifice is good.” But as Austen’s later novels demonstrate, the morality of sacrifice depends on what the sacrifice is for. Peter Geach writes in The Virtues that “self-sacrifice for an evil cause may be mere vice,” and he says that, for example, even “two people’s mutual love may be a living death by mutually inflicted wounds of the spirit.” And even here in Northanger Abbey, Catherine believes that she was right not to sacrifice the good opinion of the Tilneys by following the lead of John and Isabella Thorpe. The tensions between different, competing goods begin to become important in Northanger Abbey, as Austen tests sacrifice against loyalty, honesty against propriety, and authority against natural inclination. Testing honesty against prudence, Austen encounters the complexities of the virtues, and hereafter, with Marianne Dashwood especially, demonstrates that honesty is not always the best, the most virtuous, policy. Catherine is naive, but her misadventures never seriously compromise her. Even when she suspects General Tilney of murder, Henry is the discoverer, debunker, and protector of her secret.

Henry’s speech to Catherine urges her to remember “‘the country and the age in which we live. Remember that we are English, that we are Christians’” (NA 197). Problematic as this speech is in its absolute certainty that for these reasons murder cannot go undetected, it serves as a reminder to Catherine that she needs to judge more carefully and more prudently in future. She is comfortable for the present to conclude that “Among the Alps and the Pyrenees, perhaps, there were no mixed characters. There, such as were not as spotless as an angel, might have the disposition of a fiend,” as in Ann Radcliffe’s novels (NA 200). But Henry has taught her to begin to distinguish shades of gray in characters: “among the English, she believed, in their hearts and habits, there was a general though unequal mixture of good and bad” (NA 200). Having begun an education in Aristotelian ethics, Catherine makes a resolution to act with prudence: “Her mind made up on these several points, and her resolution formed, of always judging and acting in future with the greatest good sense, she had nothing to do but to forgive herself and be happier than ever” (NA 201).
Catherine is convinced that real evil is less likely to be detectable in the characters around her, and therefore that she will have to be more careful about judging the degrees of evil. I agree with Marilyn Butler’s argument that the villains in *Northanger Abbey*, especially General Tilney and John Thorpe, are admirably subtle. Butler writes that “already in *Northanger Abbey* the opportunists find allies where they should properly be most vigorously opposed—among those who uphold only the forms, and not the essence, of orthodoxy.” She concludes, “The pompous but mercenary General is as much implicated as John Thorpe in the pursuit of Catherine’s mythical fortune.” Although Austen focuses much more on the development of her heroine in *Northanger Abbey* than she does on the virtuous Frederica in *Lady Susan*, the major achievement of *Northanger Abbey* is, as Butler suggests, the creation of complex villains. Both the General and John Thorpe are believable as more or less ordinary members of society. They are not so clearly vicious that they are shunned by all rational people. The fortune-hunting greed of both of them, the intemperance of the General, and the foolish and inconsiderate behavior of Thorpe are complicated by the fact that they are generally accepted in society and approved by Catherine’s chaperones, the Allens. That villains can be ordinary people is radical, just as the idea that heroines can be ordinary girls is radical. Both the vicious and the virtuous are shown in all their ordinariness. They are, quite simply, human. Catherine must learn to distinguish between ordinary people who are actively good or at least mostly harmless, and ordinary people whose vices impinge on her own virtue. *Northanger Abbey* shows that villains can be complicated and that novels can be morally serious and bitingly comic at the same time.

Although Austen’s portraits of virtue in *Northanger Abbey* are more developed than those in *Lady Susan*, and her portraits of vice are more subtle, she has not yet identified the balance that she will later discover, of the virtuous character surrounded by varieties of vice, but holding fast to the mean. The story of *Northanger Abbey* is wonderfully satiric, and playfully critiques the conventions of romance and the gothic. However, despite Austen’s insistence on her heroine’s natural, real, and nonheroic qualities, when it comes to virtue, especially the virtue of honesty, Catherine is more like Adeline or other virtuous heroines whose goodness is never in question. She agonizes (sometimes), but she is never shown to be seriously in error, only a little silly and easily led by her imagination. Later Austen heroines will have to think more, struggle more, and suffer for more than ten minutes or one dark night in a scary room.

Catherine is innately good, possessor of elements of courage if not quite yet the prudence necessary to cope with the vicious people she
encounters in social life; Lady Susan is innately wicked, coldly prudent and the creator of her own version of propriety. In *Northanger Abbey* and even more so in *Lady Susan*, Jane Austen focuses on varieties of vice. In her later novels, the portrayals of virtuous and vicious characters are both strong. Beginning with Marianne Dashwood, Austen's other heroines are neither all good nor all bad, as she incorporates aspects of both Lady Susan and Catherine into her later work. The figure of Catherine predominates as the pattern of natural virtue, but there is still a mixture, as Marianne, Elinor, Elizabeth, Fanny, Emma, and Anne exist in a world where original sin is also part of human nature. Unlike the world of *Lady Susan*, however, the worlds of *Sense and Sensibility*, *Pride and Prejudice*, *Mansfield Park*, *Emma*, and *Persuasion* are places in which virtue can triumph over sin.
CHAPTER THREE

Sense and Sensibility: “Know Your Own Happiness”

. . . summon up all the fortitude you possess, for Alas! in the perusal of the following Pages your sensibility will be most severely tried.


Early in Sense and Sensibility Marianne Dashwood says she believes that her sister Elinor’s theory of behavior requires that one follow the rules of respectability. Marianne reveals that she has thought Elinor believed it right “‘to be guided wholly by the opinion of other people. I thought our judgments were given us merely to be subservient to those of our neighbours,’ ” she says to her sister, “‘This has always been your doctrine, I am sure’ ” (SS 94). Some readers ascribe a similar theory to Austen as well as to Elinor.¹ A number of critics argue instead that there is a more complex relationship in Sense and Sensibility between the natural affection and spontaneity of sensibility and a strict, conservative, rule-following version of sense, and some suggest that Austen is critical of conventional codes of rules.² Those who do read the novel as conservative, however, tend to accept Marianne’s view of Elinor’s rules as the dominant and triumphant code, interpreting the ending and Marianne’s marriage to Colonel Brandon as a sacrifice of passion to the expectations of conservative society.³ Although Elinor is generally careful, calm, and conservative in her behavior, she does not obey social decorum rigidly or unthinkingly, and she defends what Edward calls her “‘plan of general civility’ ” by insisting that “‘My doctrine has never aimed at the subjection of the understanding. All I have ever attempted to influence has been the
behaviour. You must not confound my meaning’ ” (SS 94). She hopes Marianne will behave with civility, politeness, and decorum to their acquaintance, but not at the expense of her independence of mind or her abilities to judge the character, understanding, and behavior of others.

In contrast to critics who see either Elinor or her creator as an inflexible conservative, I argue that while Elinor’s “plan of general civility” does in general have the author’s approval, it is not a rigid code. The relationship between sense and sensibility is complex, and this complexity is most evident in the novel in tensions between the virtues of amiability and honesty, which may be understood as aspects of charity and justice. This chapter examines the consequences of different ways of dealing with those tensions, in order to argue that Austen’s focus in this novel is the virtue of fortitude. Balancing amiability and honesty in the right way requires strength. Sense and Sensibility is a novel of classical balance and harmony, yet there are persistent reminders of the necessity of atonement for deviations from that balance, in order to maintain harmony. In fact, the practice of fortitude in the novel is shown to be incomplete without grace. Although the very title has led some readers to interpret the novel as something of a treatise on the virtue of temperance, in which excess of sensibility is reformed by rigorous self-denial into sense, it is fortitude, not temperance, that is the focus of Sense and Sensibility—fortitude that requires discipline to be sure, but that also makes it possible for genuine good nature, amiability, and honesty to be fully exercised in the pursuit of living a happy life.

In Sense and Sensibility the virtues that come under Austen’s most intense scrutiny are the social virtues of amiability, tact, and honesty; the heroic virtue of fortitude; and the Christian virtues of love and faith. This is not to say that other virtues (such as temperance) do not come into play, but only that these are among the most prominent. Whereas in Lady Susan, Austen’s focus is on a handful of vices and on the perversion of the virtue of prudence, and in Northanger Abbey her emphasis is on beginning to practice prudence, in Sense and Sensibility she explores a wider variety of virtues. She also shows how a classical virtue, fortitude, can be learned, and how it can be understood in Christian terms. In this novel, virtue is not simply conceived of as chastity, regardless of Colonel Brandon’s highly conventional opinion of female virtue. Chastity as a virtue is implicit in all the novels, but as I discuss at greater length in chapter seven in my analysis of Persuasion, Austen values its concomitant virtue constancy, the enduring loyalty of the mind and heart, above the mere regulation of sexual conduct. In Sense and Sensibility, as in Northanger Abbey, the process of learning appropriate social behavior is essential to the education of the understanding.
The Social World

As Elinor reminds Marianne, living in the social world requires that we behave well to our neighbors—in Christian terms, that we love our neighbors as ourselves. *Sense and Sensibility* dramatizes the struggle to love neighbors who are rude, vulgar, senseless, or unprincipled, as well as those who are kind, thoughtful, and sensible, even while remaining true to one’s own standards, intelligence, and honor. In loving one’s neighbor, there is an inherent tension between respect and affirmation; that is, it is difficult to draw the line between being polite and sympathetic to someone, and being complicit with that person’s behavior. The danger is that one can enable the other person to continue with destructive actions if one affirms detrimental behavior and appropriate behavior indiscriminately. While sympathy can be a great virtue, allowing one to share in and ideally to alleviate the sufferings of another, it must be tempered by judgment so that one does not affirm good and evil equally. Social behavior in Austen’s novels, then, requires the constant exercise of judgment in order to achieve the right relation of civility to integrity. The Aristotelian terms for the virtues of social intercourse are friendship, truthfulness, and ready wit or tact, all of which appear frequently in Austen’s novels as she examines what it might mean to be virtuous in the social world.

Being virtuous and being in the world are often set up as contradictory states. In the Christian tradition, Thomas à Kempis’s *The Imitation of Christ* articulates the ideal “That it is sweet to despise the world and to serve God,” but he recognizes that “it is not granted to all to forsake all things, to renounce the world, and to assume the monastic life.” In Book 14 of *The City of God*, St. Augustine defines the distinction as one between two cities, the city of those who live for the flesh and the city of those who live for the spirit; while “the one seeks glory from men,” “the greatest glory of the other is God, the witness of conscience.” To be virtuous is to obey God and conscience; to be worldly is to seek gratification in earthly things as ends in themselves. However, the virtue of those who live for the spirit is not necessarily limited to those in holy orders, but is a choice available to all. Virtue does not necessarily demand isolation from the world: Augustine after all writes of “the city of God as it sojourns in this world.” There are earthly, human virtues, which are practiced in the world, and also divine virtues, which lift the soul into the city of the spirit. In *Areopagitica* (1644), Milton writes that “the knowledge and survey of vice is in this world so necessary to the constituting of human virtue, and the scanning of error to the confirmation of
truth.” Austen would concur that it is necessary to survey vice, if not to know it. In order to discriminate between vice and virtue one must be educated to recognize each of them; otherwise it is difficult to maintain virtue that is in and yet not of the world. In Austen’s novels moral education is important precisely because it can be so difficult to distinguish the subtleties of vices and virtues.

Colonel Brandon places a high value on the “‘amiable’” aspects of the “‘prejudices of a young mind;’” that is, Marianne’s mind. Elinor, however, talks to him about what she feels to be the dangers and “‘inconveniences’” of “‘systems [that] have all the unfortunate tendency of setting propriety at nought,’” and she stresses that “‘a better acquaintance with the world is what I look forward to as her greatest possible advantage’” (SS 56). Elinor’s choice of the word “acquaintance” here is significant, as “knowledge” of the world may suggest something more like immersion in its ways. As Edward Ferrars later assesses his own predicament, his early engagement to Lucy Steele—“‘a foolish, idle inclination’”—is “‘the consequence of ignorance of the world—and want of employment.’” Edward chooses his words judiciously when he describes how his error might have been avoided: he says that “‘mixing more with the world,’” as he would have done had he had a profession, would have been good for him (SS 362). “Mixing” implies more contact than “acquaintance,” but it still suggests a way of living in the world while not being wholly of the world. The consequence of a too-early friendship with or even worship of the world is exemplified by Willoughby’s independence at a young age and the “consequent habits of idleness, dissipation, and luxury”：“The world had made him extravagant and vain—Extravagance and vanity had made him cold-hearted and selfish” (SS 331). The world is at fault for wooing Willoughby early and late, and as Elinor later observes of the rake’s progress, “all Willoughby’s difficulties have arisen from the first offence against virtue. That crime has been the origin of every lesser one, and of all his present discontents” (SS 352). The seemingly irreversible progress of Willoughby’s descent into vice following his first offence against virtue suggests that his immersion in the world makes it next to impossible for his honor to be restored—this is in contrast to Hume’s theory that a man’s virtue can be more easily redeemed. Thus Austen’s fiction might be seen as opposing Hume’s double standard of virtue. Willoughby’s vice is selfishness, or worldliness: like Mr. Elliot in *Persuasion*, for whom “‘To do the best for himself,’ passed as a duty” (P 202), “‘His own enjoyment, or his own ease, was, in every particular, his ruling principle,’” says Elinor (SS 351).
The way to avoid worldly sins, Austen suggests in *Sense and Sensibility*, is not by shunning the world entirely and thus risking ignorance, but by “acquainting” one’s self with the world in order to recognize folly and danger. Austen, like Milton, “cannot praise a fugitive and cloistered virtue, unexercised and unbreathed.” Learning to distinguish what is good in the world is a part of education. As Lady Howard puts it in Frances Burney’s *Evelina* (1778), “When young people are too rigidly sequestered from it [the world], their lively and romantic imaginations paint it to them as a paradise of which they have been beguiled; but when they are shown it properly, and in due time, they see it such as it really is, equally shared by pain and pleasure, hope and disappointment.”

While Fanny Price’s solution to the preservation of virtue—at least initially—may have more to do with isolation from worldly influence and contamination, Elinor Dashwood’s view is that with the right kind of education it is possible to be virtuous in the social world, even in a society where the behavior of those around her often seems antithetical to virtue. Social virtue provides the basis for choosing how to behave well: as Ben Jonson says of the study of poetry, it offers “a certain rule, and pattern, of living well, and happily; disposing us to all civil offices of society.” Seeing the social virtues as a pattern may be a more useful analogy than seeing them as a rule: rules may be made to be broken, but patterns are more likely to be altered to fit. Social virtues may be like patterns for sewing: properly tailored for the individual and the occasion, they will allow for the garment to fit comfortably, but mass-manufactured according to identical standards they are unlikely to be universally appropriate.

### The Virtue of Amiability

Austen is interested in how rules and categories and patterns of virtue are fitted to the person and the moment, and she explores the social virtues that Aristotle defines as friendship, honesty, and tact. Friendship, or amiability, is an especially interesting virtue: Aristotle says he has no name for it—there was no precise Greek word for what he was trying to describe, and he uses the word *philia* as the closest approximation. “Amiability” is Austen’s term. She values amiability highly, even more highly than Aristotle does, and in her representation of all three of these virtues she goes beyond narrow definitions of the terms: this is one of the ways in which she extends tradition. It is not the virtues that she makes broader—she is not suggesting that the target be widened or the
standards be lowered—but the exploration of the ways they work or don’t work. Manners and tact for her are more important than they are for Aristotle because they provide an indication of the morality they represent or conceal.

The excess of amiability is obsequiousness, sometimes accompanied by self-serving motives, and the defect is cantankerousness or unmannery behavior. In *Sense and Sensibility*, Lucy Steele is obsequious—as she herself might describe someone, “excessively amiable” or perhaps “prodigiously polite”—while Mr. Palmer is cantankerous. Both the Miss Steeles are excessive in their amiability toward Lady Middleton:

> With her children they were in continual raptures, extolling their beauty, courting their notice, and humouring all their whims; and such of their time as could be spared from the importunate demands which this politeness made on it, was spent in admiration of whatever her ladyship was doing, if she happened to be doing anything, or in taking patterns of some elegant new dress, in which her appearance the day before had thrown them into unceasing delight. (SS 120)

Mrs. Jennings, Sir John Middleton, and especially Charlotte Palmer, are also excessively good-natured. Mrs. Jennings praises people indiscriminately, inconsistently, and excessively—she fits Madame Duval’s description of the French in *Evelina*: “They don’t make no distinctions at all,’ said she; ‘they’re vastly too polite.’ ” Sir John’s interest in merry parties leads him to pressure others to join him; however, his superabundance of good spirits is often made more acceptable because of his kindness. When he cordially but ironically insists that the Dashwoods dine at Barton Park every day until they feel at home in Barton Cottage, “though his entreaties were carried to a point of perseverance beyond civility, they could not give offence,” because he is so friendly and generous (SS 30).

In the more serious question of whether or not Marianne is engaged to Willoughby, Mrs. Dashwood also is too kind to be prudent and ask her daughter the truth, and thus her desire to be generous and amiable to Marianne exceeds her wish to protect her: “Elinor thought this generosity overstrained, considering her sister’s youth, and urged the matter farther, but in vain; common sense, common care, common prudence, were all sunk in Mrs. Dashwood’s romantic delicacy” (SS 85).

Edward Ferrars, though often criticized as a dull or flat character, is more complex than the caricatures that comprise the characterization of Mrs. Jennings, Sir John, or even Mrs. Dashwood, because his amiability is
in tension with his honesty. To Marianne it is certain that his character is “‘very amiable’” (SS 17), and for Mrs. Dashwood it is enough that “he appeared to be amiable” (SS 15). The narrator tells us that “his behaviour gave every indication of an open affectionate heart” (SS 15), but in the course of events it becomes clear that his natural tendencies toward affection and amiability are hindered by the secrecy with which he is obliged to conduct the engagement of which he is already so weary. Edward is amiable, but he is not completely honest and open.

Lady Middleton’s inattention and even insensibility to all but her own children and her own pleasure mean that she lacks amiable qualities. That virtue can be a matter of degree, however, is demonstrated by Elinor’s relief at Lady Middleton’s “calm and polite unconcern” after Marianne is rejected by Willoughby—her policy of civil noninterference here outshines the “clamorous kindness of the others,” and the narrator tells us that “Every qualification is raised at times, by the circumstances of the moment, to more than its real value; and [Elinor] was sometimes worried down by officious condolence to rate good-breeding as more indispensable to comfort than good-nature” (SS 215). This remark suggests two things about Austen’s views on virtue: while virtue may be perceived in degrees, it does have a “real value,” and while even though both Elinor and her creator value good breeding highly, and may find that it is more indispensable to comfort than good nature is, apart from good nature the value of good breeding is questionable.

Although a number of critics have argued that Elinor’s good nature is deficient or even repressed,11 her engagement with the joys and sorrows of others, especially Marianne, and her deep love for her family and for Edward indicate otherwise. Elinor regulates her behavior, but this does not mean that her temper is dull or her understanding is limited. That is true of Lady Middleton, who is all politeness and no spirit, but it is not true of Elinor.12 For the Middletons, social life means entertainment: “Continual engagements at home and abroad . . . supplied all the deficiencies of nature and education; supported the good spirits of Sir John, and gave exercise to the good-breeding of his wife” (SS 32). Elinor is not unamiable; in fact, she is the character in the novel who best exemplifies the union of good nature and good breeding. It is not the case that Elinor needs to learn Marianne’s sensibility as much as Marianne requires an education in common sense. From the start Elinor possesses a keen sensibility, if not to the beauties of dead leaves (SS 88), then to the feelings, pain, beauty, and also the selfishness of the characters around her. Her sensibility may have more to do with truth than with the beauty of nature, but her temper is amiable and her breeding is refined.
True amiability involves civility to family, friends, and strangers, according to their due. This is not to say that self-interest is involved in assessing what is due to others—if it were, Elinor would be obliged to be more polite to Mrs. Ferrars—but that the amount of attention paid must be appropriate to the circumstances. Discerning what is appropriate requires education and understanding. Some people, for example, fawn unnecessarily and insincerely over strangers—this is excess, and amiability means judging how much attention is warranted to satisfy civility. Before taking up the question of what it is that makes Elinor amiable, and the question of what constitutes fortitude, I want to explore what happens in *Sense and Sensibility* when amiability comes into conflict with the virtue of honesty.

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**Sincerity and Spontaneity**

Marianne’s love of truth and sincerity is well known. Presumably this love should lead her to the practice of the virtue of truthfulness, but it also leads her into transgressions against amiability, making it difficult for her to be in charity with her neighbors. Although she believes she is acting spontaneously and naturally in each situation, she is in fact following her own system of rules: as Susan Morgan suggests, “The conventions of sensibility, far from representing a mode of spontaneous and open response to the events and people of Marianne’s life, are a means of predetermining truth, of dictating judgment and behavior.”

Alistair Duckworth argues that Marianne’s sensibility is not simply a matter of fashion, because she values sincerity and detests the jargon of the picturesque, but even her revelation that “’sometimes I have kept my feelings to myself, because I could find no language to describe them in but what was worn and hackneyed out of all sense and meaning’” (SS 97) shows a reliance on conventions of sensibility that require originality in all things. Marianne’s devotion to her ideal of honesty—she proclaims to Elinor at one point (SS 170) that she conceals nothing (nothing, that is, except the fact that there is no secret about Willoughby)—and her unwillingness to qualify her language with the forms of politeness mean that she cannot be amiable to her hostesses, Lady Middleton and Mrs. Jennings. When Lady Middleton proposes cards during one of the Dashwood sisters’ visits at Barton Park,

No one made any objection but Marianne, who, with her usual inattention to the forms of general civility, exclaimed, “Your
ladyship will have the goodness to excuse *me*—you know I detest cards. I shall go to the piano-forté; I have not touched it since it was tuned.” And without farther ceremony, she turned away and walked to the instrument. (SS 144)

Lady Middleton is offended, and Elinor is obliged to smooth things over. Elinor’s civility here both placates her hostess and produces an opportunity to speak to Lucy alone, and she “thus by a little of that address, which Marianne could never condescend to practise, gained her own end, and pleased Lady Middleton at the same time” (SS 145). Marianne sees civility as inferior to openness and sincerity, but her rejection of propriety means that she retains her sincerity at the expense of tact, and therefore offends or injures other people.

Elinor notices in Willoughby a similar lack of tact, “a propensity, in which he strongly resembled and peculiarly delighted her sister, of saying too much what he thought on every occasion, without attention to persons or circumstances” (SS 48–49). The crucial difference between Marianne and Willoughby, however, despite the similarity in the openness and professed sincerity of their opinions about landscapes and taste, but especially about people they dislike, is that “Marianne abhorred all concealment where no real disgrace could attend unreserve” (SS 53); that is, she is conscious of the real dangers of unreserve but believes she avoids them. Although we are told that “Willoughby thought the same” (SS 53), the later actions of both illustrate that Marianne learns to value the benefits of reserve when concealment is appropriate, whereas Willoughby simply regrets that his own secrets did not remain concealed for longer, or forever. The qualification on Marianne’s dislike of concealment provides an interesting contrast with Mr. Darcy’s vehement avowal that “‘disguise of every sort is my abhorrence’” (PP 192) in the aftermath of his first proposal to Elizabeth: both Marianne and Darcy later discover that there are times when concealment may be appropriate, but in the first revelations of their opinions on the subject it is Marianne who is said to be more aware of the possible consequences of concealment, while Darcy is much more extreme in his rejection of all disguise. This contrast is instructive because it revises the commonplaces of Austen criticism that Darcy is reserved and proud, not open, and that Marianne is romantic, open, intemperate, and oblivious of all consequences.

Marianne does not foresee all the potential disgraces of incivility, however, and refuses to be polite to Mrs. Jennings even when she owes her hostess her gratitude. When the sisters are traveling to London with Mrs. Jennings, although “Mrs. Jennings on her side treated them both
with all possible kindness,” Marianne, who finds her hostess vulgar, “sat in silence almost all the way, wrapt in her own meditations.” As usual, “To atone for this conduct therefore, Elinor took immediate possession of the post of civility which she had assigned herself, behaved with the greatest attention to Mrs. Jennings, talked with her, laughed with her, and listened to her whenever she could” (SS 160). As with attitudes on their journey to London, so too with the desire to leave the city: Marianne, once rejected by Willoughby, wishes to leave immediately for Barton to be with her mother, yet Elinor recognizes that “‘We owe Mrs. Jennings much more than civility; and civility of the commonest kind must prevent such a hasty removal as that’” (SS 191). Although Marianne’s behavior in the second situation is much more understandable, and in both instances she may be true to herself and to her own feelings, her honesty impinges on her responsibilities toward others. Following her own rules, she offends not merely against politeness and decorum, but against the virtue of amiability. For her the virtues and the passions are conflated, as she believes it is virtuous to be passionate.

Marianne may be said to follow the philosophy of David Hume in that she sees sentiment as the cause of all that is noble. Hume writes that “What is honourable, what is fair, what is becoming, what is noble, what is generous, takes possession of the heart, and animates us to embrace and maintain it.” In contrast to the uplifting powers of sentiment, he argues, reason is cold and reserved, not capable of inspiration: he continues, “What is intelligible, what is evident, what is probable, what is true, procures only the cool assent of the understanding; and gratifying a speculative curiosity, puts an end to our researches.” In his use of biblical language that echoes Philippians 4:8—“Finally, brethren, whatsoever things are true, whatsoever things are honest, whatsoever things are just, whatsoever things are pure, whatsoever things are lovely, whatsoever things are of good report; if there be any virtue, and if there be any praise, think on these things”—Hume revises tradition to demote truth. Whereas the Apostle Paul emphasizes that Christians should contemplate “whatsoever things are true,” Hume privileges honor and nobility of sentiment above truth and reason. He acknowledges the argument that virtue is conformity to reason, but argues that it is passionate feeling, not reason, that compels people to pursue virtue.

Marianne’s strong sentiments, however, do not always lead her to virtue. In fact, it is possible that she is guilty of an excess of truthfulness; that too much honesty is not virtuous. Aristotle outlines the main deviations from truthfulness as boasting and false modesty, but because the ways of failing to satisfy the mean are unlimited, surely two more ways of deviating
from this virtue are rudeness, an excess of honesty at the wrong time, toward the wrong person (and so on), and falsehood, simply not being truthful. At the risk of sounding too much like Mary Bennet, let me suggest that boasting and false modesty have to do with our estimation of ourselves; rudeness and falsehood have to do with how we treat others. The question of false modesty or boasting does arise in *Sense and Sensibility*, but it does not appear to be as much of a problem for Austen’s heroines as the variations of rudeness and falsehood are: Edward points out that Marianne “‘knows her own worth too well for false shame’” (SS 94), and neither Marianne nor Elinor is inclined to self-promotion. Austen, like Aristotle, values truthfulness, not modesty, as the virtuous mean in this case. In contrast to the extremes of boasting and false modesty, truthfulness provides a correct estimation of one’s own worth. Modesty, with its conduct-book connotations of sexual purity, bashfulness, and shame, is not a virtue.18

Marianne’s excessive honesty hurts her fellow creatures; Elinor, on the other hand, whose sensibility toward the feelings of others is in fact much stronger than Marianne’s, finds it necessary to lie in certain circumstances, in order to avoid incivility, and in order to remain amiable. Here is where virtue in Jane Austen’s writing becomes truly interesting: it is not only not passive, as it is for Radcliffe’s heroines, but it is tested—tested not simply against temptations and vices, as it is for Richardson’s heroines, but against other virtues. Honesty comes into conflict with amiability. When the decidedly unamiable Mrs. Ferrars praises Miss Morton’s “‘style of painting’” instead of Elinor’s screens and Marianne protests rudely but sincerely, “‘what is Miss Morton to us?—who knows, or who cares, for her?—it is Elinor of whom we think and speak’” (SS 235). Elinor is hurt by the warmth of this outburst, “but Colonel Brandon’s eyes, as they were fixed on Marianne, declared that he noticed only what was amiable in it, the affectionate heart which could not bear to see a sister slighted in the smallest point” (SS 236). Brandon is a partial observer, but it is true that there is something amiable in Marianne’s intentions; however, the effect on others around her, including, most importantly, her sister, is that she has been rude in being too honest.

Elinor, as many readers have noticed, is the virtuous heroine who has to tell lies. R.F. Brissenden argues that Elinor’s “commitment to decorum,” though understandable, is not commendable, as it “leads her astray.” Brissenden thinks Elinor “is rather too ready to follow the apparently easier and wiser paths of polite prevarication,” but this conclusion does not do justice to the struggles Elinor endures in deciding how to behave to others. It is not easy to be civil to everyone. It is a good
question, however—how can we reconcile virtue with the necessity of lying in polite society? How, indeed, does Elinor do so, for surely she is aware of what she is doing? There are many places in the novel where Austen draws attention to Elinor’s attitude toward politeness. She is obliged to respond somehow to Lucy Steele’s inordinate praise of Sir John and Lady Middleton, because “Marianne was silent; it was impossible for her to say what she did not feel, however trivial the occasion; and upon Elinor therefore the whole task of telling lies when politeness required it, always fell” (SS 122). She does her best to say the right thing, “speaking of Lady Middleton with more warmth than she felt,” and then offering a “simple and just” commendation of Sir John when Lucy calls him charming (SS 122). But while she is not being entirely honest here, neither is she being obsequious, as Lucy is in her excessive and self-interested praise of her newfound patrons. And she does not simply smile and agree with everything Lucy says: when Lucy turns to praise the children, saying that she dotes upon them, Elinor sees her chance to respond to the second part of the statement rather than the first, and says, “‘I should guess so... from what I have witnessed this morning’” (SS 122). Thus, although she must deviate a little from truthfulness, she does not lie any more than she has to.

Elinor’s politeness is a sign of her concern for others, and yet her sympathy does not get the better of her judgment. When she is left to explain to Colonel Brandon why Marianne flees the room upon his arrival, he asks if her sister is ill, and she “answered in some distress that she was, and then talked of head-aches, low spirits, and over fatigues; and of every thing to which she could decently attribute her sister’s behaviour” (SS 162). This happens before Marianne receives Willoughby’s last letter, well before she becomes really ill, but Elinor is able to use Marianne’s heightened anxiety and low spirits to meet Brandon’s expectations, and to conceal, civilly, that Marianne does not want to see him because he is not Willoughby. When Charlotte Palmer asks Elinor “whether she did not like Mr. Palmer excessively,” Austen gives this response: “‘Certainly,’ said Elinor, ‘he seems very agreeable’” (SS 114). Now, while saying of a man whose “studied indifference, insolence, and discontent” she has already observed (SS 112) that he seems “very agreeable” is a polite lie to his wife, the punctuation of the remark means that Elinor is able to give her own judgment in a concealed way: “Certainly,” followed by a semicolon, may be read as the answer to “whether she did not like Mr. Palmer excessively,” not the first confirming part of “he seems very agreeable”; that is, certainly she does not like him excessively. And how could she? Elinor tries not to do anything excessively—why would she find a cantankerous man to be certainly agreeable?
Many times in the novel she avoids speaking altogether and, unless she is obliged to give an answer, simply refrains from either politely agreeing with or rudely opposing someone. This tension between silence and speech happens frequently in conversations with Lucy—“Elinor wished to talk of something else, but Lucy still pressed her to own that she had reason for her happiness; and Elinor was obliged to go on.—”; “To this, Elinor had no answer to make, and did not attempt any” (SS 239)—or with her mother—“Elinor could not remember it;—but her mother, without waiting for her assent, continued”; “She paused.—Her daughter could not quite agree with her, but her dissent was not heard, and therefore gave no offence” (SS 338). She tells polite lies when she judges that something civil must be said, but refrains from doing so whenever she can. Yet if the situation really requires it she does speak out, even if it means offending; for example, she silences Lucy’s professions of selfless concern for Edward staying in favor with his mother by pointing out that it is “‘for your own sake too, or you are carrying your disinterestedness beyond reason’” (SS 148). With some people, however, she does not feel it is worth replying or objecting, if the subject matter is not serious: to the effusions of Robert Ferrars about the sublime value of a cottage she “agreed to it all, for she did not think he deserved the compliment of rational opposition” (SS 252). The important thing is that Elinor judges each situation as it arises; it is not simply that she always tells polite lies while Marianne always tells the truth: Elinor tells polite lies when it is an unavoidable necessity, but she never does so with unthinking politeness. Thus Elinor’s approach to balancing amiability and honesty, despite falling short of perfect virtue, involves a complex understanding of social life.

Balancing Honesty with Civility

Both Elinor and Marianne are guilty of deviating from the mean of truthfulness, albeit in different directions. Marianne is rude; Elinor lies. The question then is which sister chooses the right approach? Marianne may be truthful, but she is not always amiable. Elinor sometimes tells polite lies, but she upholds civility and the virtue of amiability, and is attentive to the feelings of others. Elinor genuinely feels for others in distress: like George Eliot’s Dorothea Brooke in Middlemarch (1871–72), who forces herself to ask the important question “Was it her event only?” after she comes across Will Ladislaw at Rosamond Lydgate’s house, Elinor is capable of working her way through to real sympathy for others even when her own heart has been seriously hurt. After she learns of
Lucy’s secret engagement to Edward, “Her resentment . . . for a short time made her feel only for herself; but other ideas, other considerations soon arose” (SS 139) and soon she feels that if Edward “had injured her, how much more had he injured himself; if her case were pitiable, his was hopeless” (SS 140).

In general, for Marianne, the practice of honesty regardless of situation is a selfish adherence to a code of taste: it is abhorrent to her to tell less than the whole truth. This does not mean, however, that Marianne is always entirely oblivious to the feelings of others; on the contrary, when she is speaking to someone she loves, such as Elinor, she holds back from expressing her whole opinion if she believes that it will offend. Early in the novel she tries not to continue the subject of whether or not Edward has taste (even though she has raised it with Elinor)—“Marianne was afraid of offending, and said no more on the subject”—but when Elinor continues it, she phrases her response carefully, saying, “‘I have not had so many opportunities of estimating the minuter propensities of his mind, his inclinations and tastes as you have; but I have the highest opinion in the world of his goodness and sense,’ ” and “rejoic[ing] to find her sister so easily pleased” by this answer (SS 19–20). Her assessment of Edward’s character sounds like a politely phrased reference letter for a mediocre but pleasant employee or student. Marianne does know how to be tactful. The education in civility she goes through later in the novel is not a whole new way of looking at social life so much as a revision and extension of the best parts of her previous outlook.

Nevertheless, Marianne for much of the novel thinks mostly of her own feelings. On the subject of her various offences against civility and charity to her neighbors, Susan Morgan argues convincingly that “Marianne’s integrity is a luxury, an indulgence of self at the expense of those around her,” and that her insistence on sincerity and spontaneity “substitutes fixed maxims and immediate impressions for the more difficult and more homely task of being just to others as well as to oneself.” A serious problem with this approach, then, is that Marianne does not allow for the possibility that she will be wrong, that people will turn out to be better than she expects. The decorum that Elinor holds to, on the other hand, offers, as Morgan says, “a way of seeing and acting toward others which allows for them the possibility of becoming more than our understanding of them.” Mrs. Jennings’s real kindness and concern during Marianne’s illness bear out the value of Elinor’s politeness: whereas at first both sisters found her rather vulgar, Elinor persisted in behaving toward her with civility, and in fact Mrs. Jennings does prove to be more amiable than either sister thought. Even more seriously, Elinor’s civility
toward Colonel Brandon means her mind is open to being convinced of his virtues, while Marianne’s early dismissal of him as old and, therefore, disagreeable means that her eventual reconsideration of this opinion is much more painful, as it means admitting she was wrong and unfair to him. By behaving civilly to other people, Elinor is closer to practicing the virtues than Marianne, because a virtue is no longer a virtue when the practice of it is unjustly harmful to others. Elinor, in pursuit of amiability, tact, and truthfulness, and finding that there are tensions among these virtues, aims at the next best thing to the perfect practice of each virtue, which Aristotle says is appropriate when there is such a conflict. Elinor is an excellent example, therefore, of the idea that Austen’s characters function as “living arguments” for the virtues. Although Aristotle mentions conflicts between virtues, he does not analyze in detail what happens when the virtues collide. Austen does, and her lively portraits of virtuous and almost virtuous characters make her analysis of the virtues more compelling than a discussion of the virtues in a philosophical treatise.

Vice or Moral Weakness

The next question is: what happens when people fall short of the full practice of a virtue, or of the virtues? Are they guilty of vice? Again, for Aristotle at least, it is not that simple. He says that there is an important distinction between vice and moral weakness, the difference being that while vice is an imbalance of emotion that makes us unable to see that what we do is wrong, moral weakness is the state of knowing what is right, behaving wrongly, and being conscious of regret at falling short of practicing the virtues. What does this distinction mean for Elinor and Marianne? Elinor is much more self-aware than Marianne. When she is obliged to lie in polite company, she recognizes and regrets what she is doing; thus, according to Aristotle she would be guilty only of moral weakness, which is much easier to correct than vice.

For Marianne, on the other hand, the problem may be more serious. Her perspective is imbalanced, and needs to be set straight. She believes, for example, that if there had been “‘any real impropriety’ ” in her trip to Mrs. Smith’s house with Willoughby, she “‘should have been sensible of it at the time’ ” (SS 68). Like the philosopher Lord Shaftesbury, she believes in an innate sense of right and wrong. According to Shaftesbury in the Inquiry Concerning Virtue, or Merit, “To have the Reflection in his Mind of any unjust Action or Behavior, which he knows to be naturally odious and ill-deserving” is “properly call’d CONSCIENCE.” But Austen
does not follow Shaftesbury in this feeling; although the practice of the virtues relies upon individual judgment, it must be educated judgment, as Wollstonecraft advocates, and the principle is not simply, “if it feels moral, it must be right.” Marianne proves to have misjudged the appropriateness of her actions. Because she is unaware that it is wrong, her incivility is probably a vice, and therefore harder to correct. The very difficulty of readjusting her behavior later on can be seen in her reaction to Elinor’s request that she be discreet about Lucy’s engagement to Edward. Marianne apologizes for having been insensitive to Elinor’s heartaches, and she “engaged never to speak of the affair to any one with the least appearance of bitterness;—to meet Lucy without betraying the smallest increase of dislike to her;—and even to see Edward himself . . . without any diminution of her usual cordiality” (SS 264–65). In short, she promises to be amiable even under unpleasant circumstances. “These were great concessions;—but where Marianne felt that she had injured, no reparation could be too much for her to make” (SS 265). Here Austen again shows Marianne’s disposition toward excess, even in good things, and although Marianne does keep her promise to Elinor, she shows tendencies toward obsequiousness, excessive amiability, because, for example, “She attended to all that Mrs. Jennings had to say upon the subject, with an unchanging complexion, dissented from her in nothing, and was heard three times to say, ‘Yes, ma’am’ ” (SS 265). Achieving the virtuous balance is indeed a difficult task.

**Repentance**

Marianne does prove capable of correcting her behavior and achieving a balance. After her illness, she tells Elinor that she has considered her feelings and actions throughout the affair with Willoughby, and she sees “‘nothing but a series of imprudence towards myself, and want of kindness to others’” (SS 345). In her enthusiastic plans for future improvement, Marianne asserts that “‘from my home, I shall never again have the smallest incitement to move,’” but she clearly knows the virtuous path she should strive to achieve: “‘if I do mix in other society it will be only to shew that my spirit is humbled, my heart amended, and that I can practise the civilities, the lesser duties of life, with gentleness, and forbearance’” (SS 347). These aspirations are reminiscent of the negative virtues Wollstonecraft criticizes, because Marianne is thinking in extremes still, yet the fact that she aspires to “practise the civilities” shows that she is on the right track. Through her own experience of suffering
and through the education Elinor urges on her, she has come a long way from her first assessment of Elinor’s doctrine of civility as subservience to our neighbors’ judgments. The next lesson she needs to learn is that this practice of civility does not involve merely “the lesser duties of life” for gentle women, but it is related to the highest aspiration for both men and women: it is part of the full practice of the virtuous life.

In Marianne’s grand plan for improvement, she says, “‘I mean never to be later in rising than six, and from that time till dinner I shall divide every moment between music and reading. I have formed my plan, and am determined to enter on a course of serious study’” (SS 343). Marianne’s plan resembles a passage from one of her favorite poets, James Thomson, whose works Edward earlier speculated she would buy if, as Margaret said, someone were to give them “‘all a large fortune apiece’” (SS 92). In *The Seasons* (1746) Thomson writes of

An elegant sufficiency, content,
Retirement, rural quiet, friendship, books,
Ease and alternate labour, useful life,
Progressive virtue, and approving heaven!
These are the matchless joys of virtuous love...  

In the earlier conversation with Edward, Margaret, and Mrs. Dashwood, Marianne and Elinor differ about what constitutes economic competence or wealth, with Marianne giving two thousand a year as “‘a very moderate income,’ ” for “‘a proper establishment of servants, a carriage, perhaps two, and hunters,’ ” and Elinor laughing that one thousand would be wealth to her (SS 91). Marianne’s later proposal of retirement and study involves a more modest idea of a life of “elegant sufficiency,” although in Colonel Brandon she does marry a man with two thousand a year after all.

Responding to Marianne’s proposal for a retired life, Elinor “honoured her for a plan which originated so nobly as this,” yet she smiles “to see the same eager fancy which had been leading her to the extreme of languid indolence and selfish repining, now at work in introducing excess into a scheme of rational employment and virtuous self-control” (SS 343). After Elinor has told her of Willoughby’s confession, however, Marianne reiterates her desire to regulate her remembrance of him, saying that “‘it shall be checked by religion, by reason, by constant employment,’ ” and vowing that “‘The future must be my proof. I have laid down my plan, and if I am capable of adhering to it—my feelings shall be governed and my temper improved’” (SS 347). For Austen,
decorum and civility, the “lesser duties of life,” may be trivial and meaningless if they are mere forms, but when united with the ideals of religion, reason, and employment, they are among the outward signs of inward spiritual change and growth.

“Know Your Own Happiness”

Happiness for Marianne, then, involves religion and reason as well as exertion and fortitude. What is it that constitutes Elinor’s happiness? Early in the novel, Mrs. Dashwood, who ordinarily delights in indulging melancholy thoughts, exhorts Edward to conquer his want of spirits and not dwell on the question of his inheritance or independence, by telling him to “‘Know your own happiness. You want nothing but patience—or give it a more fascinating name, call it hope’” (SS 103). Does Elinor know her own happiness? That Mrs. Dashwood preaches patience and the theological virtue of hope is unusual, considering the narrator’s later comment that “Bad indeed must the nature of Marianne’s affliction be, when her mother could talk of fortitude! mortifying and humiliating must be the origin of those regrets, which she could wish her not to indulge!” (SS 213). Fortitude is perhaps an even less fascinating name for a virtue, but that is effectively what Mrs. Dashwood is advocating when she tells Edward to be patient. Significantly, she takes a classical virtue, patience, endurance, or fortitude, and revises it slightly, renaming it with a more romantic, more Christian word, hope. While Mrs. Dashwood’s more immediate concern is to coax Edward out of his “want of spirits,” her theory that knowing one’s own happiness is grounded in patience, or hope, is wise instruction.

Elinor possesses patience, and she has been praised by critics for exemplifying the related virtue of self-discipline or exertion.27 I would argue that it is this exertion that makes it possible for Elinor to be amiable. Just as offences against virtue set in motion other offences against virtue, as in Willoughby’s case, the positive practice of virtue involves a chain of interrelated virtues that cause and affect each other. Self-knowledge may bring us to understand our faults, knowledge of how we have injured others may bring us to exert ourselves to do better in future, and the constant discipline of seeking to know well in order to act rightly requires courage: Elinor has the courage to be strong, and because she is strong in her knowledge of herself and of others she is able to be amiable. Moral education ideally promotes truthfulness, tact, and amiability. Elinor’s strength and fortitude make it possible for her to act in an
amiable manner, and to have hope in her heart even when it seems Edward is lost to her forever. When Marianne learns Edward is bound to Lucy, she asks her sister, “‘how have you been supported?’ ” and Elinor replies that she felt she was doing her duty; Marianne exclaims, “‘—and yet you loved him!’ ” but Elinor reveals the source of her hope and endurance by saying, “‘Yes. But I did not love only him’ ” (SS 262–63). Again like Eliot’s Dorothea, Elinor is able to sympathize with and love others when she herself is suffering: even in this very conversation, with Marianne “listen[ing] with horror, and cry[ing] excessively,” she is required “to be the comforter of others in her own distresses, no less than in theirs” (SS 261). This takes a good deal of strength, and Elinor is equal to the challenge. She knows her own happiness well enough to recognize, as she says to her sister, that “‘after all that is bewitching in the idea of a single and constant attachment, and all that can be said of one’s happiness depending entirely on any particular person, it is not meant—it is not fit—it is not possible that it should be so’ ” (SS 263). Because Elinor is acquainted with the world, and knows something of what may and may not constitute happiness, she is able to be strong, and because of her fortitude she is able to know her own happiness.

This fortitude—strength, discipline, patience, or exertion—does not come easily to Elinor, however. She tells Marianne that “‘The compo-sure of mind with which I have brought myself at present to consider the matter, the consolation that I have been willing to admit, have been the effect of constant and painful exertion;—they did not spring up of themselves’ ” (SS 264). For example, in the most severe test of her civility she is required to conduct a social visit with Lucy and Edward at the same time. Neither of the others is able, or willing, to rescue the situation, but Elinor is determined to say and do what she ought: “so anxious was she, for his sake and her own, to do it well, that she forced herself, after a moment’s recollection, to welcome him, with a look and manner that were almost easy, and almost open; and another struggle, another effort still improved them” (SS 241). This is virtue tested and proven. Doing and saying the right thing at the right time does not always come easily to her, but the important thing is that she tries. Austen does poke fun at Elinor’s patience, however, when she writes that when Elinor goes to fetch Marianne, she leaves Lucy and Edward together and takes her time getting to her sister, spending several minutes on the landing, “with the most high-minded fortitude” first (SS 242). It is funny and ironic that Austen describes this plan as heroic, but surely we sympathize with the exasperated Elinor as well. She receives no help from Edward or Lucy, who are solely responsible for the awkwardness of the situation.
To accuse her of glorying in her self-denial and high-mindedness, however, as some critics have, is unjust. If she had stayed in the room enduring the impossible situation, determined not to leave, that might be interpreted as self-torture and excessive fortitude. The fact that she escapes the room is evidence that she is much affected by what is happening, and that even her endurance has limits. Her “high-minded fortitude” in leaving Edward and Lucy alone for a few minutes longer is thus amusing because ironic, but, more than that, it does take real account of how to handle social difficulties.

Elinor is possessed of “strength of understanding” and “coolness of judgment,” and she is good-natured: “She had an excellent heart;—her disposition was affectionate, and her feelings were strong; but she knew how to govern them” (SS 6). Her strong feelings are apparent in scenes in which she becomes speechless—for example, when Edward appears at Barton Cottage and reveals that he is free. As Inger Sigrun Brodey points out, “Like a true ‘woman of feeling,’ Elinor loses her ability to speak when she feels most deeply.” She knows her own mind, and therefore can be strong, can love her neighbor, and can be happy, even in difficult circumstances; the balance she achieves between a just understanding of the social world and a charitable attitude toward the people in it contributes as well to the eventual happiness she finds in marriage with Edward. In contrast to Elinor, Willoughby’s inconsistent opinions and inconstant actions lead him into a marriage in which he declares himself miserable, to the point where he even begins to speculate to Elinor in their interview at Cleveland, “ ‘Were I even by any blessed chance at liberty again’ ”—but she stops him from continuing (SS 332). In conversation with Edward while he is still engaged to Lucy, Elinor offers him “a very earnest assurance . . . of her unceasing good wishes for his happiness in every change of situation that might befal [sic] him” (SS 290). Although this assurance may have a slight hint of her hope that his situation might change so he would be free to marry her, it is not nearly so blatant as Willoughby’s remark. Even if it were blatant, the fact remains that Edward and Lucy are not married yet, and Willoughby is—and Edward’s and Lucy’s engagement would need only to be broken in some way, whereas Willoughby’s wish depends on his wife’s death. In any case, much more prominent in Elinor’s wish for Edward’s happiness is her real desire for his welfare, and her dependence on the necessity of seeking honorable happiness even under the reverses of fortune. With Elinor as the exemplar of fortitude tested and still constant, her brother’s praise of “ ‘Poor Fanny[’s]’ ” reaction to the news of Edward’s engagement to Lucy appears even more ridiculous. John Dashwood assures his sisters
and Mrs. Jennings that his wife’s “‘constitution is a good one, and her resolution equal to any thing. She has borne it all, with the fortitude of an angel!’” (SS 265).

If Elinor is the representative of the virtue of fortitude in the novel, is it Marianne’s fate to learn to be as virtuous as her sister? After he relates the story of the two Elizas to Elinor, Colonel Brandon expresses his belief that as Marianne’s misfortunes “‘proceed from no misconduct,’ ” they “‘can bring no disgrace. On the contrary, every friend must be made still more her friend by them’” (SS 210). He is sure that knowledge of her own sexual innocence will support her in her disappointment; Elinor, on the other hand, thinks that Marianne might have acted better, and the narrator’s judgment is with Elinor. Brandon reflects conventional opinion in his certainty that because there has been no sexual misconduct, there has been no transgression against virtue. He is also certain that “‘Concern for her unhappiness, and respect for her fortitude under it, must strengthen every attachment’” (SS 210). As he has just concluded his tale of the first Eliza’s inconstancy, confessing that “‘I had depended on her fortitude too far’” (SS 206), it is clear that for him female fortitude consists chiefly in resisting sexual temptation.

Chastity is an aspect of the virtues, but it properly belongs in a subcategory. It may well follow that someone who values faith and love would want to guard against sexual impurity, but fortitude in this novel is not just about avoiding temptation, as the narrator, Elinor, and ultimately Marianne demonstrate in words, and as Marianne especially demonstrates in dramatic action. Marianne does not at first have real fortitude—she does have the kind Brandon is talking about, and she has not lost sexual virtue, but she does not have the strength of mind that would enable her to stay strong and healthy when she is rejected in love. The evening of Willoughby’s departure from Barton we are told that she “could neither eat nor speak, and after some time, on her mother’s silently pressing her hand with tender compassion, her small degree of fortitude was quite overcome, she burst into tears and left the room” (SS 82). The narrator says, “She was without any power, because she was without any desire of command over herself” (SS 82); in other words, she lacks fortitude because she lacks the courage to exert herself. Because she feels joy and suffering in extremes—when it is decided that the sisters will go to London, “Marianne’s joy was almost a degree beyond happiness” (SS 158), and when Mrs. Jennings brings her a letter that she expects is from Willoughby but is really from her mother she feels “the acuteness of the disappointment which followed such an ecstasy [sic] of more than hope” (SS 202)—Marianne finds it difficult to maintain her composure, her spirits, and her health.
Elinor is sensible to exhort her to “‘Exert yourself, dear Marianne,’” when Marianne gives way to misery after receiving Willoughby’s final letter, and she points out the possible consequences of not doing so, using extreme language to try to shock Marianne into a recognition: “‘if you would not kill yourself and all who love you,’” she cries (SS 185). Readers often interpret Marianne’s subsequent melancholy and illness as a refusal to obey Elinor’s advice, but in fact there are numerous signs that she does try to exert herself. On the first evening after Willoughby’s letter has effectively destroyed all her hopes, she determines to dine with Elinor and Mrs. Jennings, even with company (the Parrys and Sandersons) present as well, and “though looking most wretchedly, she ate more and was calmer than her sister had expected” (SS 193). Although she does leave the room when she later feels oppressed by Mrs. Jennings’s attention to her sorrow, the scene contrasts sharply with the evening after Willoughby’s departure from Barton Cottage, as she is much stronger the second time, even though suffering a far greater disappointment. In London, after the letter, “From a night of more sleep than she had expected, Marianne awoke the next morning to the same consciousness of misery in which she had closed her eyes” (SS 201); again in contrast, in Barton, “Marianne would have thought herself very inexcusable had she been able to sleep at all the first night after parting from Willoughby . . . . She was awake the whole night, and she wept the greatest part of it” (SS 83).

When the sisters attend a party at the home of Fanny Dashwood’s acquaintance, the narrator relates that “Marianne had now been brought by degrees, so much into the habit of going out every day, that it was become a matter of indifference to her, whether she went or not” (SS 249): although she has not yet begun to take an interest in things outside herself, she is beginning the habit of exertion and self-discipline. After she learns of Edward’s engagement, she starts to see what fortitude has meant for Elinor, but this knowledge does not help her to emulate her sister; rather, “Her mind was so much weakened that she still fancied present exertion impossible, and therefore it only dispirited her more” (SS 270). She has been exerting herself, but she now reacts to Elinor’s conduct “with all the pain of continual self-reproach, [and] regretted most bitterly that she had never exerted herself before; but it brought only the torture of penitence, without the hope of amendment” (SS 270). At this point, she is penitent, but she feels neither absolved of her fault nor inspired to improve her conduct.

It is when she confesses to Elinor what she has felt, and acknowledges responsibility for her weaknesses, that she reveals she is prepared for forgiveness and change. She says, “‘I saw that my own feelings had
prepared my sufferings, and that my want of fortitude under them had almost led me to the grave’ ” (SS 345). She describes the change in her opinions to Elinor, and expresses the newly dawned desire “‘to have time for atonement to my God, and to you all’ ” (SS 346), and she appears to think atonement involves doing penance by studying and by demonstrating her affection for her family. Yet instead of “finding her only pleasures in retirement and study” (SS 378), at the end of the novel she has learned to love again, and although absolution is not explicitly offered to her, it is surely through the grace that comes with atonement that she is able to find renewed happiness. Colonel Brandon is naturally happy in his marriage to her, but the rhetoric of the narrator’s conclusion raises the question of whether or not Marianne is genuinely happy—“that Marianne found her own happiness in forming his, was equally the persuasion and delight of each observing friend”—only to resolve it in the very next sentence with authorial certainty: “Marianne could never love by halves; and her whole heart became, in time, as much devoted to her husband, as it had once been to Willoughby” (SS 379).

Along with a number of other critics, Marilyn Butler argues that Marianne’s marriage is a betrayal and a failure.29 But if we read Marianne’s earlier story closely and notice the ways in which she exerts herself to do her duty to others and to God, the marriage at the end is not as shocking, because it is not an abrupt about-face. The problem is that Mrs. Dashwood is made the apparent agent of the marriage: while the marriage is consistent with Marianne’s repentant and educated self, the fact that Mrs. Dashwood announces her plans to reward Colonel Brandon with the gift of her daughter makes it seem as if Marianne is the victim of social pressures. Yet although the marriage is her mother’s “darling object,” it is Marianne who comes “voluntarily to give her hand to another” (SS 378). Some readers object to the narrator’s statement that she marries “with no sentiment superior to strong esteem and lively friendship” (SS 378), but this is Austen’s irony: most marriages in her novels are far from this ideal of esteem and friendship, let alone the additional ideal of romantic love, and these initial sentiments of Marianne’s do mature into love. Marianne’s education, then, what the narrator calls her “extraordinary fate” (SS 378) of revising her opinions and counteracting her early actions, involves both the classical regulation of governing her feelings and improving her temper, and the Christian imperative of contrition. The classical balance may be a matter of degrees and of negotiating the tensions among the virtues, practicing how to be good, civil, and happy, but atonement to God requires contrition and confession, humility and love, and acceptance of grace and forgiveness.
Elinor finds happiness and fulfillment through marriage with Edward, it is true, but she is capable of “knowing her own happiness” from the beginning of the novel because she knows her own faults and exercises her judgment in social life to maintain the virtues of her understanding and to focus on the virtues of prudence, amiability, honesty, civility, and fortitude in her actions. All anyone can do is choose to act virtuously with the hope that it may contribute to happiness. It is not only good fortune that leads to Elinor’s happiness in marriage, but also fortitude that helps her to be amiable and thus to be happy in her knowledge of herself as well. Susan Morgan argues that Elinor is “the major innovation of Sense and Sensibility and a new kind of character in English fiction” because she is a flawed heroine in the “sense of using an awareness of her own failings as a factor in maintaining a continuing and flexible process of judgment.” I agree with this judgment of Elinor, but I think Morgan is unfair to Marianne, whom she calls a flawed heroine only “in the simpler sense” of “making mistakes and learning to see them.”

Elinor possesses this awareness of her faults from the beginning, but when Marianne ultimately does achieve a similar awareness, she also recognizes that there is a complicated process involved in “practising the civilities.” Although Marianne changes, she is Marianne still; she is not a new Elinor: as John Wiltshire points out, her enthusiasm for reform, “the very eagerness of her desire to live,” is what “makes her reform a new enactment of her embodied self, not the assumption of an Elinor-like sobriety.”

Like Morgan, Butler sees Elinor’s character as representative of something new, in Austen’s work, if not in English fiction generally: she says, “Elinor is the first character in an Austen novel consistently to reveal her inner life,” and concludes that it is a “real technical achievement of Sense and Sensibility” that “this crucial process of Christian self-examination is realized in literary terms.” Elinor is highly aware of her conduct and very much concerned to correct it when it is wrong, but she operates according to a system that, though flexible, is more dependent on amelioration than on forgiveness—is her self-examination really Christian?

Marianne thinks she knows what constitutes her own happiness, yet she ultimately finds it not in sentiment, passion, and taste alone, but in classical heroism and fortitude, and in Christian confession and repentance. Fortitude alone would have supported her in her plan of work and study, if she had indeed lived out her life in seclusion, but atonement means that her ruined and disappointed love can be revived in a new sphere of affection and family life. Unlike Charlotte Palmer, who is always “happy without a cause” (SS 118), Marianne and Elinor have good reason for their happiness. But whereas Elinor’s primary support is
her own strength, and she offers an example that her sister eventually learns to emulate. Marianne in confessing her faults turns to God for her support, and finds love. She may have been educated partly by Elinor's example of the classical virtues, but if Elinor is a classical heroine (even though she marries a clergyman), and Marianne represents both classical and Christian virtues, perhaps it is Elinor's turn, at the end of the novel, to learn from Marianne, not about sensibility, but about grace. As Augustine writes in *The City of God*, “however valorously we resist our vices, and however successful we are in overcoming them, yet as long as we are in this body we have always reason to say to God, ‘Forgive us our debts.’” Forgiveness fills the gap between the mean we aspire to, and the virtue we can achieve on our own. Unlike Elinor, Marianne is prepared to ask for divine grace to make up the difference.

Seeing Elinor and Marianne in the context of classical and Christian ideas of the virtues can help to clarify the way Jane Austen works within a larger tradition of the philosophy of virtue, exploring the weaknesses, tensions, and balances involved in the practice of an ideal. Understanding the sisters as participants in a process of learning to practice the virtues may also be more helpful than trying to sort out to what degree each possesses sense or sensibility. *Sense and Sensibility* does not involve rigid prescriptions of character defined by duty and desire, reason and emotion, sense and sensibility; it is not primarily concerned with how to temper sensibility with sense. It is complex not because Elinor must learn sensibility while Marianne must learn sense, but because Austen shows them both aspiring to the ideal of virtuous behavior through a difficult working out of judgment, practical wisdom, and application. *Sense and Sensibility* is about flaws, weaknesses, even vices, and confession and change. Unlike *Northanger Abbey*, *Sense and Sensibility* is concerned with discovering the right way to practice the range of the virtues. This makes *Sense and Sensibility* one of Austen’s mature novels, even though it is often classed with *Northanger Abbey* as an early, relatively flat novel. The virtues in *Sense and Sensibility* are quite different from virtue in Richardson’s, Radcliffe’s, Inchbald’s, or Fenwick’s novels, and Austen does not rely on Hume’s or Shaftesbury’s theories of morality.

The practice of the virtues in this novel is something like what Wollstonecraft calls for, in that it involves educated women who do not depend on men for judgment and moral guidance, but practice the “exertion of [their own] judgement to modify general rules.” And it is even more like what Aristotle envisions, in that it does not involve prescriptive sets of opposing behaviors, but a range of right principles that must be practiced to be achieved, and that even at times compete with
each other. In addition, however, virtue in this novel ultimately requires Christian confession and penance. The virtues are not static, but tested; they are social, intellectual, moral, and spiritual, not simply sexual, virtues. *Sense and Sensibility* is a radical reworking of contemporary notions of virtue that Wollstonecraft, Aquinas, and Aristotle would have approved, as Austen demonstrates the importance, and the flexibility, of practicing the virtues; and it provides, in Marianne, an example of how classical and Christian virtues can show how to know one’s own happiness.
Pride and Prejudice and the Beauty of Justice

... perfect happiness the just reward of their virtues.
—Jane Austen, “Evelyn,” Volume the Third (MW 191)

Like Sense and Sensibility, Pride and Prejudice is concerned with the social virtue of amiability and the problem of how to be truthful and civil simultaneously. Like Elinor, Elizabeth Bennet must negotiate ways to keep her judgment independent while she behaves politely to her family, her neighbors, and her enemies. But she has much more spirit than Elinor, and thus has a great deal more trouble behaving civilly when she is insulted or exasperated by others. In Pride and Prejudice, the tensions in Jane Austen’s exploration of competing virtues are heightened, yet it is not simply because Elizabeth has a harder time than Elinor at balancing amiability and civility. There is more at stake, the questions are more complicated, and the action is more dramatic in this novel because Austen takes on the problems of anger and prejudice, investigating how they work in relation or opposition to the principles of virtue.

A number of critics have read Pride and Prejudice as the humiliation of Elizabeth Bennet, objecting to the way in which the novel seems to require the subjection of Elizabeth’s assertiveness to Darcy’s better judgment. The underlying assumption of such critics is, as Claudia L. Johnson says explicitly in Jane Austen: Women, Politics, and the Novel, that original sin is what Mary Bennet calls “thread-bare morality” (PP 60). In addition to the tendency to see Pride and Prejudice as a story of humiliation, another trend of much longer standing has been to accept too
readily as critical fact Austen’s playful comment in a letter to Cassandra that *Pride and Prejudice* really is too “light, & bright, & sparkling” (*Letters*, February 4, 1813; 203). A number of critics attempt to demonstrate Austen’s seriousness by showing how the novel is “marked, even scarred, by history,” or by arguing that Austen was a political subversive hiding behind conservative forms, because “the family of readers that Austen posited did not necessarily exist” in her own time. Julia Prewitt Brown has argued convincingly that “Jane Austen’s stature has declined with the rise of feminist literary criticism,” suggesting that while feminist critics such as Mary Poovey, Nina Auerbach, Carolyn Heilbrun, and Sandra M. Gilbert and Susan Gubar read Austen as complicit in bourgeois ideology and see marriage in her novels as an inadequate substitute for independence, the criticism of men including F.R. Leavis, Ian Watt, Lionel Trilling, George Steiner, and Alasdair MacIntyre reads Austen as serious and internationally important. I agree with Brown that the decline in Austen’s reputation is a serious one, but whereas she would like to see Austen taken seriously primarily in the context of a feminism based on the works of Mary Wollstonecraft and George Eliot, I think Austen should also be taken seriously as a philosophical and religious writer in the context of the tradition of both men and women who wrote before her time.

In contrast to critics who focus on either humiliation or the scars of history in *Pride and Prejudice*, then, I argue first of all in this chapter that the change in Elizabeth is not due to repression and humiliation, but to a liberating process of education that leads to Christian humility. Humility in *Pride and Prejudice* is not abject self-abasement, but a right sense of one’s own fallibility, and it is not just something Elizabeth learns in order to submit herself to Darcy, but something that they both learn so that they may together submit to God in the context of Christian marriage. In the second part of my argument, I defend some of the language—including the words *anger*, *prejudice*, and *judgment*—that Austen uses to describe the education of Darcy and Elizabeth, in order to demonstrate that *Pride and Prejudice* is intensely serious, even the most serious of Austen’s novels, despite and often in places because of its comedy. It is serious not primarily because it is political in a historical sense—by which most critics mean that it participates implicitly in the debates surrounding the French Revolution and the Napoleonic Wars—but because it deals with the issues of courage and justice. It is thus in fact highly political, insofar as Aristotle says that the question of “how shall our life together be ordered?” is the central issue of politics. Both the seriousness and the beauty of *Pride and Prejudice* arise out of Austen’s...
concern with how to get from sin to justice. Part of the answer to the question of this process has to do with humility, part of it also has to do with anger, and most of it has to do with love.

Sparkling or Serious?

There has always been a suspicion among readers—and especially among nonreaders—of Jane Austen’s novels, that love is not quite a serious enough topic, even for a novel. Janeites are often caricatured as escapist readers indulging in a guilty pleasure, reading Jane Austen in a dream-world of fantasy, wish-fulfillment, Regency ball gowns, lace, and perfectly happy marriages. The real world, even the real world of other kinds of fiction, it is suggested, is much more serious than that. Even the best of the recent film adaptations do little to counteract the assumption that Austen novels are preoccupied with the perfect wedding as the culmination of every woman’s dream.8

*Pride and Prejudice*, perhaps because it is one of the best-known and best-liked of the novels, is particularly vulnerable to the criticism that it is mere fantasy. Johnson calls the novel “almost shamelessly wish-fulfilling,” Judith Lowder Newton describes it as “Austen’s fantasy of female autonomy,” and Isobel Armstrong says that its explorations of class privilege are limited, which is why “the assuaging and energizing dreamwork of its comedy have no parallel in Jane Austen’s other novels.” Armstrong defends Austen by saying that she was “no dreamer” because in *Mansfield Park* she next “constructed a text which would challenge” the dream of *Pride and Prejudice*. Attempting to defend the political seriousness of this novel, Marilyn Butler first of all writes that “It would not be in keeping with the serious-mindedness of modern scholarship to rest content with the popular view of *Pride and Prejudice* as having no meaning at all,” and goes on to suggest that “If in nothing else, a clue to the conservatism of the novel lies in the original title, ‘First Impressions,’ ” which may indicate that “the early version was more dogmatic” than the later version with its revolutionary heroine.9

Even critics who are unwilling to accept the view that *Pride and Prejudice* has “no meaning at all,” have had trouble reading it as politically engaged and therefore as serious writing. Thus, it remains read by many as irredeemably romantic or insufficiently political. Ironically, the barrier to taking *Pride and Prejudice* seriously has been that it is easy to accept Austen’s own comments on her work as a serious statement of artistic fact.10 If we are to take her seriously we need to read the whole “light
The whole work is rather too light, & bright, & sparkling; it wants shade; it wants to be stretched out here & there with a long Chapter—of sense if it could be had; if not, of solemn specious nonsense—about something unconnected with the story; an Essay on Writing, a critique on Walter Scott, or the history of Buonaparte, or anything that would form a contrast & bring the reader with increased delight to the playfulness and Epigrammatism of the general stile. (Letters, February 4, 1813; 203)

These lines are clearly ironic: she may be modest here but it is widely agreed by now that she was not an unconscious artist, and if she really thought her novels needed extra long chapters of sense (Chapter 17 of Eliot’s *Adam Bede* comes to mind) she could have added them. As she well knew, sense is pervasive throughout her novels—it is never an aside. In this sentence she anticipates the objections of some of her readers; she is not speaking as a serious critic of her novel, because the novel could speak for itself. Regrettably, the uncritical tendency to believe what writers say of their work, whether their intention is serious or ironic, has meant that many of Austen’s readers think that she too thought *Pride and Prejudice* was “light.”

Tragedy is never far away in *Pride and Prejudice*, and the brilliance of Austen’s heroine is that Elizabeth can see the materially disastrous consequences of acting according to conscience and the good, yet she does the right thing anyway, refusing both Mr. Collins’s modest competence and Mr. Darcy’s powerful consequence because both men are, among other things, self-interested and self-important. Mr. Collins is clearly ineducable; Darcy, however, is capable of improving the education of his judgment. The questions of judgment and education are not frivolous, nor is the problem of how to bring about the right kind of learning. Austen’s question throughout *Pride and Prejudice* is Plato’s question in the *Meno*: “Can virtue be taught?”

This is a sensible question and a serious one. As to the question of whether *Pride and Prejudice* is “too light, & bright, & sparkling” because “it wants . . . a long Chapter . . . of solemn specious nonsense,” it is clear from Austen’s use of the word *specious* that the novel does not want it at all. And the novel’s intensely serious comedy is very much connected with its story. D.W. Harding is right that “The people who feel that her work would have been in some way more significant if she had dealt
directly with contemporary great events are coming perilously close to the Prince Regent’s Librarian with his suggestion” that she consider writing “any Historical Romance illustrative of the History of the august house of Coburg” (Letters, March 27, 1816; 311). Harding makes a useful distinction between being preoccupied with “abstract social questions” and being intelligently aware of them.12 Those who are preoccupied with them will have little room for art; those who are oblivious to them will have little idea of the larger significance of their work; those who write with an awareness of history, society, and human nature will be able to achieve much more than either of the former kinds of writers.

“Regulated Hatred”

Although Harding is right that Austen’s novels are not less significant for their lack of chapters of historical solemnity, his well-known interpretation of the novels as the author’s way of achieving ironic distance from society because of her “regulated hatred” of society’s vulgarities is too extreme. His understanding of Austen is that as a novelist “part of her aim was to find the means for unobtrusive spiritual survival, without open conflict with the friendly people around her whose standards in simpler things she could accept and whose affection she greatly needed.”13 The “subversive school” of Austen criticism takes its cue from Harding’s pioneering reading between the lines of her novels, and ranges from such critics as Marvin Mudrick and John Halperin, who see Austen as bitterly ironic toward other human beings, to Johnson and Poovey, who see Austen’s subversiveness as selective hatred directed against social structures and strictures rather than against vulgar people.

But the problem with the first version, by Harding and Mudrick, of the sharply satiric and subversive view of Austen, is that it may tempt readers to cultivate Mr. Bennet’s kind of ironic detachment, reserve, and sense of his own superiority, rather than engaging even with difficult people and characters. Proponents of Austen as a proto-feminist political subversive ironically are in the same position as these critics: arguing, as Poovey does, that Austen only appeared to uphold conservative values in common with readers because she could not speak subversively in her own time, suggests that only a small group of enlightened readers today can understand the novels.14 As Wayne C. Booth says in The Rhetoric of Fiction of many conservative Austen readers through the years, they have the “illusion of traveling intimately with a hardy little band of readers whose heads are screwed on tight and whose hearts are in the right
Thus even writers who celebrate Austen as a subversive feminist cultivate a small band of superior readers who can now understand Austen, even if her contemporary readers could not.

The idea that what Austen sought through her novels was “unobtrusive spiritual survival” is also problematic. In suggesting that Austen wanted to remain unobtrusive, Harding anticipates the feminist argument articulated by Johnson that she found silence empowering; that given her social situation as a single woman without wealth or status, the most effective thing she could do was to go along with the forms of “conservative myths” while silently objecting and plotting subtle ways to communicate her message of political change. In life it may be true that Austen wanted, to some extent, to remain unobtrusive—that she required seclusion for her writing, did not seek out literary circles, and tried not to offend her neighbors with overt criticisms of their vulgarities. But in her novels spiritual survival is not unobtrusive. It may be temporarily hidden or reserved, as in the case of Fanny Price seeking refuge in her room or Anne Elliot playing the piano in order to deflect attention from herself, but it eventually is shown to assert itself in various ways, as Fanny insists on not marrying Henry Crawford and Anne demonstrates her instincts for survival when she directs the response to Louisa’s fall. And in *Pride and Prejudice* especially, precisely because of its bright and sparkling heroine, spiritual survival is shown to be central, as survival requires being actively engaged even with the most impossible people in order to address the pressing political problem of how our collective life should work. The unobtrusive survivor is Mr. Bennet, hiding in his library. Spiritual survival in Austen’s novels, as it is exemplified by her most virtuous characters, requires not the rejection of the vulgar world (as in the ascetic Christian extreme or the eighteenth-century model of the discontented man of the world withdrawing from social life), but courageous engagement with the world in the service of justice. Harding’s theory, therefore, that hatred is the driving force behind the novels, does not account for the positive energy they possess and inspire.

**Righteous Anger**

Hatred, even well-regulated, is still hatred, still negative. The idea that Austen’s novels are powered by bitter hatred whether of people or institutions does not adequately explain the positive exuberance or the joy of her vision of human happiness. Austen writes with ironic humor and criticism and with sharp satire, but she also writes with pleasure and
hope. To emphasize the joy in the novels is not in any way to lessen their seriousness or downplay their satire: it is in her comprehensive judgment of both good and bad that the powerful and the positive aspects of her work reside. Judgment, while it cannot coexist even with well-regulated hatred, does require the naming of evil. But it is the naming of evil in the service of love, not of hatred, and that is the important distinction for understanding Austen’s novels. Distinguishing between good and evil is a central concern for her characters, and in order to do it they must learn to exercise judgment; they need to examine their prejudices and their principles, and doing so will unavoidably involve anger, whether it is anger at something that is evil in someone or something else, or anger at something in themselves. This is righteous anger, but it is temporary, because in the novels, as in the Christian tradition, love triumphs. It cannot do so, however, if no one recognizes what is wrong, becomes angry, and makes the effort to set things right; that is, makes an effort to establish justice.

What is central to *Pride and Prejudice* is not wish-fulfillment or fantasy, but justice, and how to get there. Readings of the novel that rely on the politics of the state or the politics of gender in Austen’s time or our own in order to explain this novel are bound to demonstrate that women were required to be unobtrusive. But some of the very concepts that trouble Austen’s readers because the words seem so negative, so humiliating, such as anger, prejudice, and judgment, are actually integral to the cause of virtue and justice. Integral, I must stress, only when rightly used and rightly understood. They are powerful concepts, and it is the difficult business of Austen’s characters, in the novels generally and in *Pride and Prejudice* in particular, to learn exactly how to use them with courage and with love. Not all her characters are capable of learning this; not all her virtuous characters do it consistently well. But her analysis of how her characters think about social and political life together is what makes the novels so fascinating. It is righteous anger, not “regulated hatred,” that is the source of Austen’s ironic and artistic power, and that helps her characters determine how to act and how to live.

Anger is, strangely enough, closely tied to the practice of amiability. Those who never get upset at anything, who tolerate or even praise everyone and everything, are inevitably excessively amiable. More extreme than Mrs. Jennings in this excess is Mr. Collins. According to Aristotle, as I noted in the previous chapter, the excess of amiability is obsequiousness. Mr. Collins is insufferably obsequious, and his attempts at civility are invariably excessive, as his confession to Mr. Bennet about his habit of “‘arranging such little elegant compliments as may be
adapted to ordinary occasions’” suggests (PP 68). Far from offering compliments that occur to him naturally in social situations, he contrives stock phrases to offer up, much like greeting-card verses kept in readiness for any emotional occasion. This preparation saves him the trouble of actually assessing the abilities or charms of the individual ladies he meets, and ensures that he will never be astonished at the beauty of any one woman. And, as we know, it is not the individual woman he thinks of in his schemes of marriage, it is his own happiness.

When Elizabeth realizes that his “affections,” such as they are, have been transferred to her, she “observed his increasing civilities toward herself, and heard his frequent attempt at a compliment on her wit and vivacity” (PP 88). His civilities are increasing to excess, and, significantly, it is a repeated attempt at one compliment. The unfortunate Mr. Collins aspires to the virtues of civility and humility, and it would be impossible to say that he falls short of them, for he far exceeds the mean in both cases. So much so, in fact, that Austen describes his walk into Meryton with the Bennet girls as passing “[i]n pompous nothings on his side, and civil assents on that of his cousins” (PP 72). Excessive civility turns into pompous behavior, while the sisters somehow manage to be appropriately civil in response. Civility is to amiability what manners are to morals: ideally the outward manifestation of real goodness, politeness based on respect, tolerance, and understanding.

The defective form of amiability is cantankerousness, churlishness, or contentiousness, it involves a lack of manners and understanding, and is exemplified by Lady Catherine’s cantankerous behavior and interference in the business of those around her. At Rosings in conversation with Elizabeth—really more of an interview than a real conversation—she is always exclaiming, one imagines, quite loudly, at the answers Elizabeth makes to her intrusive questions: “‘Five daughters brought up at home without a governess!—I never heard of such a thing’” (PP 164); “‘All!—What, all five out at once? Very odd!—And you only the second.—The younger ones out before the elder are married!’” (PP 165). At cards, “Lady Catherine was generally speaking—stating the mistakes of the three others, or relating some anecdote of herself” (PP 166). She does not aspire even to the most basic civilities of conversation, and instead criticizes other people without the least attempt to understand or respect them. She and Mr. Collins are indeed opposites, but neither is anywhere near virtue. Criticism and anger come too easily to Lady Catherine; Mr. Collins is not nearly critical enough.

Mr. and Mrs. Gardiner are often singled out as a rare example of the happily married couple, at ease with each other, their family, and their
relations in society—whatever Miss Bingley and Mrs. Hurst may think of their position—and they serve as a good illustration of the mean, the center at which the virtue of amiability may be found. They fulfill Aristotle’s criterion for true amiability, which is that they behave “alike towards those [they know] and those [they do] not know, towards intimates and those who are not so.” Aristotle specifies that “in each of these cases” the virtuous person “will behave as is befitting; for it is not proper to have the same care for intimates and for strangers.” They are neither too defensive nor too generous. The civil behavior of the Gardiners to their relatives and to strangers is founded on a complex understanding of human nature; by offering respect and politeness to all, they leave open the possibility that even those who appear undeserving may turn out to be better than they seem, as Darcy in fact does. Yet when Lydia and Wickham elope the Gardiners are sufficiently angry to take action: once an individual has demonstrated that he or she is undeserving, even the amiable person is entitled to become angry—to a point. The contemplation of anger in the cause of justice is extremely difficult, and the action that follows such contemplation is even more difficult, because justice without mercy, without charity, is scarcely justice at all. Figuring out how anger is related to amiability, then, is something that can be learned only through practice.

The virtue of amiability is complicated for Mr. Darcy, and he is aware that it is: his problem, as he himself describes it, is that he does not have “‘the talent which some people possess . . . of conversing easily with those I have never seen before. I cannot catch their tone of conversation, or appear interested in their concerns, as I often see done’” (PP 175). Elizabeth, describing her own performance at the piano, implies that like her, he does not “‘take the trouble of practising’” (PP 175). Soon after this conversation, Elizabeth herself is called on to do what Marianne Dashwood calls “‘practic[ing] the civilities’” (SS 347), as Lady Catherine makes comments on Elizabeth’s piano-playing, “mixing with them many instructions on execution and taste”; Austen says “Elizabeth received them with all the forbearance of civility” (PP 176). Civility clearly has a great deal to do with decorum, with maintaining social niceties even when one does not feel like being polite, but its practice is also shown to be closely related to morality.20 By not responding rudely or angrily to Lady Catherine, Elizabeth is not merely doing what Mr. Collins asks her to when he tells her to dress simply because Lady Catherine “‘likes to have the distinction of rank preserved’” (PP 161). This would be following the rules. Instead, by putting up with the incivility of others, she learns to practice and preserve her own amiability.
The crucial moment in *Pride and Prejudice* in which the anger of both Darcy and Elizabeth is demonstrated is the first proposal scene. When Darcy finds his proposal rejected, he accuses Elizabeth of incivility: “‘I might, perhaps, wish to be informed why, with so little *endeavour* at civility, I am thus rejected’” (*PP* 190). Struggling for composure despite his anger, he feels that she has been rude in saying that if she “‘could feel gratitude,’” she would thank him (*PP* 190). But of course she cannot feel it, and so she chooses not to pretend that she is grateful for his affections. Despite the fact that he will soon explain his own behavior and his struggles over his regard for her by avowing that “‘disguise of every sort is my abhorrence’” (*PP* 192), he does seem to wish that she had disguised her frank statement that she cannot feel obligation or gratitude. Here again, the virtues are shown to be dramatically interesting, as it just is not possible to practice all the virtues at the same time, because they compete with one another. This is exactly what happens to both Elizabeth and Darcy in this scene. Both attempt to be civil: despite losing “all compassion in anger” when Darcy first speaks of the inferiority of her position, Elizabeth “tried, however, to compose herself to answer him with patience, when he should have done” (*PP* 189). Darcy likewise becomes “pale with anger,” yet he speaks “in a voice of forced calmness” and “with assumed tranquillity [sic]” (*PP* 190–91).

But in spite of their efforts at first to be, or at least to seem, civil, the virtue of amiability comes into direct conflict with the virtue of truthfulness. Neither likes to lie; thus under pressure they tell each other the truth, Darcy that he loves her even though her relations are inferior, and Elizabeth that she cannot feel gratitude and therefore cannot even thank him for his proposal. And Elizabeth, when he accuses her of incivility, counters with her own implied accusation: by asking “‘why with so evident a design of offending and insulting me, you chose to tell me that you liked me against your will, against your reason, and even against your character?’” she argues that he transgressed against civility first, and so she feels justified in asking “‘Was not this some excuse for incivility, if I was uncivil?’” (*PP* 190). When she seeks an excuse for her own reaction, she is not simply searching for something that will explain her transgression against a rule of virtue, a code of conduct, but she is reaching for a tradition in which, as I suggested in chapter three, the virtue of civility exists in tension with the virtue of honesty.

In this scene, neither character can exist for long within that tension, and both are overcome by anger, but, as I have been suggesting, anger is
not necessarily always a bad thing. It is important that Elizabeth and
Darcy struggle not with politeness as it is tested against the temptation to
become rude or angry, but instead they wrestle first with two competing
virtues, amiability and truthfulness, before they become truly angry. It is
hard to be virtuous, but it is even harder when the virtues will not exist
equally and simultaneously. The outbursts of honesty and anger that fol-
low are brief but powerful. With respect to anger, Aristotle calls the
excessive form irascibility or revengefulness, and says that the deficiency
has no real name, but the right disposition is something like patience, or
good temper. He says, "The man who is angry at the right things and
with the right people, and, further, as he ought, when he ought, and as
long as he ought, is praised."21 Neither Elizabeth nor Darcy gives in to
anger completely, as they reveal, honestly, why they are angry, and yet
they are both trying to be patient and civil. Elizabeth again tries “to the
utmost to speak with composure” (PP 192) and Darcy leaves her, with
“incredulity and mortification,” true, but with civil parting words:
“ ‘Forgive me for having taken up so much of your time, and accept my
best wishes for your health and happiness’ ” (PP 193). The apology may
be narrow—he does not apologize for anything he has said or for
injuring her feelings, but his wish for her welfare shows that he can pay
attention to what is apart from himself.

Practicing Amiability and Civility

It is not until Elizabeth and the Gardiners meet him at Pemberley that
Darcy begins to demonstrate that he is learning to practice the virtue of
amiability. Elizabeth is surprised that he wishes to be introduced to her
uncle and aunt—“This was a stroke of civility for which she was quite
unprepared” (PP 254)—and yet she then hears him invite her uncle,
“with the greatest civility, to fish there as often as he chose” (PP 255).
Darcy is practicing civility even toward those he does not know—this is
in sharp contrast to his remarks on his first meeting with Elizabeth. While
Mr. Gardiner suspects that “‘perhaps he may be a little whimsical in his
civilities,’ ” Elizabeth explains to them that Darcy’s “character was by no
means so faulty, nor Wickham’s so amiable, as they had been considered
in Hertfordshire” (PP 258).

Wickham’s manners, his civil behavior and pleasing address, convinced
many that he was amiable; Darcy’s manners, on the other hand, convinced
many that he was guilty of pride, conceit, and even perhaps cantanker-
ousness. Wickham’s character demonstrates that it is possible to be civil
without being truly amiable. The civilities, then, are lesser virtues; though it is still possible to behave in excess or defect of the virtue of civility, this virtue is more a matter of form. Even Miss Bingley can be civil, though hers is often described as “cold civility” (PP 42). Politeness and etiquette may reflect an amiable character and a complex moral life, but they clearly cannot substitute for them. Here the civilities are more like a set of rules to follow, rules that may give the appearance of goodness, and may contribute to the preservation of decorum, but which in isolation from other virtues can be dangerous. Civility often disguises anger, and often should. Yet there are no rules for exactly when and how anger should be concealed or repressed, and when it should be spoken. Once again, the pressure is on the individual to learn, to feel, to know, to judge, and to accept responsibility for mistakes. As Henry Tilney puts it in *Northanger Abbey*, “‘When properly to relax is the trial of judgment’” (NA 134). Prudence and wisdom are essential to the pursuit of justice and the practice of amiability.

Righteous anger is a tremendously difficult concept, and is next to impossible to practice in a virtuous way, and yet in the first proposal scene both Elizabeth and Darcy are justified to some extent in their anger with each other. There is no easy way to be reconciled in a polite compromise. They are trying to find the truth, and they are right to be angry with each other when they suspect deviations from truth. As Aristotle suggests, however, it is important to control anger, and to be sure that one is only angry with the right people, for the right length of time. Near the end of *Pride and Prejudice*, when she and Darcy are discussing that first proposal and he exclaims, “‘How you must have hated me after *that* evening,’” Elizabeth registers her awareness of the changes in her level of anger: “‘Hate you! I was angry perhaps at first, but my anger soon began to take a proper direction’” (PP 369). To understand how anger may work toward justice it will be necessary to consider the difficult questions of prejudice and judgment.

**Prejudice in Favor of the Good**

How can prejudice possibly be defensible? To the extent that it is an unthinking bias against someone or something, it is not; but the idea of having preconceived opinions warrants further consideration. When one is predisposed in favor of something that is good, like fairness, or beauty, or kindness, one’s prejudices prevent one from giving equal weight to things that are opposed to them. If prejudice is understood as prepossession, or
adherence to principle, it is quite different, and much more acceptable, than the idea of judging adversely in advance of the situation or the facts. While Jane Austen does not by any means advocate all prejudice as good, it is worth thinking about prejudice as a complex word and a complex issue in her novels, especially, for obvious reasons, in *Pride and Prejudice*.

For example, Elizabeth is prejudiced in favor of good sense; judging Mr. Collins by that principle, not only in advance of his arrival at Longbourn, but also during his visit there, she finds him deficient. Although she has prejudged him during the conversation with her father and sisters at breakfast when they analyze his letter, her prejudice is borne out by her later observation of his behavior. Her prejudice in favor of good sense leads to a prejudice against, and then a judgment of Mr. Collins’s foolishness, and when his lack of sense threatens to impinge on her own freedom she rejects his offer of marriage in the name of principle. Jane, who has fewer prejudices and is more greatly disposed to approve of everyone—Elizabeth says she is “‘a great deal too apt you know, to like people in general’” (*PP* 14)—might have accepted him.

Good judgment always relies to some extent on prejudices in favor of the good—the difficult thing is determining when a judgment is too hastily made. Judgment involves discrimination, another unfashionable word, in order to make sure that it is good judgment. Tolerance, compassion, and sympathy invoked without limits are just as dangerous as prejudice, discrimination, and judgment made without reason. Just as a virtue is better understood as a quality with limits and degrees rather than as the diametric opposite of a vice, judgment is better understood as incorporating aspects of anger, prejudice, and discrimination, as well as incorporating understanding, mercy, and love, than as a rigid system of negative pronouncements.

The problem, then, for Elizabeth and Darcy, is that although both have understandable and defensible prejudices in favor of civility and good breeding, they both judge each other too quickly as offending against those ideals. That they are apt to judge others is not in itself a bad thing—their judgment is independent, in contrast to Mr. Bingley’s preference of relying on his friends to judge for him, and it is intelligent, in contrast to Jane’s too-generous candor and subsequent susceptibility to Miss Bingley’s guile—but their tendency to judge others before they judge themselves is a serious problem for both Elizabeth and Darcy. Their potential, then, to exercise good judgment is superior, but as yet uneducated, and both make mistakes. As Darcy says of Bingley in his letter to Elizabeth, “‘Bingley has great natural modesty, with a stronger dependence on my judgment than
on his own.—To convince him, therefore, that he had deceived himself
[with regard to Jane’s affection], was no very difficult point” (PP 199).
Darcy is confident in his own powers of perception, and does not stop to
question his own judgment. Likewise, Elizabeth is certain that Charlotte
would never act so foolishly as to show more affection than she feels in
order to secure a husband, and of course is soon obliged to reexamine her
convictions. With respect to each other, their judgments are premature, as
Darcy pronounces Elizabeth tolerable, but not handsome enough to
tempt him, before he has thought very much about her looks or had a
chance to see what effect her liveliness has on her looks, and Elizabeth
establishes her inflexible view that Darcy is proud and disagreeable
before she has even spoken to him. Their prejudices are founded on first
appearances, not even on first impressions of conversation; neither has an
adequate basis for good judgment.

While early on they make wrong decisions, Darcy soon revises his
under the influence of love, and the education he receives from the
moment he begins to love Elizabeth is a difficult one. Love is beautiful,
but education can be painful, as it is hard to come to terms with one’s
own mistakes. The fear of shame, however, as Plato has Phaedrus suggest
in the Symposium, can inspire the individual to learn more and to be
more virtuous. The pursuit of love and the pursuit of the beautiful
involve openness to error. Elaine Scarry writes in On Beauty and Being
Just that beauty “ignites the desire for truth by giving us, with an electric
brightness shared by almost no other uninvited, freely arriving perceptual
event, the experience of conviction and the experience, as well, of
error.”23 Scarry suggests that the love of the beautiful, far from distracting
us from what is just, can instead drive us to seek justice.

In Darcy’s case, by the time he writes his letter to Elizabeth, in the
aftermath of the anger over injustices in the proposal scene, he has realized
that judgment and justice are more difficult than he had previously
thought. In describing why he convinced Bingley of Jane’s indifference,
he shows a new openness to reconsidering his own judgments on the
basis of better information: he writes, “ ‘If you have not been mistaken
here, I must have been in an error. Your superior knowledge of your sister
must make the latter probable.—If it be so, if I have been misled by such
error, to inflict pain on her, your resentment has not been unreasonable’ ”
(PP 197). He also recognizes that she has not had enough information to
judge Wickham correctly: “ ‘Ignorant as you previously were of every
thing concerning either, detection could not be in your power, and
suspicion certainly not in your inclination’ ” (PP 202). Just as the truths
of the proposal scene were painful to both, sorting out the truth in the
letter is painful; the difference is that when he was proposing and then being rejected, Darcy thought only of himself—‘And this . . . is your opinion of me! This is the estimation in which you hold me!’ (PP 192). When he is writing the letter to Elizabeth he is thinking of the pain that the truths he tells will give her: ‘Pardon me.—It pains me to offend you’ (PP 198). In the letter, in addition to explaining his own actions, he is trying to establish what is right: he asks if he has been mistaken regarding Jane, he reveals the reasons for his adverse judgment of Wickham, and he is at pains to judge correctly.

**Learning the Art of Judgment**

In their book *The New Idea of a University*, Duke Maskell and Ian Robinson argue that in Jane Austen’s fiction “There is no saying in advance how we ought or ought not to speak, no prescribing the best style. There are judgements to be made but no rules to follow, no skills to be exercised.”24 While it is true that there are no prescriptions for speech or behavior, judgments are not made without reference to principle. In his letter Darcy appeals to his observation of Jane, which he acknowledges to be incomplete, and his experience of Wickham, which he maintains is a solid basis for judgment. Prejudice formed on superficial observation is shown to be faulty: Darcy needs to learn to look more closely before judging others, to let Bingley judge for himself, and most importantly, to judge himself more strictly than he judges others, and to do that first, while leaving open the possibility that others will behave better than he expects them to. Yet with Wickham, he has greater reason to judge his character because he has seen him deceive again and again. While the Bible would tell Darcy to forgive his brother seventy times seven, or to welcome the prodigal son home again, Wickham is neither Darcy’s brother nor his son, and he is not repentant. And forgiveness does not necessarily mean Darcy has to continue to let Wickham take advantage of him. Judgment is not a skill that can be taught by obeying rules; it is an art. And art is harder to achieve than the correct execution of technical skill.

By writing the letter, Darcy demonstrates some of the ways in which he is learning this art. Reading it, and rereading it, Elizabeth exemplifies Austen’s model for the art of education. Maskell and Robinson suggest that *Pride and Prejudice* provides a framework by which we can understand what education should be. But they point to Mr. Bennet’s breakfast seminar on the textual analysis of Mr. Collins’s letter as the ideal model,
with a learned man offering to young students a piece of writing for discussion. Mrs. Bennet’s response focuses more on her projections for the future than on the matter at hand, saying, “‘There is some sense in what he says about the girls however; and if he is disposed to make them any amends, I shall not be the person to discourage him’ ” (PP 63). Two of his other listeners, preoccupied with other things, decline to comment, as “To Catherine and Lydia, neither the letter nor its writer were in any degree interesting” (PP 64). Each of the other three offers her opinion of the text, with one determined to like it (Jane), one commenting pedantically on style (Mary), and one (Elizabeth) arriving at something resembling the seminar leader’s own opinion, thereby at once demonstrating her critical capacities and pleasing her teacher. The idea of the seminar discussion represented here is a useful comment on education, but it is not the best model for it.

For one thing, Maskell and Robinson give Mr. Bennet too much credit for wisdom. They write that “As Mr. Bennet, without aiming to, just in the ordinary course of domestic life, educates his daughter Elizabeth, so Elizabeth reeducates the formally educated Darcy, and is educated by him in turn.” In the ordinary course of domestic life, Mr. Bennet is usually in his library, ignoring the education of all his daughters, including Elizabeth. And in the breakfast seminar scene, he gives no guidance to his students: he simply offers them a text to think about and then prepares to enjoy laughing at their responses to it. He teaches only his own prejudices. That Elizabeth responds intelligently owes nothing to the powers of the seminar leader (except in this case, perhaps genetic inheritance), and everything to her own judgment: “‘He must be an oddity, I think,’ said she. ‘I cannot make him out.—There is something very pompous in his stile.—And what can he mean by apologizing for being next in the entail.—We cannot suppose he would help it, if he could.—Can he be a sensible man, sir?’ ” (PP 64). In asking this question she is not seeking confirmation of her suspicion, but drawing out the reluctant participant at the table and forcing him to give his own opinion to the group, which he has hitherto concealed from his students just as he has concealed the very fact of the letter and of Mr. Collins’s visit for a month. In both cases he enjoys the concealment and the resulting attention he gets when he does reveal something. At Elizabeth’s prompting, he offers his opinion, which reveals more about his anticipation of entertainment than about his judgment of Mr. Collins’s lack of sense; thus he does not address Elizabeth’s question adequately. He replies, “‘No, my dear; I think not. I have great hopes of finding him quite the reverse. There is a mixture of servility and self-importance in his letter, which promises well. I am impatient to see him’ ” (PP 64).
Elizabeth’s Education

Like Maskell and Robinson, Susan Fraiman sees Mr. Bennet as the source of Elizabeth’s initial intellectual power; however, while they argue that Elizabeth goes on to educate Darcy, Fraiman argues that Elizabeth loses that power: she writes that “Enabled by her father, this unique Bennet daughter sets out with a surplus of intellectual confidence and authority which, in the course of the novel, she must largely relinquish.” Mr. Bennet does recognize Elizabeth’s intellectual superiority, but he is not responsible for her education. When Lady Catherine speculates that if the Bennet girls had no governess—“‘I always say that nothing is to be done in education without steady and regular instruction, and nobody but a governess can give it’”—their “‘mother must have been quite a slave to your education’, ” Elizabeth answers that “that had not been the case”: “‘but such of us as wished to learn, never wanted the means. We were always encouraged to read, and had all the masters that were necessary. Those who chose to be idle, certainly might’” (PP 164–65). In the past Mr. Bennet may have encouraged reading, and provided other instructors or tutors from time to time, but he did not undertake the formal education of his daughters. No more does he contribute to the education of Elizabeth’s judgment in the course of the novel. Elizabeth’s education comes from her own self-examination, and the beginnings of that process arise from her contemplation of Darcy’s letter. This is not to say, as Fraiman does, that Darcy becomes the agent of her education—Fraiman describes “a darker, downward vector” in what she sees as “the narrative that passes Elizabeth from one father to another and, in doing so, takes her from shaping judgments to being shaped by them”—with his letter offering its judgment of her, but that the letter provides the occasion for her to educate herself.

If Elizabeth were to attempt to maintain her self-esteem by persisting in her initial impression of the letter, that would indicate a dark and downward vector. At first she reads “[w]ith a strong prejudice against every thing he might say” (PP 204)—clearly the wrong kind of prejudice, as it makes learning impossible. She is “too angry to have any wish of doing him justice” (PP 204). But although “for a few moments, she flattered herself that her wishes did not err”—that is, that her judgment of Wickham is intact and infallible—and although if she were to do what she intends to do with the letter and “never look in it again” (PP 205) she would indeed confirm her previous judgments and blindly proceed with the vain assurance of her own confidence, she does not put the letter away, and she does not leave her opinions unquestioned. When she
“protest[s] that she would not regard” (PP 205) the letter, it is because she suspects that it will challenge her. At this point, she has not read the whole letter anyway: she “put it hastily away” even “though scarcely knowing any thing of the last page or two” (PP 205). She is not in a position to judge the letter because she has not read the whole text. Reading the whole thing is the first part of education.

The second part is to read it all over again: “when she read, and re-read with the closest attention, the particulars immediately following of Wickham’s resigning all pretensions to the living, of his receiving in lieu, so considerable a sum as three thousand pounds, again she was forced to hesitate” (PP 205). She puts down the letter, deliberates, and then rereads again and again. It is not just the information Darcy provides that makes it possible for her to reformulate her judgment, but the fact that this information prompts her to think more carefully about other things she already knows about Wickham and about Darcy. As she rereads Darcy’s account of Wickham, she finds that “she could bring no proof of its injustice” (PP 205). It is not the revelation that Wickham tried to elope with Georgiana Darcy that causes her to change her mind; she does not rely as others do on Darcy’s judgment alone. The key to her education is the way in which new knowledge enlarges, revises, and enlightens previous knowledge. Elizabeth thinks on the past and focuses on her conversations with Wickham: “She was now struck with the impropriety of such communications to a stranger, and wondered it had escaped her before” (PP 207).

Elizabeth’s education comes from an intense engagement with a significant text that does not tell her how to think or how to live, but inspires her to rethink what she thinks of herself. The consequence of that education is that she is reminded that it is human to be wrong, not always but often, and that in order to know anything she must be humble and careful. In recognizing the extent of her error, she does find it humiliating, but in addition to the humiliation inherent in the situation it is important to note that she sees the justice of her new assessment of herself: “‘How humiliating is this discovery!—Yet how just a humiliation!—Had I been in love, I could not have been more wretchedly blind’ ” (PP 208). To persist in errors that occurred because she had “courted prepossession and ignorance, and driven reason away” (PP 208) would be further folly. It is necessary for her to recognize her fault so that she can turn from it; she has to go to one extreme in order to rise to the other. It is not possible to learn anything if one cannot learn from one’s mistakes.

Elizabeth does not dwell on her humiliation once she has recognized that “‘Till this moment, I never knew myself’ ” (PP 208), but moves on
to further consideration of other things, this time, like Darcy, thinking of
the pain of others rather than of herself. “From herself to Jane—from
Jane to Bingley, her thoughts were in a line which soon brought to her
recollection that Mr. Darcy’s explanation there, had appeared very insuf-
ficient; and she read it again” (PP 208). Once she knows herself, she does
not focus on herself, because she is no longer humiliated: she is free to
think of others, and “Neither could she deny the justice of his descrip-
tion of Jane” (PP 208). Again, the model of her education means that she
reads, thinks, and rereads. This process as Austen dramatizes it in this
passage is a more detailed, more imaginative, more serious, and more
effective example of how education works than the seminar scene with
Mr. Bennet. Mr. Bennet’s method of instruction is self-serving: his goal is
his own entertainment, not the advancement of his students. As Elizabeth
says to Jane in Volume Three, Chapter Twelve, “‘We all love to instruct,
though we can teach only what is not worth knowing’” (PP 343). Virtue
is not easily taught, as the example of Mr. Bennet’s attempt at instruction
demonstrates. Some people, in fact, are incapable of learning much
anyway. But the process of revising judgment on the basis of better infor-
mation reveals, in the scene in which Elizabeth comes to terms with
Darcy’s letter and with her own mind, that virtue can be learned.

Good judgment does not by any means come easily to Elizabeth
following this scene. In fact, she is wary of judgment or action, as is
apparent in her decision not to reveal Wickham’s character to anyone but
Jane, and her subsequent lament after Wickham and Lydia elope that, as
she says to Darcy,” ‘Oh! had I known what I ought, what I dared, to do!
But I knew not—I was afraid of doing too much’” (PP 277–78). Once
Wickham involves Lydia in his escapades, Elizabeth is firm in her revised
judgment of him—“‘Wickham will never marry a woman without
some money. He cannot afford it’”—but she is also careful to acknowledge
the limits of her knowledge: “As to what restraint the apprehension of
disgrace in the corps might throw on a dishonourable elopement with
her, I am not able to judge; for I know nothing of the effects that such
a step might produce” (PP 283).

Although her judgment is moderated, as I argued in the introduction,
it has not disappeared and it is still her own. Fraiman argues that “Darcy
woos away not Elizabeth’s ‘prejudice,’ but her judgment entire.” This
reading is based primarily on the passage in the novel in which Elizabeth
begins

...
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. (PP 312)

Fraiman objects to this passage, saying that “What may surprise and sadden us, . . . and what the novel surely registers with a touch of irony, is that a heroine who began so competent to judge should end up so critically disabled, so reliant for judgment on somebody else.”31 But Austen does not say that Elizabeth would adopt Darcy’s judgments; she would benefit from his wider experience, which is simply a way to gain access to some of the aspects of more formal education that have been denied her as a woman. Their marriage will be a marriage of equals, as Mr. Bennet’s warning to Elizabeth about avoiding an unequal marriage indicates. Elizabeth does not see it as marriage to a superior any more than she sees it as marriage to an inferior, as I have discussed in the introduction. By the time she marries Darcy she has already helped him to reeducate his own judgment, and so for him to share his knowledge of the world with her does not mean she will be subservient to all his views.

**Courage and Love**

The process of learning good judgment, virtuous judgment, in *Pride and Prejudice* is extremely difficult. How does one know how to judge without excessive prejudice, excessive anger, and without arrogance, self-righteousness, and rigid intolerance? The answer implicit in the novel is through the prudence and wisdom to adhere to good principles in the first place, but also through the courage to learn, accept, and revise the places where one goes wrong. *Pride and Prejudice* is about cultivating the courage to be open to education through a constant revision of self-knowledge in order to try to understand one’s principles better and to act according to them. Paradoxically, courage requires humility. Those who resist Austen’s insistence that after Elizabeth learns what Darcy has done to bring about Lydia’s marriage, “For herself she was humbled; but she was proud of him,” do not give full weight to the next sentence: “Proud that in a cause of compassion and honour, he had been able to get the better of himself” (PP 327). This passage highlights the paradoxical interdependence of virtues, for in order to act courageously in the
name of honor, Darcy has had to humble his pride and act with compassion, not condescension. And Elizabeth is humbled not because he has condescended to help her family, but because she feels anew the injustice of her early treatment of him: “Oh! how heartily did she grieve over every ungracious sensation she had ever encouraged, every saucy speech she had ever directed towards him” (PP 327). This echo of the general Confession in the Book of Common Prayer points to the Christian nature of the humility with which both Darcy and Elizabeth therefore approach marriage.32 Both of them repent and confess, and resolve to act better in future: this pattern represents the eternal quest of the Christian soul to reach a state of grace. It is because Darcy and Elizabeth discover humility that they are both able to submit to each other in Christian marriage.

Justice and Memory

Jane Austen is interested in how characters can act courageously in the service of truth and justice. Part of that service involves sympathy, as Darcy learns to see where he gives pain to others, and Elizabeth’s knowledge of her self makes it possible for her to think more of others. David E. Gamble compares Elizabeth’s education in sympathetic judgment with the process Adam Bede goes through when he learns he has misjudged Hetty Sorrel, and he concludes that “In the end, Lizzie and Adam both show that sympathy is not so much a matter of truth as it is a practical necessity for dealing with others and the world.” Invoking George Eliot’s image of the pier-glass from Chapter 27 of Middlemarch, Gamble writes that “Our sympathy is itself a light which distorts its objects—the only difference is that it seems to work a little better than egoism.” Although this may be true of how sympathy works in Eliot’s novels, Gamble bases his argument about Austen on Elizabeth’s injunction to Darcy to “ ‘Think only of the past as its remembrance gives you pleasure’ ” (PP 369), and he suggests that Elizabeth is willing to forget the past “for the sake of the future amiability.”33 Like Gamble, Claudia L. Johnson reads this as a serious statement of Elizabeth’s, and Austen’s, philosophy about “the wish for and experience of happiness and pleasure.”34 Austen is not sending Elizabeth in pursuit of the freedom of pleasure, however, but in pursuit of happiness as a good. And Darcy does not believe Elizabeth believes what she calls her philosophy—“‘I cannot give you credit for any philosophy of the kind,’ ” he says (PP 369). Elizabeth does not really believe this philosophy, given how much time she has spent in
the course of the narrative going over the past, spending more time remembering painful things than pleasant, because she wishes to learn from the most difficult things. The characters in Pride and Prejudice who do think on the past only as it gives them pleasure are Lydia and Wickham: on their visit to Longbourn following their wedding, “They seemed each of them to have the happiest memories in the world. Nothing of the past was recollected with pain” (PP 316).

In the first proposal scene, the writing of the letter, and Elizabeth’s reading of the letter and her subsequent reassessment of her memory of the past, both Elizabeth and Darcy have experienced pain. They have had to acknowledge their mistakes, and they have had to revise their memories of past events. Darcy has had to admit that Elizabeth is probably right about Jane, and he later acknowledges to Bingley that he made a mistake in keeping from him the news that Jane was in London. Both Darcy and Elizabeth examine their memories, and both of them find the process painful. Yet when it is over, they do not then forget. They forgive each other, and their memories of the pain of having their pride humbled will fade with time. But they do not seriously advocate the beauty of forgetting as the solution to being overburdened with memories. The justice that comes with remembering and examining memory is far more beautiful than the playfulness of selective forgetting could ever be.

**Learning to Practice the Virtues**

Austen suggests in Pride and Prejudice that we need not all remember everything all of the time, and we may need to forgive and forget, but the balance between memory and forgetting must be negotiated at the right time, in the right manner, for the right length of time, and so on. It will not do to create new memories based on inclination and pleasure. This is not Austen’s idea of freedom. Freedom will only come with a just understanding of the past, present, and future, and for that her heroines need to examine and reexamine their memories, their motivations, and to act in future with an understanding based on just memories of the past.

In their discussion following the second proposal, Darcy says to Elizabeth about his letter that “‘I knew... that what I wrote must give you pain, but it was necessary’” (PP 368). Justice is difficult and judgment of character and action can be painful, but the difficulty and the pain are sometimes necessary. Darcy regrets the bitterness of the beginning of the letter, but Elizabeth assures him that “‘The adieu is
charity itself’ ” (PP 368). In the same way that he limited his anger at the end of the first proposal by offering his best wishes for her health and happiness, he concluded the letter by saying, “‘I will only add, God bless you’ ” (PP 203). Darcy’s own education, though not represented in the same detail as Elizabeth’s, arises equally from his gradual conviction of the rightness of her criticism of his conduct. Especially in her attack on the fact that he did not behave as a gentleman, he has received a shock, and he says that her words “‘have tortured me;—though it was some time, I confess, before I was reasonable enough to allow their justice’ ” (PP 367–68). “Gentleman-like” behavior is here not only manners, but morals, as Darcy, like Elizabeth, must recognize how to change in order to behave justly. Just behavior is not simply the kind of restorative justice that Darcy brings about in the case of Lydia’s marriage to Wickham, either. Before either Darcy or Elizabeth can act to restore justice, they must reach a philosophical standpoint from which they can appraise their own minds justly.

In *Pride and Prejudice*, justice is achieved through education, and education is possible only through courage, humility, and love. As Maskell and Robinson rightly observe, “Without love education will not get far.” Integral to education is the ability to make good judgments about the world, a text, another person, and especially one’s self, in order to move beyond the self and enter into engagement with the world, through reading and through sympathizing with other people. Maskell and Robinson are right that “Jane Austen goes further” than Socrates does in his suggestion that “‘The unreasoned life . . . is not worth living’”: for Austen, “a life without judgement . . . would not be a human life at all.”36 To be truly virtuous, civility must be accompanied by genuine amiability (which Wickham does not have), and amiability must be exhibited through the forms of civility (which Darcy learns). Virtues may be thrown into competition with each other (as Elizabeth and Darcy discover when they try to uphold the virtues of civility, honesty, and patience), but although they don’t always coexist peacefully and simultaneously, they are nevertheless dependent on one another.

It is in the education of judgment that virtue can flourish; courage and justice and love are the serious ideals of *Pride and Prejudice*. The novel brilliantly outlines ways to know what virtue is and how to practice it, and in doing so, *Pride and Prejudice* exemplifies Austen’s fullest expression of the range of the virtues. Yet it is not an ethical manual or treatise, but a serious and comic novel of morals and manners. In its investigation of the serious questions of anger, prejudice, and judgment, and of the way in which these concepts may be seen as integral to the tradition of the
virtues of justice and love, *Pride and Prejudice* is, I think, Austen’s most accomplished novel. At the conclusion of the novel, Elizabeth writes to her aunt Mrs. Gardiner, uniting the ideals of justice and happiness in the announcement of her union with Darcy: she writes that “‘I am the happiest creature in the world. Perhaps other people have said so before, but not one with such justice’” (*PP* 382–83).
CHAPTER FIVE

Fanny Price and the Contemplative Life

. . . the welfare of every Nation depends upon the virtue of it’s individuals.

—Jane Austen, “Catharine,” Volume the Third (MW 232)

Poor Fanny Price—much of the criticism of Mansfield Park criticizes her for being prim, proper, and priggish. From one of Austen’s most lovable heroines, Elizabeth Bennet, I turn, then, to one of her least, Fanny Price. Fanny has been called “a caricature of goodness,” or “a weak woman with self-defensive and self-aggrandizing impulses.” Some have suggested that “with purity that seems prudish and reserve bordering on hypocrisy, Fanny is far less likeable than Austen’s other heroines,” or that “Fanny’s is a negation of what is commonly meant by character,” or that “fiction holds no heroine more repulsive in her cast-iron self-righteousness and steely rigidity of prejudice” than Fanny Price.1 Few critics defend Fanny as likeable, and even fewer argue that she’s interesting. Those who argue that she’s dramatically interesting often feel that they need to find in her some kind of deviousness, deformity, or hypocrisy.2

Moral education in Northanger Abbey as well as in Sense and Sensibility and Pride and Prejudice involves learning to judge characters and situations with prudence, strength, and justice. After the first few chapters of Mansfield Park, which describe Fanny’s youth, Fanny seems to know almost infallibly how to judge character and action. The problem she confronts is how to keep judging correctly and abide by her judgments consistently. Unlike Catherine, Marianne, and Elizabeth, she seems to have little left to learn. Fanny Price is more like Elinor Dashwood in her confident knowledge of human nature. But Fanny is also like Elinor in
that she struggles to hold fast to her principles. Both heroines, already well-educated, still find it hard to maintain their moral rectitude when they are surrounded by well-meaning people who pressure them to conform to the morally relaxed expectations of society.

When Edmund attempts to persuade Fanny to accept Henry Crawford, he tells her he has told the Crawfords that she was “‘of all human creatures the one, over whom habit had most power, and novelty least: and that the very circumstance of the novelty of Crawford’s addresses was against him’” (MP 354). He has explained and defended her by saying that “‘you could tolerate nothing that you were not used to’” (MP 354). Is Edmund right that Fanny is a creature of habit; and, more importantly, is it true that habit prevents her from responding to anything new? What are Fanny’s principles, and why does she resist Crawford’s offer and the encouragement of the Bertrams and of Mary Crawford to accept it? Fanny’s recourse to principle and her tendency to act from habit call into question the flexibility of the virtues in this novel. Whereas in Pride and Prejudice or Sense and Sensibility virtue is made possible by the habit of exercising judgment, in Mansfield Park it would appear that virtue does involve acting according to principle and the precedent of habit.

Henry Crawford asks, “‘What is her character? . . . —Is she prudish?’” (MP 230), struggling to make sense of Fanny’s character, but even he admits that “‘I do not quite know what to make of Miss Fanny. I do not understand her’” (MP 230). In this chapter I investigate her character further in order to try to understand it, and I argue that she is interesting because her liveliness is in the life of the mind. She is thoughtful, contemplative, and actively engaged in thinking through the situations she confronts in the course of the novel. She is neither dull nor passive. She is temperate, she engages in serious philosophical contemplation, and she may be Jane Austen’s strongest heroine. A predominant concern in the novel, exemplified most vividly by the contrast between Lady Bertram and Mrs. Norris, is the question of temperance. In the case of these two women, temperance has to do with the habits of living that all too easily tend toward either indolence or officious exertion. Fanny, on the other hand, attempts to balance contemplation with activity, and while she may not always arrive at the temperate mean, she is strong, independent, and interested in growth and development. Her habit of obeying her relatives may make it seem as if she is an example of virtuous passivity, but her active contemplation of moral questions, especially her decision not to participate in the play and her decision not to marry Henry Crawford, shows how much she values the life of the mind.3
The problem with reading *Mansfield Park* as a narrative in which, in the words of one critic, “Fanny herself is little more than a fetishistic commodity, essentially bought and sold by members of her family, encouraged to prostitute herself for rank and wealth, and doubly deserted by both her immediate and her adopted relatives,” is that it ignores Fanny’s resistance to being bought and sold. To see her as a commodity is to look at her from the viewpoint of the Crawfords, and to a lesser extent the Bertrams. It is true that the narrator’s voice is more lively than Fanny’s, but this does not imply that the narrator is necessarily aligned with Mary Crawford. Throughout the novel the narrator criticizes the Crawfords along the same lines as Fanny does, and thus the ending of *Mansfield Park* is not a belated attempt to suppress the liveliness of the worldly characters, as some have argued. What is at stake in the interpretation of Fanny’s character is the crucial question of whether Austen was looking forward to a commodity culture or reaching for a tradition in which a heroine like Fanny Price could be taken seriously.

**Fanny’s Strength**

There is a critical reluctance to allow Fanny the power of a heroine: it is almost as if literary criticism has marginalized her in the same way that the Bertrams do at first. When Fanny first arrives at Mansfield and begins her education along with her cousins, Maria and Julia think her “prodigiously stupid” (*MP* 18), while Sir Thomas and Mrs. Norris decide that “‘though far from clever, she showed a tractable disposition, and seemed likely to give them little trouble’” (*MP* 18). Mrs. Norris points out to her nieces that “‘There is a vast deal of difference in memories’” (*MP* 19), and although she gives this as a reason why Maria and Julia should pity Fanny’s “‘deficiency,’ ” the fact that their supposedly superior memories are exercised by the recitation of “‘the kings of England,’ ” “‘the Roman emperors,’ ” “‘the Heathen Mythology,’ ” “‘the Metals, Semi-Metals, Planets, and distinguished philosophers’” (*MP* 18–19), rather than by the synthesis of ideas they have learned, demonstrates instead that their education is deficient. Fanny, on the other hand, “could read, work, and write, but she had been taught nothing more” (*MP* 18). Nothing more—when reading and writing are the foundations of education. As long as she continues to practice reading and writing, she is not likely to be really deficient. Her cousins, Austen reveals, are “entirely deficient in the less common acquirements of self-knowledge, generosity, and humility” (*MP* 19). So, for that matter, is Mary Crawford, and the narrator’s early
criticisms of Maria and Julia are consistent with later criticisms of Miss Crawford as well, while Fanny is shown to be generous and humble, willing to serve others. Self-knowledge is a virtue for all Austen heroines, as Elizabeth Bennet’s epiphany demonstrates vividly: “‘Till this moment, I never knew myself’” (PP 208). The narrator says of Sir Thomas’s daughters, however, that “In every thing but disposition, they were admirably taught” (MP 19).

Much later in the novel, during the ball at Mansfield, Sir Thomas undertakes to demonstrate to Henry Crawford that Fanny is a malleable character, easily persuaded to follow the wishes of those in authority. “[I]nterfering a little with her inclination,” he advises her to go to bed—“‘Advise’ was his word, but it was the advice of absolute power . . . It might occur to him that Mr. Crawford had been sitting by her long enough, or he might mean to recommend her as a wife by shewing her persuadableness” (MP 280–81). Taken on its own, this statement by the narrator could be an indictment of the patriarch’s power. But going to bed a little earlier than she wishes is a relatively small sacrifice for Fanny to make in order to preserve peace, especially as “her inclination and strength for more [dancing] were pretty well at an end” anyway (MP 279). When it comes to the important decisions of her life, however, she does not respond out of habitual deference to authority.

Yet her docility is what everyone counts on, from Henry Crawford, who once he has resolved to marry her “warmly expatiated on” Fanny’s “graces of manner and goodness of heart,” her “gentleness, modesty, and sweetness,” her “patience and forbearance” (MP 294); and Mary Crawford, who exclaims that “‘You will have a sweet little wife; all gratitude and devotion’” (MP 292); to Edmund, who urges her to “‘prove yourself grateful and tender-hearted; and then you will be the perfect model of a woman, which I have always believed you born for’” (MP 347). 6 Edmund thinks that proving herself “‘upright and disinterested’” (MP 347) is only the first step on the way to model womanhood, and he asks her to act as she always has in the ordinary course of life at Mansfield Park; that is, to act out her gratitude by conforming to the wishes of her friends. What they expect of her are the “spaniel-like virtues” that Mary Wollstonecraft criticizes so vehemently. The Bertrams and Crawfords ask Fanny to submit once again, as she has in the past in serving others. It is one thing for Fanny to sacrifice her time and energy for the comforts and whims of others, but it is quite a different thing to sacrifice her body and soul to the preferences of those she cannot trust. Resisting that sacrifice means sacrificing the good opinion of many, possibly forever. The decision Fanny makes, to reject Crawford on
the basis of a carefully considered judgment of his past behavior, is not priggish, it is admirable. And she does reject him on that basis: it is her judgment of his character even more than her prior love for Edmund that leads her to this decision. She may have been docile in the past, easily serving others and never asserting herself, but to speak out, to resist, and to hold fast to her decision is not proof of morally prim and proper behavior, but of strong, independent judgment coming from someone long used to submission.

The Bertrams and Crawfords cannot quite believe that she has this much power. Edmund in particular has trouble accepting her strength because he persists in thinking he has formed her mind and her judgment, and therefore continues to exert control over it. When he and Fanny first discuss Miss Crawford’s character, Edmund concludes that they think alike—“‘I am glad you saw it all as I did’”—and the narrator suggests that “Having formed her mind and gained her affections, he had a good chance of her thinking like him” (MP 64), but even so early in the novel, she does not think entirely as he does, calling Miss Crawford’s comments about her uncle “ungrateful” despite Edmund’s assessment that they are merely “indecorous” comments, and questioning the good nature of a brother who does not trouble to write to his sisters. Edmund’s conclusion is that Mary Crawford is “‘perfectly feminine, except in the instances we have been speaking of. There she cannot be justified’” (MP 64). Fanny has not withdrawn her criticisms, and so Edmund’s conclusion is evidence more of his deference to Fanny’s definition of what is feminine and appropriate than of his power over her judgments. In fact, he saw it all as she did.

Early in the novel, at Sir Thomas’s departure for Antigua, Fanny is a good judge of her own character. Like her cousins the Miss Bertrams, she is relieved that he is going, but unlike them she recognizes that her feelings on the occasion are deficient. She knows that she should love and care for him, and she “grieved because she could not grieve” (MP 33). This recognition is the appropriate assessment of what is due to someone who has cared for her, not a reluctant submission to authority. Fanny is very much aware of the workings of her own mind, in a way that Maria and Julia are not, and in the course of the novel her reliance on its powers becomes both more frequent and more interesting. If she were truly priggish, she would be either always self-righteous in her moral judgments, or else self-righteous in her submission to the moral judgments of others, yet she is neither. When she first forms her opinion of Crawford’s reprehensible behavior toward and with her cousins, the narrator says that “had her confidence in her own judgment been equal to her exercise of
it in every other respect, had she been sure that she was seeing clearly, and judging candidly, she would probably have made some important communications to her usual confidant” (MP 115). Instead, she “only hazarded a hint, and the hint was lost” (MP 115). This scene could have been a major turning point in the novel, if only Fanny had been priggish in her condemnation of Crawford, and capable of convincing Edmund that she was right, by telling him what she witnessed between Maria and Crawford at the gate of Sotherton. Although Mrs. Norris believes that the elopement of the adulterous pair could have been prevented if only Fanny had married Crawford, to the extent that Fanny can be blamed for any of it, it is her lack of confidence in her own judgment that means she cannot assert herself at this point to expose their behavior at Sotherton. Fanny knows her own mind, but does not yet trust it.

**The Life of the Mind**

Fanny’s judgment and Edmund’s are early on distinct, and they diverge even more when the question of acting in *Lovers’ Vows* arises. When Edmund proposes to Fanny that he act the part of Anhalt in order to prevent his brother from admitting Charles Maddox, an outsider, to the intimacy of their party at Mansfield Park, he is aware that she does not think as he does—“‘I see your judgment is not with me’” (MP 154)—and when Sir Thomas returns home and interrupts the theatricals, Edmund is clear that Fanny’s judgment has been right, and that it has been different from his own—“‘Fanny is the only one who has judged rightly throughout, who has been consistent’” (MP 187). Yet when it comes to Crawford’s proposal for marriage, Edmund’s memory is faulty and he professes blindness to their differences in the past as well as in the present. At precisely the moment when it should be clearest to him that Fanny’s thoughts are not only different from his own and his father’s, but strongly opposed to them, he attempts to maintain the illusion that she is still his pupil, still following the lines of his judgment. To her objection that “‘I am afraid we think too differently, for me to find any relief in talking of what I feel,’” he protests, “‘Do you suppose that we think differently? I have no idea of it. I dare say, that on a comparison of our opinions, they would be found as much alike as they have been used to be’” (MP 346). Edmund has to reach back to the time when his and Fanny’s ideas were one; he is oblivious to the change in her and to her increased confidence in her own mind. This blindness is ironic, especially as it is probably partly because of his commendation of her consistent and correct judgment
following the episode of *Lovers’ Vows* that she has learned to place her trust in herself.

It is only partly to do with his approbation of her behavior, because the greater part of her confidence in her judgment comes simply from having thought about the matter a great deal, and worked through her reservations in order to arrive at a conviction of her own intelligence and rectitude. She does not make her decision about the play easily, and she agonizes over the decision even after she has made it: she retires to bed that night with her mind full of the problem (*MP* 150), and finds no comfort in sleeping on the question. Michael Giffin suggests that the white attic that is Fanny’s bedroom is “a trope for Greek thinking or the life of the mind.” It is not the attic, however, where the life of the mind thrives for Fanny, but the East room: “The little white attic, which had continued her sleeping room ever since her first entering the family, proving incompetent to suggest any reply” to her dilemma, “she had recourse, as soon as she was dressed, to another apartment, more spacious and more meet for walking about in, and thinking, and of which she had now for some time been almost equally mistress” (*MP* 150).

When she is agonizing about the play, after Edmund has consulted her and made his decision to play Anhalt, Fanny assures herself of her own decision—“She could not feel that she had done wrong herself, but she was disquieted in every other way. Her heart and her judgment were equally against Edmund’s decision” (*MP* 159)—it has not been easy for her to arrive at that certainty. Pacing in the East room, she has explored her mind and her motivations: “she had begun to feel undecided as to what she ought to do; and as she walked round the room her doubts were increasing. Was she right in refusing what was so warmly asked, so strongly wished for?” (*MP* 152–53). Beginning to feel that perhaps she owes her cousins as well as her uncle gratitude and obedience, she is interrupted by Edmund’s knock and his conversation about whether he should participate in the play. Through a combination of solitary reflection and engagement with her cousin on the subject of ethical behavior, Fanny arrives at the conviction that she has been right to refuse to act. The idea that Edmund could be inconsistent in his principles is disconcerting to her, and prompts her to hold all the more strongly and consistently to her own.

It may be objected that Fanny’s jealousy of Miss Crawford, heightened as it is by the realization that Edmund is going to act for and with her, is the ultimate motivation for Fanny to stick to her principles. She laments that “Alas! it was all Miss Crawford’s doing. She had seen her influence in every speech [of Edmund’s] and was miserable” (*MP* 156). Her misery.
over the question of her own participation appears to dissolve in the misery of unrequited love exacerbated by the knowledge that the beloved prefers another: “The doubts and alarms as to her own conduct, which had previously distressed her, and which had all slept while she listened to him, were become of little consequence now. This deeper anxiety swallowed them up. . . . it was all misery now” (MP 156–57). But to return to the passage quoted above, both Fanny’s heart and her judgment are equally against Edmund’s decision, as “she could not acquit his unsteadiness; and his happiness under it made her wretched” (MP 159). Her love for Edmund and her respect for his judgment in other things serve to emphasize for her how misguided it is to be inconsistent in moral behavior.

Edmund has taught Fanny well to begin with, but his infatuation with Mary Crawford, which he later admits was not with her as a woman, but as “‘the creature of my own imagination’” (MP 458) has led him to attempt to teach Fanny more by his wrong-headed example than by theoretical moral instruction. As a clergyman, Edmund hopes to be of use not only as a preacher, but as an example: he tells Miss Crawford when they are in the Sotherton chapel that “‘where the parish and neighbourhood are of a size capable of knowing his private character, and observing his general conduct,’” a good clergyman will be able to influence “‘public manners,’” which he says “‘might rather be called conduct, perhaps, the result of good principles’” and of the doctrines they teach (MP 93). His speech is reminiscent of Chaucer’s description of the Parson in the General Prologue to the Canterbury Tales: “This noble ensample to his sheep he yaf, / That first he wrought, and afterward he taughte.”9 That is, he not only preaches but practices morality before he dares to preach it to others. Edmund’s conclusion, which grants a great deal of power to clergymen, suggests that “‘it will, I believe, be every where found, that as the clergy are, or are not what they ought to be, so are the rest of the nation’” (MP 93).

But although Edmund’s decision to act spreads moral consequences to Tom and Maria Bertram—“Edmund had descended from that moral elevation which he had maintained before, and they were both as much the better as the happier for the descent” (MP 158)—his influence has the opposite effect on Fanny. Edmund’s behavior may represent the general moral tenor of life at Mansfield Park at this point, but it does not have the power to alter the whole fabric of moral life in this nation in miniature. At this point Edmund is not yet a clergyman, but he claims to be thinking as if he is one, as can be seen in his initial protest that he should not play Anhalt because “‘the man who chooses the profession
itself, is, perhaps, one of the last who would wish to represent it on the stage’” (MP 145). The “nation,” however, is shown to depend for its welfare not on the virtue of its clergymen, but on the virtue of its individuals, as Jane Austen has Mrs. Percival suggest in “Catharine” (MW 232), in the phrase I have used as the epigraph for this chapter.

Because of her love for Edmund, Fanny learns from his example, whether that example is positive or negative. She learns this not only because he has taught her well, but also because she has read a great deal—among her reading materials in the East room is Johnson’s *Idler*, for example. And Austen’s description of Susan Price offers a further insight into the formation of Fanny’s mind, principles, and independent judgment. Although Fanny first despair of Susan’s character, she comes to realize that Susan has natural advantages: “Her greatest wonder on the subject” was that “so much better knowledge, so many good notions, should have been hers at all; and that, brought up in the midst of negligence and error, she should have formed such proper opinions of what ought to be—she, who had no cousin Edmund to direct her thoughts or fix her principles” (MP 397–98). This passage suggests that Fanny did not necessarily need Edmund’s guidance to develop her mind either, and Fanny’s recognition of this possibility helps her to prepare for further resistance to Henry Crawford, whose visit to Portsmouth follows in the very next chapter. Having learned from Susan’s example that her own mind is not entirely indebted to or reliant upon Edmund’s teaching and example, Fanny is bold enough to say confidently to Crawford’s flattery of her—“‘Your judgment is my rule of right’”—that he is quite wrong: she exclaims, “‘Oh, no!—do not say so. We have all a better guide in ourselves, if we would attend to it, than any other person can be’” (MP 412). That “if we would attend to it” is important, as it implies both that most people do not listen to that better guide, and that she has not always attended to it confidently herself.

**Moral Duty**

Because of her gratitude to Sir Thomas, Fanny has often been aligned with his moral code by critics wishing to establish that she is passive, obedient, and long-suffering—a model niece, a model daughter, and the perfect wife for any man, whether Henry Crawford or Edmund Bertram. I have argued thus far instead that Fanny’s moral principles are quite distinct from Sir Thomas’s and from Edmund’s, despite a number of similarities, and despite her acquiescence to the wishes of her
aunts and uncle in matters of everyday life and conduct. In fact it is because her principles are higher than theirs that she submits to serve her aunts and show her gratitude to her uncle. Having discussed Fanny’s independence of mind and judgment, I want to turn now to her habit of submission. Is Fanny’s adherence to principle a matter of regularly submitting to what she perceives as her moral duty? The frequent emphasis in the narrative on the word principle appears to suggest that she does act according to rules. While she does think carefully about the judgments she makes, she sometimes finds safety in the ultimate recourse to a code of conduct that regulates her life.

What kind of habits does Fanny have, then, and how are they related to her sense of duty? Tony Tanner says of her that “She prefers custom and habit to novelty and innovation, and her resolute immobility, frail and beset though it is, is a last gesture of resistance against the corrosions of unfettered impulse and change.” He criticizes Fanny along the usual lines, saying that it makes her even less sympathetic that “She is never, ever, wrong”; she “always thinks, feels, speaks and behaves exactly as she ought.” Tanner proposes that there is “an intimate and significant connexion between her virtue and her immobility.” As I have already argued, although Fanny is eventually vindicated in her moral choices, she sometimes thinks she is wrong, and she has to struggle to learn to trust herself, risking being wrong. And she does not always behave as she ought, but she is often aware of not doing so, and that she is aware of it means that she is participating in moral growth. It is Sir Thomas and Edmund who say that she behaves “as she ought”; that is, as they wish her to.

Alasdair MacIntyre suggests that when Fanny refuses Henry Crawford “she places the danger of losing her soul before the reward of gaining what for her would be a whole world. She pursues virtue for the sake of a certain kind of happiness and not for its utility.” S.L. Goldberg argues against MacIntyre’s reading of *Mansfield Park* as Aristotelian, saying that MacIntyre is wrong to identify Fanny’s rejection of Henry Crawford as the central act of courage in the novel. Goldberg writes that “It is made absolutely clear in the novel itself that no one in it would expect a girl, even with Fanny’s ‘mediocre’ social position to look forward to, to marry without feeling love or some semblance of it.” While it may be clear to the reader, to Jane Austen, and to Fanny that no one should expect Fanny to marry without love, it is not so clear for her guardian and his wife. Sir Thomas acknowledges that Fanny does “not owe [him] the duty of a child,” but he makes it known that if either of his daughters had refused such a proposal, he would “have thought it a gross violation of duty and respect” (*MP* 319). Lady Bertram voices the social and familial opinion
about what Fanny ought to do: in what is “almost the only rule of conduct, the only piece of advice, which Fanny had ever received from her aunt in the course of eight years and a half,” she tells her niece that she must accept Henry Crawford’s proposal, because “‘you must be aware, Fanny, that it is every young woman’s duty to accept such a very unexceptionable offer as this’” (MP 333). But Fanny has a better sense of where her duty really lies: after her second interview with Sir Thomas, she tries to understand why he insists on her marrying Crawford, yet she resolves that “She must do her duty, and trust that time might make her duty easier than it now was” (MP 331).

Tanner’s interpretation of Fanny’s immobility is problematic: she is not immobile, nor does she desire to be. MacIntyre is right that Fanny shows courage in her refusal of Crawford. She is emotionally strong, she wishes for exercise, and she desires to be helpful to the family. Although the wish to be helpful is taken for granted, the wish for exercise is less often gratified. Call it constancy rather than immobility: she does not choose physical immobility, and she certainly does not suffer from the indolent consequences of an inactive mind. If she were a hero rather than a heroine, would this characteristic be more likely to be called prudence, courage, or constancy? Tanner admits that “In her stillness she is not inactive: on the contrary, she is often holding on strenuously to standards and values which others all around her are thoughtlessly abandoning.”13 But he maintains that tranquility is what she desires above all, contrasting Mary Crawford’s claim during the game of “Speculation” that “‘I will stake my last like a woman of spirit. No cold prudence for me. I am not born to sit still and do nothing’” (MP 243). Neither is Fanny born to sit still and do nothing. Even when she is sitting still, under the constraints of her family, she does not do “nothing.” She is thinking, long and deeply, contemplating the consequences of her thoughts and her actions, consequences both for herself and for the actions of others. The habit of contemplation that she relies on means that she is not the tractable relation, the immobile cousin, “the stationary niece,”14 but a woman with a fiercely active and courageous mind: Fanny’s action is in the contemplative life. Of all Jane Austen’s heroines, she is the one who reaches philosophical wisdom.

The habit of contemplation means that she can exercise her independent judgment, but what about her habit of doing what others ask—does she submit in body, though not in spirit? And does this make her hypocritical? For example, when Mary Crawford calls to visit her and to scold her for not loving Henry, Fanny sees this visit as a “formidable threat”—she has lived “in continual terror” of the visit—yet when
her guest implores her for the opportunity to speak alone together, Fanny cannot resist: “Denial was impossible. Her habits of ready submission, on the contrary, made her almost instantly rise and lead the way out of the room. She did it with wretched feelings, but it was inevitable” (MP 356–357). The habit of politeness requires her to submit to the interview. Just as Elinor Dashwood’s politeness makes claims on her behavior that may oppose her feelings, Fanny’s decorum prohibits her from refusing her guest’s wishes. Like Elinor, however, she finds it possible to balance her judgment and her behavior. Fanny does submit to Miss Crawford’s wish, but she remains silent through much of this scene, listening to but not acquiescing in her visitor’s opinions. At one point, both women are quiet, “each thoughtful; Fanny meditating on the different sorts of friendship in the world, Mary on something of less philosophic tendency” (MP 360). Fanny is indeed philosophical here, contemplating, as many philosophers have before her, the nature and definitions of varieties of friendship. While her silence allows Mary to misconstrue her meaning and exclaim that she hopes Fanny’s “‘reverie’” is due to her thinking “‘of one who is always thinking of you’” (MP 360)—that is, Henry—it probably wouldn’t much matter what Fanny said here, because Mary, like her brother and the Bertrams, is determined that Fanny will think in conformity with all their wishes at last.

Fanny’s habit of outward conformity, then, does lead those around her to believe that she is submissive. The difference in her habits of submission, however, is that while she performs the tasks her relatives require of her out of a sense of gratitude and of love and duty, she obeys Miss Crawford’s demands on her time because she is used to obeying her relatives. As the narrator says of Fanny’s visits to the parsonage to visit Miss Crawford once her cousins have left Mansfield Park, she went “without any sense of obligation for being sought after now when nobody else was to be had” (MP 208). Is she wrong to fall in line with Miss Crawford’s wishes too easily? Does she see Miss Crawford out of a jealous desire to know her rival? She visits with her, but she sets limits on their intimacy, and she never pretends to show affection for her when she feels none. And her sense of politeness and charity toward others means that she cannot shun her neighbors completely.

Her habit of obeying orders means also that she even has to obey Mrs. Norris. During the preparations for the play, she follows orders, yet she does not submit more than she has to: “She worked very diligently under her aunt’s directions, but her diligence and her silence concealed a very absent, anxious mind; and about noon she made her escape with her
work to the East room, that she might have no concern in another, and as she deemed it, most unnecessary rehearsal of the first act, which Henry Crawford was just proposing” (MP 168). It may appear hypocritical of her to work diligently and conceal her absent, anxious mind; but the alternative is unthinkable: to tell everyone about her anxieties? or to refuse to work, pleading indisposition? How honest does a virtuous person have to be? Virtue often has as much to do with not telling as with telling and revealing, as the virtue of honesty comes into tension with the virtue of prudence. In this scene Fanny’s mind is absent not because she is not thinking at all, but because its freedom exists symbolically in the East room, which is where she goes as soon as she can in order to think. This example demonstrates the way in which Fanny maintains her freedom: she submits to work that requires her physical presence, but her mind is elsewhere, engaged in contemplation.

**Growth and Development**

Although it may seem easy to accept tranquility as Fanny’s normal state—after the ball, for example, “she could afterwards bring her mind without much effort into its everyday state, and easily conform to the tranquillity [sic] of the present quiet week” (MP 284)—she enjoys movement, excitement, and novelty, activity she’s not used to, and has had few opportunities to experience or enjoy. The night of the ball, she is “sore-footed and fatigued,” true, but she is also “restless and agitated” and feels “in spite of every thing, that a ball was indeed delightful” (MP 281), and the following day, before she conforms to the habits the household expects of her, she “thought and thought again of the difference which twenty-four hours had made in that room,” meditating on the “hope and smiles, bustle and motion, noise and brilliancy” everywhere (MP 283). Because she cannot experience action repeatedly, the exercise is in her mind: “Fanny thought and thought again.” This thinking and rereading is similar to Elizabeth Bennet’s process of reading and rereading Darcy’s letter at the center of *Pride and Prejudice*.

Fanny welcomes new experiences, and her habits do not prevent her from enjoying or accepting what is new simply because it is new. On the drive to Sotherton, the road is new to her, and she “was soon beyond her knowledge,” but she “was very happy in observing all that was new, and admiring all that was pretty” (MP 80); she is happy to be beyond her knowledge, and hence to be able to extend that knowledge. Edmund is certainly wrong to say later that “‘you could tolerate nothing that you
were not used to’ and that ‘habit had most power’ over her, ‘and novelty least’ (MP 354). Significantly, on the way to Sotherton, she ‘was not often invited to join in the conversation of the others, nor did she desire it’ (MP 80). This is why the others are unaware of her receptiveness to what is new. ‘Her own thoughts and reflections were habitually her best companions’ (MP 80); she is not afraid to know herself or to be left to her own thoughts. This is not a bad habit. The question thus appears to be not, is habit in itself a limiting and confining thing, but what kinds of habits are good ones to have? How does one distinguish between a good habit and a bad habit? Fanny is often taken as the symbolic representative of tradition and of the resistance to change in *Mansfield Park*. Yet, Jane Austen often identifies Fanny with both the growth and development of the mind and the change and growth of the natural world.

The East room, which I have argued represents the mind, is frequently analyzed as the repository of family possessions without much value to the rest of the family, odds and ends that they have either outgrown or discarded, such as the ‘faded footstool of Julia’s work, too ill done for the drawing–room, three transparencies, made in a rage for transparencies . . . ; a collection of family profiles thought unworthy of being anywhere else’ and then of course the prized sketch of H.M.S. Antwerp, drawn by William Price (MP 152). These are the ‘comforts’ (MP 152) of Fanny’s room: they symbolize the past, and her care of them symbolizes her guardianship of the estate and of tradition, even of outmoded tradition. However, the very first items mentioned in the description of the East room, prior to the list I have just quoted, suggest a symbolism that is quite different. The reasons given for her initial visits to the deserted schoolroom are that she goes there ‘when she visited her plants, or wanted one of the books, which she was still glad to keep there, from the deficiency of space and accommodation in her little chamber above’ (MP 151). Gradually, she adds to the possessions there, and spends more time in the room; the plants and books—in that order—are mentioned again: ‘The comfort of [the room] in her hours of leisure was extreme. She could go there after any thing unpleasant below, and find immediate consolation in some pursuit, or some train of thought at hand.—Her plants, her books—of which she had been a collector, from the first hour of her commanding a shilling—her writing desk, and her works of charity and ingenuity, were all within her reach’ (MP 151). Plants and books: both represent growth and development, not immobility and unchanging stillness.

The plants in particular point to her interest in life’s changes. When she seeks the comfort of the East room she does so partly ‘to see if by
looking at Edmund’s profile she could catch any of his counsel,” but also to see if “by giving air to her geraniums she might inhale a breeze of mental strength herself” (*MP* 152). When Fanny is confined in Portsmouth, she misses her relatives and the orderliness of life at Mansfield Park, but she also misses “all the pleasures of spring”:

She had not known before what pleasures she *had* to lose in passing March and April in a town. She had not known before, how much the beginnings and progress of vegetation had delighted her.— What animation both of body and mind, she had derived from watching the advance of that season which cannot, in spite of its capriciousness, be unlovely, and seeing its increasing beauties, from the earliest flowers, in the warmest divisions of her aunt’s garden, to the opening of leaves of her uncle’s plantations, and the glory of his woods. (*MP* 431–32)

Valuing the newness of the beginnings of spring, the progress of growing plants, trees and flowers, Fanny is not insensible to the beauty of change and the importance of development. It is not just any season that inspires her with such joy, but the most capricious one, the unpredictable season of novelty and new beginnings.

Even November can have its beauties, however, and it is useful to return to Fanny’s conversation with Mary Crawford the previous autumn on one of her visits to the parsonage, visits that for Miss Crawford, who values social life far more highly than the natural world, are “most acceptable” in the “gloom and dirt of a November day” (*MP* 205). During one of their walks in the shrubbery, Fanny discourses at length on the changes there: “‘Every time I come into this shrubbery I am more struck with its growth and beauty’” (*MP* 208). As Hermione Lee notes, Fanny’s “reflective outdoor mood” here “indicat[es] that she is not irrationally rigid in the dislike of improvements she showed in the conversation about Sotherton.”¹⁵ Her attention to nature leads her to consider human memory, and she exclaims, “‘How wonderful, how very wonderful the operations of time, and the changes of the human mind!’” (*MP* 208). Miss Crawford has no response to make to this long speech, which indicates one of the reasons for Fanny’s many silences: when she speaks at length on intellectual subjects, she is ignored. In this case, she introduces what she thinks should interest Mary Crawford, which is Mrs. Grant’s part in the development of the shrubbery—but even here her listener is not attentive. Fanny turns instead to talking about “‘the growth of the laurels and evergreens,’” and her interest in these leads
her into a less articulate speech, which she calls “‘rhapsodising’”: she is impressed by “‘The evergreen!—How beautiful, how welcome, how wonderful the evergreen!—When one thinks of it, how astonishing a variety of nature!’” (MP 209). Mary Crawford’s most memorable remark in this scene is her comment that “‘I see no wonder in this shrubbery equal to seeing myself in it’” (MP 209–210), but Fanny is also seeing herself in it. Her pleasure in the year-round constancy of the evergreen—“‘I am so glad to see the evergreens thrive!’” (MP 209)—indicates her own consistent behavior and the thriving constancy of her own heart and mind, as well as her interest in the welfare and growth of the natural world. This scene suggests that constancy and growth may coexist: just as evergreen trees stay green through the season’s changes even as they grow taller each year, Fanny remains consistently devoted to good judgment while continuing to develop morally.

The Value of Habit

The development of the right kind of habits, especially the habit of constancy, is a crucial question in the one scene in which Henry Crawford almost manages to please Fanny. The scene is the one in which Crawford not only reads Shakespeare well, but demonstrates that he has thought carefully and critically about the subject of reading aloud (even if he has not actually read Shakespeare himself since he was fifteen). After Henry has delivered a reading from Henry VIII that captures Fanny’s attention, he and Edmund discuss the problems that arise from a lack of attention to how to read aloud—problems that all proceed “from the first cause, want of early attention and habit,” and Fanny listens to them “with great entertainment” (MP 339). Edmund gives the clergy as an example of a profession that has paid too little attention to “‘the art of reading,’ ” and says that there have been recent improvements, and that the “‘subject is more justly considered’ ” (MP 339–40). These, too, are improvements Fanny would approve; she would not hold blindly to the habits and practices of the past as a resistance to the “‘spirit of improvement abroad’ ” (MP 339). One of the reasons clergymen pay more attention to this art, Edmund suggests, is that their congregations possess “a more critical knowledge” than before, and are thus able to “judge and criticize” (MP 340).

Crawford then proves himself to be one of those people, informed and able to judge and criticize, as he “proceeded to ask [Edmund’s] opinion and give his own as to the properest manner in which particular passages in the service should be delivered, shewing it to be a subject on which he
had thought before, and thought with judgment” (MP 340). The narrator has previously pointed out, in connection with Crawford’s flirtation with the Miss Bertrams, that he is not a gentleman very much “in the habit of examining his own motives and of reflecting to what the indulgence of his idle vanity was tending” (MP 114–15). And when Fanny has tried to interpret Mary Crawford’s note following Henry Crawford’s proposal, she has had difficulty understanding their inconsistent behavior, because “There was every thing in the world against their being serious, but his words and manner. Every thing natural, probable, reasonable was against it; all their habits and ways of thinking, and all her own demerits” (MP 305). In the end, it will be a “return to London habits” (MP 417) that will spoil all the chances of both brother and sister for any respectable connection to the family at Mansfield Park, but here, in the conversation about Shakespeare and reading, Henry Crawford displays that he does have some good habits. They are the habit of reading and the habit of thoughtful criticism.

Unfortunately for Crawford, good reading with him is merely a matter of style, not substance. He has good taste, but although he has practiced acting, the “early habit of reading was wanting” (MP 419). This quotation about the early habit of reading appears in a comment on Susan Price, not on Crawford, but it is the same problem. Perhaps if he had continued to read Shakespeare after his fifteenth birthday, his habits might have been better, just as, if Maria and Julia had understood that education does not cease at the age of seventeen, or if Aunt Norris had corrected them when they expressed that belief (MP 55), they might have had happier lives. As Leah Price suggests, even Crawford’s limited knowledge of Shakespeare may have come from excerpts in anthologies rather than from reading the plays. Reading is a good habit; reading Shakespeare’s plays, Austen suggests, is one of the best.

One of the strongest defenses of the value of certain kinds of habit appears in the Sotherton chapel scene. The attack on the habit of family prayers comes of course from Mary Crawford, who argues that it is an improvement to life at Sotherton that the household no longer assembles for morning and evening prayer in the chapel, insisting that it is better to “leave people to their own devices on such subjects” because “Every body likes to go their own way—to choose their own time and manner of devotion,” and it is no good to oblige people to attend chapel “starched up into seeming piety, but with heads full of something very different” (MP 87). Edmund’s response is to say that if people really cannot fix their thoughts on the proper attitude of devotion during a service, this is “a weakness grown into a habit from neglect,” and
a problem that is not likely to be solved by leaving people to random private prayer (MP 87). His argument is that the formality and regularity of the service, the very fact of its being a routine, may make it possible for people to attend to devotion and prayer; he asserts that “‘the influence of the place and of example may often rouse better feelings than are begun with’” (MP 88).

Fanny’s agreement with his argument about example and habit, as demonstrated by her emphatic “‘Certainly’” following his speech about the example of a good clergyman’s good conduct (MP 93), as well as by her lament that “‘It is a pity . . . that the custom [of household prayers] should have been discontinued. It was a valuable part of former times’” (MP 86), suggests that she supports the idea of a family assembling in order to collect their thoughts and fix their devotion on God. Some readers of this passage have objected that her statement, “‘A whole family assembling regularly for the purpose of prayer, is fine’” (MP 86) has more to do with her romantic notions of what a chapel should be (“‘This is not my idea of a chapel. There is nothing awful here, nothing melancholy, nothing grand’” [MP 85]) than with the notion that regular chapel services exist for the worship of the glory of God. But here her agreement with Edmund’s defense of the reasons for the habit of prayer suggests otherwise.\footnote{18}

The distinction between good and bad habits also depends on one’s definition of comfort. There are many examples of how characters define comfort differently, with Lady Bertram’s reliance on Fanny’s care as her comfort throughout the novel being one of the most frequent.\footnote{19} The best definition of comfort is revealed when Mrs. Norris proposes to accompany Fanny and William on their trip to Portsmouth. She is tempted to join them because Sir Thomas is to pay for them to travel comfortably by post, and Fanny and William are, not surprisingly, “horror-struck at the idea” (MP 373). As the narrator says, “All the comfort of their comfortable journey would be destroyed at once” (MP 373). This comment raises (and answers) the question of whether true comfort consists in ease, or in peace. The definition of comfort is important because peace is moral comfort, whereas ease is only the avoidance of irritation. Edmund falls into the trap of equating comfort and ease when he tells Fanny he will not try to stop his siblings from putting on \emph{Lovers’ Vows}. His reasoning is that “‘Family squabbling [sic] is the greatest evil of all’” (MP 128). Here he is the one who does not want to disturb the comfortable habits of his family, habits in which each sibling is bound and determined to have his or her own way. It is Tom and Maria especially whose habits are fixed, and who are slaves to what they are accustomed to. In the end, sobered
by his illness, Tom reforms his habits, and for Sir Thomas, “There was convenience also in Tom, who gradually regained his health, without regaining the thoughtlessness and selfishness of his previous habits” (MP 462). For Maria, on the other hand, there is little hope of change: her habits of selfishness are firmly fixed, and despite their disastrous consequences, her father can only hope that she will be penitent (MP 465).

Independence and Authority

There is one more place in the novel where I want to look at the effects of habit in relation to questions about Fanny’s independence of mind and her submission to Sir Thomas’s rules. Even late in the narrative, after she has learned to trust her considered judgments, and has been brave enough to tell Henry Crawford that we should all attend to our own better judgment rather than rely on the authority of others, she has occasion to apply to Sir Thomas’s authority. She reads Mary Crawford’s letter to her in Portsmouth and although she feels “disgust at the greater part of this letter” (MP 435), she cannot help but be tempted by the offer of the Crawfords to deliver her to Mansfield Park. Mary has preyed upon her sympathies for her relatives as well as on her personal desire to be at home (for “Portsmouth was Portsmouth; Mansfield was home” [MP 431]), saying that “‘you cannot in conscience (conscientious as you are,) keep away, when you have the means of returning’ ” (MP 435). But Fanny is also reluctant to be the means of reuniting Miss Crawford with Edmund, and so she feels “incapable of judging impartially whether the concluding offer might be accepted or not” (MP 435).

Although some might think the narrator is being ironic about Fanny in saying, “Happily, however, she was not left to weigh and decide between opposite inclinations and doubtful notions of right; there was no occasion to determine, whether she ought to keep Edmund and Mary asunder or not” (MP 436), Fanny has already weighed right and wrong. She is not merely a creature of habit and deference to authority, and although some might see the invoking of “a rule to apply to, which settled every thing” (MP 436) as a mere capitulation to patriarchal authority, the situation is more complex. The narrator does say that “Her awe of her uncle, and her dread of taking a liberty with him, made it instantly plain to her, what she had to do. She must absolutely decline the proposal” (MP 436). However, the reason she does not have to examine her motives regarding Edmund and Miss Crawford is that she has in fact already considered the ethical implications of accepting the offer of
conveyance to Mansfield. She relies on her own judgment as well as the confirmation of authority. Like Elizabeth Bennet, who makes decisions about her happiness using her own judgment but with reference to people who are connected with her, Fanny considers the implications of ethical action both for herself and within the context of her family and community.

Before deciding that she will abide by Sir Thomas’s rule of right, she has determined that it would be “a material drawback” to her happiness at being “transported to Mansfield” to owe “such felicity to persons in whose feelings and conduct, at the present moment, she saw so much to condemn; the sister’s feelings—the brother’s conduct—her cold-hearted ambition—his thoughtless vanity” (MP 435–36). At the thought of having Henry Crawford “still the acquaintance, the flirt, perhaps, of Mrs. Rushworth!—She was mortified. She had thought better of him” (MP 436). It is Fanny’s vanity here that is mortified, but her sensitivity to injuries to her own self-consequence is part of her contemplation of the inappropriateness of accepting the offer. She refuses it “absolutely,” not primarily because of either a disinclination to bring her cousin and Miss Crawford together, or a dread of the rule of Sir Thomas, but because it would be humiliating to her to accept the condescension of the Crawfords, and because she still trusts her own assessment of their characters. To some extent, in turning to Sir Thomas’s authority, Fanny finds that service to a rule of law can be liberating: even those who are capable of asserting independent and considered judgment sometimes find comfort in the idea that they are also protected by rules and customs, that not everything has to be judged for the first time every time. It is a relief to Fanny that she can give this perfectly acceptable social reason for refusing in her letter to Miss Crawford, but it is nevertheless evident from the text that she has once again thought carefully about acting before she does anything.

In contrast to Descartes and other philosophers of the Enlightenment, Fanny sees philosophical contemplation as something that takes place within a community—within a family—and that involves a consideration of what is due to others as well as what is due to the self. Instead of seeing her own thoughts as the sole foundation of her view of the world and of virtue, Fanny considers tradition and authority as well. She never does so unthinkingly, however, as she consults both her own judgment and her guardian’s authority. The virtues as she practices them, then, have to do with active principles carefully considered in the context of a community that includes herself and others. She acts on the principle that it is reasonable to have a “dread of taking liberties” with someone she respects.
Sir Thomas is not a static figure of authority any more than Fanny is. The inconsistent and selfish behavior of his daughters, especially when contrasted with the constant and unselfish behavior of his niece, leads him to reevaluate his own authority toward the end of the novel. The narrator concludes that he thinks carefully not only about the conduct of his daughters, but about his own behavior: “Sir Thomas, poor Sir Thomas, a parent, and conscious of errors in his own conduct as a parent, was the longest to suffer” (MP 461). In Pride and Prejudice, Mr. Bennet acknowledges regarding Lydia’s elopement that “It has been my own doing, and I ought to feel it,” yet he quickly concludes that “I am not afraid of being overpowered by the impression. It will pass away soon enough” (PP 299). Sir Thomas, on the other hand, takes responsibility for his daughter’s education. He feels that in allowing Maria to marry Rushworth, “he had sacrificed the right to the expedient, and been governed by motives of selfishness and worldly wisdom” (MP 461).

In the first part of the last chapter of Mansfield Park, Jane Austen gives her readers an intimate portrait of the mind of Sir Thomas, thereby demonstrating that she does in fact deal with male characters apart from their interactions with women. Sir Thomas thinks about morality in a way that is classically Aristotelian: he becomes aware that for Maria and Julia, “the excessive indulgence and flattery of their aunt had been continually contrasted with his own severity” (MP 463). Mrs. Norris has been excessively attentive; Sir Thomas has been defective in his attention to the education of his daughters, and “Bitterly did he deplore a deficiency which now he could scarcely comprehend to have been possible” (MP 463). The deficiency is that Maria and Julia have not learned moral principles, but it is also that they have not learned how to practice these principles in relation to their duty to family and community. Sir Thomas “feared that principle, active principle, had been wanting, that they had never been properly taught to govern their inclinations and tempers, by that sense of duty which can alone suffice” (MP 463). The problem is the gap between theory and practice: “They had been instructed theoretically in their religion, but never required to bring it into daily practice” (MP 463). The combination of theoretical and practical religion requires faith. Jane Austen’s focus on the importance of the “daily practice” of religion points once more to her belief that faith undergirds moral behavior. Although it has been suggested that Mansfield Park is a novel of moral principles, these principles, while important, are shown to be subservient to the education of the disposition: Sir Thomas laments that “He had meant [his daughters] to be good, but his cares had been
directed to the understanding and manners, not the disposition; and of the necessity of self-denial and humility he feared they had never heard from any lips that could profit them” (*MP* 463). Analyzing the importance of practice for the cultivation of a virtuous disposition, Sir Thomas embodies the Aristotelian attitude toward the virtuous mean between excess and defect.

Like Fanny, Sir Thomas thinks carefully, if belatedly, about the behavior of those around him, and judges his own behavior most strictly. Both he and Fanny consider not only what is best for themselves, but what is best universally. This emphasis on the universal is a sign of Jane Austen’s interest in philosophical wisdom about what is true regardless of time or place, age or gender. The fact that both of them engage in philosophical contemplation about what is ethical, what is good, what is true, indicates that Jane Austen sees wisdom as central to *Mansfield Park*. Part of Fanny’s wisdom involves not just the strength of her own mind and the rightness of her own judgment, but also the ways in which she thinks in the context of tradition and authority. Carefully considering both her independence and her dependence, Fanny exercises her mind in the realm of philosophical wisdom. Fanny Price is Jane Austen’s contemplative heroine. She is virtuous and wise, and she knows how to be temperate. Like all of Austen’s heroines, she sees virtue as having more to do with the life of the mind than with sexual purity and propriety. She resembles Elinor Dashwood and Anne Elliot in her consistent moral awareness and judgment, but Austen gives her a room of her own in which to think and to engage in the pursuit of philosophical wisdom.
CHAPTER SIX

Learning the Art of Charity in Emma

But lovely as I was the Graces of my Person were the least of my Perfections. . . . In my Mind, every virtue that could adorn it was centered; it was the Rendezvous of every good Quality & of every noble sentiment.


*Emma* is about the process of learning to respect other people, to tolerate differences, and to be charitable to others, and it is about the role of misery in the process of education. Although Emma Woodhouse never suffers severe physical pain or loss, in the course of the novel she is required to undergo suffering that contributes to her education, and the kind of pain she endures is the torment of coming to consciousness of her own errors. In contrast to Fanny Price, who possesses a firm knowledge of herself, but struggles to act with confidence, Emma acts confidently but has to learn to think about the consequences of her actions; she thus resembles Elizabeth Bennet. The novel describes how a young woman who appears to have everything comes to realize that she does not quite have it all, and, moreover, that she definitely does not know everything. Some have suggested that the process she has to go through to arrive at that realization is education by humiliation, and that she is required to submit to the better knowledge of her moral superior, her friend/brother/father-surrogate, whose testing of her moral worth is rewarded by her hand in marriage. A number of critics have objected to the idea that Emma must be disciplined by Mr. Knightley in order to be worthy of becoming his bride.¹ In contrast, I read Emma as primarily responsible for her own moral education, an education into charitable thought.
Her education is dependent on her choosing to change, not on her submitting to Mr. Knightley’s wishes. I see Emma as independent, even in her education in recognizing her own errors, and there is evidence that Mr. Knightley himself sees her as capable of recognizing her own errors.

Unlike Marianne Dashwood, who learns mostly from her sister, and Elizabeth Bennet, who learns primarily from the process of reading Darcy’s letters, and Fanny Price, who learns from her cousin and her reading of Samuel Johnson and other writers, Emma Woodhouse does not listen and she does not read. How, then, does she learn? What is it that brings her to understanding and humility, and how does she discover what is missing from the “best blessings of existence” that her life at the start of the novel seems to incorporate? Emma has “some” of the “best blessings of existence” (E 5) from the opening sentence onward, but what does she lack? What she starts with is that she is “handsome, clever, and rich, with a comfortable home and happy disposition,” and the added comfort that her life thus far has been unruffled by bad fortune of any form: she “had lived nearly twenty-one years in the world with very little to distress or vex her” (E 5). But although she seems to have everything, what is missing is charity.2 To some extent this absence recalls the lack of love in Lady Susan, but whereas love never gains prominence in Lady Susan Vernon’s life, it gradually does in Emma’s. At the beginning of the novel, Emma has not yet either had to experience the charity of others, or had to learn how to practice charity toward others. And as Paul says in 1 Corinthians, “though I have all faith, so that I could remove mountains, and have not charity, I am nothing” (13:2b). Emma needs to learn what charity is, and to do so she must struggle to achieve self-knowledge.

**Education and the Dangers of Solitude**

At the beginning of the novel, having lost the constant companionship of her governess and friend Miss Taylor, who has now become Mrs. Weston, Emma is “in great danger of suffering from intellectual solitude” (E 7). Austen’s irony is directed at Emma here, as Emma will not really be cut off from all social discourse, but to what extent does intellectual solitude constitute real danger? The focus here is on Mr. Woodhouse, whose vale-tudinarian habits prevent him from engaging in any “activity of mind or body,” and thus he is “no companion” for his daughter (E 7). She will have to look outside her home for intellectual companionship, then, because what she fears, though she may not be fully aware of the fact, is
the reality of being left with her own mind. Emma claims to be quite able to depend on her own mind for strength, but one of the things she has to learn is that she is not self-sufficient. When Harriet Smith presses her for her reasons for not marrying, and her plans for the future in lieu of marriage, Emma says confidently that “‘If I know myself, Harriet, mine is an active, busy mind, with a great many independent resources’” (E 85); however, she does not know herself yet, and that is part of the point of the novel. Does Emma have to come to terms with society’s expectation of her, and reshape her conception of her own strength to fit a model that requires her to be supported by a much stronger and more independent gentleman? Does Austen require that Mr. Knightley learn anything, or is he permitted to be genuinely self-sufficient? Unlike Mr. Darcy, who has to adjust his perspective when he falls in love, Mr. Knightley represents a static, unchanging standard of gentlemanlike virtue. To what extent is he Emma’s teacher, and to what extent is her judgment independent?

Emma’s fear of loneliness means that she welcomes company, even if it is not quite up to the standard of Mrs. Weston’s friendship. Facing another of the “long evenings” in which her only company is hearing Mrs. Goddard, Mrs. Bates, and Miss Bates in conversation and “quiet prosings” with her father over cards, she welcomes the introduction of Harriet Smith to the circle at Hartfield (E 22). The addition of Harriet appears to promise a kind of relief from intellectual solitude. Harriet is a distraction, and Emma can take her on as a project, and improve her, despite the fact that “She was not struck by anything remarkably clever in Miss Smith’s conversation” (E 23). What Harriet mainly alleviates is the problem of lonely exercise, not the problem of intellectual solitude. The conversation may not be challenging, but “As a walking companion, Emma had very early foreseen how useful she might find her . . . . She had ventured once alone to Randalls, but it was not pleasant; and a Harriet Smith, therefore, one whom she could summon at any time to a walk, would be a valuable addition to her privileges” (E 26). Although Emma tells herself that the appeal of Harriet’s companionship is that “Harriet would be loved as one to whom she could be useful” (E 26–27), it is clear that the real appeal is that Harriet is useful to Emma, as a kind of decorative, serviceable addition.

What might be more useful to Emma at this point in her career is a little more intellectual solitude. She has little time for contemplation of her own mind or her place in the world, partly because she is richly blessed with the outward markers of what her place in the world is—beauty, money, and independence—and partly because she is too busy participating
in society, laughing at the mistakes of others. When her brother-in-law Mr. John Knightley suggests to her that Mr. Elton “‘seems to have a great deal of good–will towards you’” (E 112), she does not even consider the possibility that her confident assessment of her social life might be wrong, and receives this warning simply as a joke: “she walked on, amusing herself in the consideration of the blunders which often arise from a partial knowledge of circumstances, of the mistakes which people of high pretensions to judgment are for ever falling into” (E 112). She is certain that Mr. Elton should marry Harriet.

**Knowing One’s Own Mind**

Emma does, however, see some things clearly, early on; she is not entirely blind to the meaning of the workings of society. Although she does not judge herself, she does judge Frank Churchill to be in error for not visiting his new stepmother (Austen’s term is “mother-in-law”) Mrs. Weston (E 122), even though she later defends Frank Churchill’s behavior to Mr. Knightley, arguing that dependence and indebtedness to others can make it difficult to do what is right in a given situation (E 146). She finds herself “taking the other side of the question from her real opinion, and making use of Mrs. Weston’s arguments against herself” (E 145). It could be argued here that her judgment of Frank’s nonappearance in Highbury has to do with her own interest in seeing him, and finding out whether her imagined connection with him has any basis in reality, but it is also important that she can see that it is the right thing to do for him to visit his father’s new wife. She can see this well before Mr. Knightley stresses to her that “‘There is one thing, Emma, which a man can always do, if he chuses, and that is, his duty . . . . It is Frank Churchill’s duty to pay this attention to his father’ ” (E 146).

One of the ways in which Emma shows that she does know her mind is that it is very difficult for her to pretend that she is in love with Frank Churchill, even after she has met him and been charmed by him. She may not be able to see that she loves Mr. Knightley, but she is intellectually and emotionally aware of the fact that she is not in love with Frank Churchill. Emma thinks through her flirtation with Frank, and her self-knowledge in this situation makes it possible for her to think through other aspects of her own behavior and feelings. It is through her analysis of where her love lies that she begins to know more about how she engages with other people in society. When Frank leaves Highbury after his first visit, Emma spends time alone thinking about her feelings, and
after examining her reaction to his departure she concludes that “‘I do suspect that he is not really necessary to my happiness. So much the better’” (E 264). She sees that he is changable and that she does “‘not altogether build upon his steadiness or constancy,’” and that “‘Every consideration of the subject, in short, makes me thankful that my happiness is not more deeply involved’” (E 265). She knows herself too well to play at lovesickness, and she knows something about her own happiness. The problem, still, is that she has difficulty knowing the happiness of others.

The roots of this problem lie in her initial conception of what charity is. She has thought that it would be charitable to be useful to Harriet (when in fact she uses Harriet as a pawn in her own matchmaking game), that it would be charitable to Mr. Elton to find him a pretty wife (when she has used him as the object of that game), and also, that it would be charitable to Frank Churchill for her to bestow her affections on him. This is charity conceived of as condescension. Emma Woodhouse, proud, elegant, and benevolent, might condescend to treat “a Harriet Smith” as a friend, to arrange the local clergyman’s love life for him, and to fall in love with a long-lost neighbor. But, as Emma needs to learn, charity is not about power.

In contrast to Elizabeth Bennet and Catherine Morland, whose revelations of self-knowledge come quite late in their respective novels, Emma has her first encounter with the pain of enlightenment relatively early, in Chapter 16. Marilyn Butler argues that it is not until Emma learns that Frank Churchill and Jane Fairfax are engaged that she finally judges herself clearly. But Emma is forced to criticize her own mind well before the climax of the novel. After Mr. Elton has proposed to her—“actually making violent love to her” (E 129)—in the carriage on the way home after the Westons’ Christmas Eve party, she is obliged to acknowledge her blindness regarding the object of her charitable matchmaking scheme. She does not yet know how blind she has been to Harriet’s feelings in the whole affair with Robert Martin, or how reprehensible it is that she has directed Harriet to love Mr. Elton, but she does see how wrong she has been about interpreting Mr. Elton’s behavior, and how her encouragement of his attentions could have been misinterpreted as welcoming his affection for her.

When she arrives home that night she is obliged to compose herself for her family’s sake, and to wait until she is alone to think things through: “her mind had never been in such perturbation, and it needed a very strong effort to appear attentive and cheerful till the usual hour of separating allowed her the relief of quiet reflection” (E 133). Quiet reflection—being alone with her own mind—may be a relief of sorts, but
it is not comfortable, as “Emma sat down to think and be miserable.—It was a wretched business, indeed!” (E 134). Thinking about one’s own mistakes is difficult, painful, and miserable. It is something Mr. Woodhouse almost never does—later in the novel Emma blesses his “favouring blindness” to her interest in Frank Churchill’s attentions to her, and Austen says that “the entire deficiency in him of all such sort of penetration or suspicion, was a most comfortable circumstance” (E 193). In this case his deficiency provides comfort for Emma, but presumably in most cases it provides comfort for him: he worries, but he does not think, and thus even his complaints are part of the comfort of his own complacency. With such a father it is either surprising or inevitable, depending on the influence granted to genes or the exigencies of circumstance, that Emma does have to think for herself.

When she does, she is thoroughly miserable. She forces herself to look back “as well as she could; but it was all confusion. She had taken up the idea, she supposed, and made everything bend to it” (E 134). The more she thinks about the past, the more she realizes her responsibility for what has happened: “If she had so misinterpreted his feelings, she had little right to wonder that he, with self-interest to blind him, should have mistaken her’s” (E 136). The result of her miserable intellectual solitude is that she sees that

The first error and the worst lay at her door. 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. She was quite concerned and ashamed, and resolved to do such things no more. (E 136–37)

This language suggests that Emma begins to see herself as chief among sinners,5 and that she is contrite about her sin. In taking blame upon herself, she is beginning to acknowledge that she cannot do everything right by herself, but needs help. She is not wholly self-sufficient.

Following the debacle with Mr. Elton, Emma is angry not with him, but with herself: “She wished him very well; but he gave her pain, and his welfare twenty miles off would administer most satisfaction” (E 182). Although she would be more comfortable if he never returned to Highbury, she knows the value of seeing him as a reminder of her faults. Austen says that “his sight was so inseparably connected with some very disagreeable feelings, that except in a moral light, as a penance, a lesson, a source of profitable humiliation to her own mind, she would have been
thankful to be assured of never seeing him again” (E 182). Seeing him is painful, but morally useful.

As far as Harriet is concerned, Emma is obliged to think again about separating her from Robert Martin. When Harriet sees Mr. Martin and his sister in Ford’s, she is flustered and does not know what to do, especially when they are kind to her despite her rejection of the proposal and the family as beneath her. At Hartfield, Harriet turns automatically to Emma to assuage her nervousness, saying “‘Oh! Miss Woodhouse, do talk to me and make me comfortable again’” (E 179). But Miss Woodhouse, having had to acknowledge her error about Mr. Elton, is a little more wary of providing immediate comfort without thinking carefully about the consequences:“Very sincerely did Emma wish to do so; but it was not immediately in her power. She was obliged to stop and think. She was not thoroughly comfortable herself” (E 179). As in Sense and Sensibility and Pride and Prejudice, the desire to be amiable and make others comfortable conflicts with the desire to be wholly truthful. Emma’s discomfort at this point is not enough to make her seriously reexamine her initial judgment that Robert Martin is not good enough for Harriet, but it is enough to make her stop and think. And if she does this often enough, Austen implies, she will approach a better understanding of truth, and will be better equipped to behave charitably to others.

Charity as Style

What charity is not, therefore, is looking after others by telling them how to live. This is Mrs. Elton’s idea of charity, and it is clearly shown to be misguided, as her officious exertions on behalf of Jane Fairfax demonstrate. In addition to directing the lives of the less fortunate, Mrs. Elton also sees charity as a matter of style. In her estimation, charity is what those in power offer to those without power: it both assists the beneficiary, and increases the positive social image and self-image of the benefactor. Early in the novel, Emma is guilty of conceiving of charity in just this way, and the introduction of Mrs. Elton to Highbury is a reminder to her of how charity should not be conducted. For example, Emma feels for Jane when Mrs. Elton insists that her servant will pick up Jane’s mail, or when she insists on arranging a governessing position for Jane. Even when Mrs. Elton is planning her part in the strawberry party, her focus is on her image, and her ability to make Jane over in her own image. She tells Mr. Knightley that “‘I shall wear a large bonnet, and bring one of my little baskets hanging on my arm. Here,—probably this basket with
pink ribbon. Nothing can be more simple, you see. And Jane will have such another’ ” (E 355). But this kind of charity—”Look, you too can be perfectly stylish just like me—it’s easy”—is vanity, as Mrs. Elton’s repeated insistence on image at the expense of feeling shows. Similarly, she opines, “I wish we had a donkey. The thing would be for us all to come on donkeys [sic], Jane, Miss Bates, and me—and my caro sposo walking by. I really must talk to him about purchasing a donkey’ ” (E 356). As Marcia McClintock Folsom points out, “The artificiality of Mrs. Elton’s vision is revealed by her thought of pestering her husband to buy the donkey to complete this imaginary scene of country life.” Mrs. Elton is clearly thinking more of the picturesque image of herself on a donkey than of providing any help to Jane or Miss Bates. At the strawberry-picking party at Donwell, “Mrs. Elton, in all her apparatus of happiness, her large bonnet and her basket, was very ready to lead the way in gathering, accepting, or talking” (E 358), and her insistence on being first in everything belies her attempts to provide charity to others.

Is it necessary to have equipment for virtue, apparatus for happiness? It is easier, no doubt, to offer charity to others if one has much to offer, but charity resides more in the disposition of a person than in objects or wealth to be dispensed. The question of external circumstances necessary to the virtuous life arises when Emma and Harriet discuss the situation of Miss Bates. Emma is defending the idea that she herself proposes to remain single, and argues that while “a very narrow income has a tendency to contract the mind, and sour the temper,” “a single woman, of good fortune, is always respectable, and may be as sensible and pleasant as anybody else’ ” (E 85). She acknowledges that Miss Bates does not fit in the category of miserly old maid, however: “Poverty certainly has not contracted her mind: I really believe, if she had only a shilling in the world, she would be very likely to give away sixpence of it” (E 85). Like Mrs. Smith in *Persuasion* and like the biblical widow who gives her last mite to those poorer than herself, Miss Bates is an exemplar of charity. Thus although Emma professes to believe that it is necessary to have wealth in order to be generous and good-natured, she has to except Miss Bates, the example of the single woman’s life that is closest to home, because Miss Bates does not lack charity. She is “‘only too good natured and too silly to suit’” Emma (E 85), but she is not uncharitable. Equipment and material resources for promoting virtue may make charity easier, as Aristotle proposes, and as Austen suggests in other novels, especially earlier novels such as *Sense and Sensibility*, but they are not always necessary, as characters in both *Emma* and *Persuasion* demonstrate.

Emma has drawn on the resources of Hartfield in order to offer charity to Mrs. and Miss Bates, in much the same way that she visits the poor.
She sends Hartfield pork to the Bates household—as her father says, “‘Now we have killed a porker, and Emma thinks of sending them a loin or a leg; it is very small and delicate’”; Emma replies that she has done more than that: “‘My dear papa, I sent the whole hind-quarter. I knew you would wish it’” (E 172). She is generous, but her charity here is mostly action, not thought. Although she has to be thoughtful enough to go to the trouble of sending this gift to them, the action does not really alter her attitude toward the recipients of her charity. It is more a matter of form than of goodwill to others.

In her conversation with Harriet, just after they have established that Miss Bates is not an uncharitable old maid, Emma speaks uncharitably of Jane Fairfax—“‘I wish Jane Fairfax very well; but she tires me to death’” (E 86)—and then she moves easily into the role of Lady Bountiful, visiting the poor of the parish and dispensing tangible charity. There is no irony, however, in Austen’s description of Emma’s attitude toward the people she visits here: “Emma was very compassionate; and the distresses of the poor were as sure of relief from her personal attention and kindness, her counsel and her patience, as from her purse” (E 86).9 So it is not empty action, but compassionate aid, as she “entered into their troubles with ready sympathy, and always gave her assistance with as much intelligence as good-will” (E 86).

It is Emma’s own ironic observation after they have left the cottage that it can be difficult to fix one’s mind on the sufferings of others when there are potential distractions in one’s own life, as she says smilingly, “‘I hope it may be allowed that if compassion has produced exertion and relief to the sufferers, it has done all that is truly important. If we feel for the wretched, enough to do all we can for them, the rest is empty sympathy, only distressing to ourselves’” (E 87). She does not believe that sympathy alone will help: action and benevolence in proportion to the need of those in distress will be helpful, but thinking without acting will not.

That Emma knows the difference between the sentimental pretensions of claims to suffer along with others in distress, and the more realistic attempt to help others without drowning in their misery with them, suggests that she is critical of the idea of charity as style. She is not, of course, as stylishly charitable as Mrs. Elton, and she does offer real help. Yet like Mrs. Elton, she also claims to offer help to those whose social situation is not quite so distant from her own. Mrs. Elton fixes on Jane; Emma fixes on Harriet, and then tries to help Jane as well. In both of her fixations, Emma is attracted to the object of her charity partly because of the idea of helping a beautiful young woman who appears to need help. This attraction makes Emma resemble the eponymous hero of George Eliot’s Daniel Deronda, heroic and sympathetic rescuer of beautiful women in distress. Harriet is not as desperate as Mirah Lapidoth, and Jane is not as
tragic as Gwendolen Harleth, but nevertheless the rescuer in each case is predisposed to offer help because of the beauty not of the action of rescue, but of the recipient. As in the epigraph I have chosen for this chapter, from “Love and Friendship” (MW 77–78) the graces of the person are conflated with the graces of the mind; and thus the beauty of the woman in question makes charity that much more appealing.

In Emma, Austen is concerned with the difference between charity as love and charity as image. The issue is highlighted in an exchange between Emma and Frank Churchill in which Frank proposes to purchase gloves at Ford’s as proof that he is “‘a true citizen of Highbury’”; he says, “‘It will be taking out my freedom’” (E 200). Emma laughs that “‘You were very popular before you came, because you were Mr. Weston’s son—but lay out half-a-guinea at Ford’s, and your popularity will stand upon your own virtues’” (E 200). It is not that it would be charitable of Frank to support the business of Ford’s, but that to be seen to patronize the same shop as everyone else would serve as a sign that he subscribes to the image of Highbury society. Frank proves his virtues by exercising the power of purchasing. But this is not a version of virtue Austen condones: for her, virtue has to do with consistency between charitable thought and charitable action.

**Benevolence and Friendship**

Frank needs to prove his virtues, because not everyone in Highbury is convinced that he has them. Prior to his arrival there, Emma and Mr. Knightley have speculated on his character, with the latter insisting, on the basis of Frank’s seeming reluctance to visit Mrs. Weston at the proper time, that he will prove to be “‘a very weak young man’” (E 148). Mr. Knightley’s opinion is that Frank “‘can be amiable only in French, not in English. He may be very “aimable,” have very good manners, and be very agreeable; but he can have no English delicacy towards the feelings of other people: nothing really amiable about him’” (E 149). Amiability, as I have suggested in previous chapters, is an important virtue for Austen because it is so closely connected with charity. Emma teases Mr. Knightley that this kind of amiability might be enough for Highbury, as “‘We do not often look upon fine young men, well-bred and agreeable. We must not be nice and ask for all the virtues into the bargain’” (E 149).

Their conversation raises the question of the difference between good will and friendship, an issue that recurs in the novel. Although Emma says
she does not expect all the virtues, she does appear to imagine that Frank will be everyone’s friend: she says that “‘My idea of him is, that he can adapt his conversation to the taste of every body, and has the power as well as the wish of being universally agreeable’” (E 150). Mr. Knightley objects to this description as the ideal of amiability, because if true it would mean that Frank would adapt his character so well to the demands of those around him that he would be insufferable: “‘What! At three-and-twenty to be the king of his company—the great man—the practised politician, who is to read every body’s character, and make every body’s talents conduce to the display of his own superiority’” (E 150). Mr. Knightley is already jealous of Frank, but his objection holds, and the kind of universal goodwill that caters to every individual while serving primarily to emphasize the charitable person’s own superiority is insufferable in the great as well as in the inexperienced twenty-three-year-old.

Emma experiences the problem of an older man’s universal amiability later in the novel when she realizes that Mr. Weston does not discriminate among his acquaintances, even though he treats them each as a particular and exclusive friend. When it comes to the evening of the ball at the Crown, it turns out that he has invited a large number of friends to come early to inspect the rooms, giving each to believe that he relies on his or her taste alone. It is not Emma’s vanity alone that is damaged by being considered “the favourite and intimate of a man who had so many intimates and confidantes” (E 320); although her vanity is hurt here, she is right to see the contradictions inherent in this way Mr. Weston has of treating everybody. Consciously or not, she recalls the earlier conversation with Mr. Knightley, and reflects that “General benevolence, but not general friendship, made a man what he ought to be.—She could fancy such a man” (E 320).

Where is tolerance and where is charity, in the debate about the difference between benevolence and friendship? How does one determine who one’s friends are, and how treatment of a friend differs from treatment of everyone else? Does one merely tolerate all others, or does tolerance also require one to be amiable, charitable, and benevolent? Charity involves more than just the right attitude toward giving gifts and paying visits. In Emma, Austen suggests that an understanding of charity also involves careful judgments about friendships and intimate relationships. Tolerating everyone or everything will not always be the charitable thing to do, so distinctions may be necessary. It seems exclusive to gather a small group of friends, and leave the rest to chance and charity, and yet this is what Austen leaves us with at the end of the novel: a “small band of true friends” who witness the wedding of Emma and Mr. Knightley (E 484). She does not say exactly who makes it into that category, but
there is no question that it is an exclusive group. Although to a certain extent the distinctions Emma and Mr. Knightley make about the small band of friends have to do with class, such judgments also have to do with charity. Austen suggests that while one may cultivate a charitable attitude and a healthy respect for other people, one need not treat everyone as a “favourite” or an “intimate.” Some people will form closer ties than others, and both this love that binds together a small band of friends, and the kind of love one offers to broader numbers of people are central aspects of charity. In *Emma*, charity is not defined simply as either good works performed for other people, or as love offered to one’s intimates: romantic love, the love of friendship, and the love of benevolent good works are all part of Austen’s understanding of charity. The process of learning to be charitable, therefore, is more than an education in good works or social justice, as it can help characters work toward happiness as well as goodness.

“Perfect Happiness”

A number of critics have discussed the concept of “perfect happiness” in Jane Austen’s novels, especially in *Emma*. Rachel Brownstein suggests, rightly, that “The gap between ‘real’ Austen heroines like Catherine or Emma or Fanny and the ideal mere picture of perfection Jane Austen thought other people admired too much is in effect the subject of all her novels.”[10] “[P]ictures of perfection as you know make me sick & wicked,” Austen wrote (Letters, March 23, 1817; 335), and it is worth remembering this statement of hers when we find Fanny especially “too perfect” or “too good.” Even Austen’s most virtuous heroines are not always perfect. Elaine Bander makes the distinction that “Perfection, for Austen, is not being but becoming.”[11] Through their contemplation of what it means to live a good life, Austen’s heroines work toward practicing, exercising, or becoming virtuous.

Julia Prewitt Brown argues that “when we close the pages of *Emma* we have learned enough about Emma and Mr. Knightley and Highbury and life in general there to know exactly how much perfection and how much happiness are included in the narrator’s ‘perfect happiness.’”[12] Yet while Austen surely recognizes the limitations of the “perfect happiness” and wedded bliss that she alludes to in the concluding paragraph of *Emma*, it seems unlikely that she intends her readers to shake their heads sadly over the disillusionment that awaits Emma and Mr. Knightley. On the contrary, her earlier description of Mr. Knightley offers a better way
of understanding her choice of these words: when he and Emma reach an understanding, “Within half an hour, he had passed from a thoroughly distressed state of mind, to something so like perfect happiness, that it could bear no other name” (E 432). Their life together, therefore, promises to be, like Emma, “faultless in spite of all [its] faults” (E 433). The virtuous life is not a perfect life, but in attempting to learn, exercise, and practice the virtues, Austen suggests, one may achieve something like perfect happiness, not happiness as an end result, but as a process open to revision.

In Emma, Austen suggests that the practice of charity is part of the process of learning, in Mrs. Dashwood’s terms, to know one’s own happiness. Charity is not about one’s own image, one’s condescension to others, but about generosity of spirit and genuine love and grace toward other people, whether those people are intimates or strangers. How does one achieve the right attitude toward one’s self and others, and how would one know exactly when it was right? As in Sense and Sensibility, the awareness of the right balance that constitutes happiness is difficult to achieve. And as in Pride and Prejudice, practicing charity at the right time, and in the right manner, toward the right persons, can be challenging. Emma’s reaction following Mr. Elton’s proposal to her causes her to repent her errors, and to resolve to behave better and more carefully in the future. She confesses to Harriet that she was wrong to have encouraged the pursuit of Mr. Elton, and this confession “completely renewed her first shame” (E 141). Emma thinks that “It was rather too late in the day to set about being simple-minded and ignorant; but she left [Harriet] with every previous resolution confirmed of being humble and discreet, and repressing imagination all the rest of her life” (E 142). Her repentance is genuine, and the turn to humility is part of the traditional response of the contrite sinner following confession, although her vow to repress imagination forever is more along the lines of Marianne Dashwood’s sober plans for her cheerless virtuous future than along the pattern of Christian confession. The person confessing prays to be granted “that this day we fall into no sin, neither run into any kind of danger; but that all our doings may be ordered by thy governance;”¹³ all the while knowing that the fallen nature common to all will mean that each day we fall into some kind of sin. The prayer is part of the process. Emma repents, knowing that she will not be able to avoid being wrong about something else yet again. But in this situation, she confesses to Harriet, and she worries that “she should never be in charity with herself again” (E 141). Is it the aim of virtue to be in charity with one’s self?
When Emma infamously chides Miss Bates at Box Hill for having to limit herself to saying only three dull things at once in response to Frank Churchill’s game (E 364), she does not at first realize that she has been uncharitable. She carries on blindly with her conversation with Frank and Mr. Weston, and it does take Mr. Knightley’s later reprimand to cause her to review her conduct. At first she “tried to laugh it off,” saying that “‘It was not so very bad. I dare say she did not understand me’” (E 374), but he explains to her the implications of her insult to someone like Miss Bates whose “‘situation should secure [Emma’s] compassion’” (E 375).

Would Emma have realized this herself? Having recognized in the situation with Harriet and Mr. Elton just how wrong her behavior could be, is Emma any more likely to see clearly the occasions on which she condescends to those around her? Perhaps she would in time have come to see the folly of treating Miss Bates this way, but moral education is slow and time-consuming as well as painful. Would it have taken her years or at least months to learn where her charity is deficient?

When during the ball at the Crown Mr. Knightley and Emma had discussed the problem of Emma’s attempt to marry Harriet to Mr. Elton, Mr. Knightley had said, “‘I shall not scold you. I leave you to your own reflections’” (E 330), and Emma had asked, “‘Can you trust me with such flatterers?—Does my vain spirit ever tell me I am wrong?’” (E 330). His reply was that she could be trusted to distinguish between her vain spirit and her serious spirit: “‘If one leads you wrong, I am sure the other tells you of it’” (E 330). He knows that she is capable of thinking through moral decisions. Yet at Box Hill, he sees that her serious spirit has not told her of it, as he witnesses her continued attempts at amusement with the others, with no sign of apology to Miss Bates. Is he trying to save her the trouble of having to learn to come to a consciousness of her mistakes? In trying to teach her virtue, is he making her moral education less painful, or more? Or is his reprimand partly the result of his own vanity: he wants Emma to be perfect too, despite his objection to Mr. Weston’s clever remark that the letters “‘M. and A.—Em—ma’” stand for perfection (E 371)? The reason he reprimands her is that he knows she will not learn by reading. She does learn by thinking things through, but it took Mr. Elton’s outburst to provide the occasion for her to reconsider that situation, and there is no way that Miss Bates would ever confront Emma. There needs to be something that instigates Emma’s thinking about her conduct. Mr. Knightley’s speech here parallels Mr. Elton’s declaration of love in that it prompts Emma to think.
There is no need for Mr. Knightley to continue to argue the point, as Emma immediately sees “[t]he truth of his representation” (E 376). And from here on, she is left in intellectual solitude, despite Harriet’s presence in the carriage, and “Time did not compose her. As she reflected more, she seemed but to feel it more. She had never been so depressed” (E 376). Once she gets home, she realizes that her attitude toward her father ought to have guided her attitude toward Miss Bates. To him, she has been patient and kind in thought as well as in action. Toward Miss Bates, “She had been often remiss, her conscience told her so; remiss, perhaps, more in thought than fact; scornful, ungracious” (E 377). Mr. Knightley has chided her only for the one public remark, but Emma’s conscience tells her that she has been thinking scornfully of Miss Bates all along, even while sending her pork and paying her visits. And she has spoken of her ungraciously to Harriet. In fact, Emma’s own conscience is more severe in judging her thought and action than Mr. Knightley is. The realization that she has not loved her neighbor as herself is Emma’s second moment of revelation, and it is far more painful than the earlier revelation that she has misjudged the situation with Mr. Elton.

**Charity and Romantic Love**

Emma’s third revelation is the recognition “that Mr. Knightley must marry no one but herself!” (E 408). Once again, however, it takes someone else’s prompting to get her to examine her own perceptions. As soon as Harriet has revealed that she not only aspires to love Mr. Knightley, but actually has some idea that he returns her affections, Emma’s mind starts working, and “A mind like her’s, once opening to suspicion, made rapid progress” (E 407). This description is important: Emma has the kind of quick mind that can analyze behavior thoroughly. Her intelligence is sharp, but her initial perceptions are a little dull, perhaps because she is so confident of her social position that she lacks the critical impulse. From the moment Harriet tells her love, thinking is painful once more for Emma. While Harriet “give[s] the history of her hopes with great, though trembling delight,” Emma’s “mind was in all the perturbation that such a developement [sic] of self, such a burst of threatening evil, such a confusion of sudden and perplexing emotions, must create” (E 408–09). Intellectual self-examination may be painful, whether one is analyzing the difficulties of acting charitably toward other people, or the complexities of romantic love.

In the opening paragraphs of the novel, Jane Austen reveals that the “real evils” of “Emma’s situation were the power of having rather too
much her own way, and a disposition to think a little too well of herself” (E 5). Added to these evils, or perhaps a result of them, has been a resistance to thinking very deeply. The things that need to be adjusted to make the “best blessings” of her life more complete are the way she treats others, and the way she thinks of herself. Yet while it sounds reasonable, as Mr. Knightley says elsewhere in the novel, that “‘Fine dancing, I believe, like virtue, must be its own reward’” (E 258), virtue in Emma is rewarded with more material blessings, just as fine dancing is often rewarded with a fine partner. Virtue may be worth pursuing for its own sake, but it does not hurt that one’s reputation improves, or that benefits accrue to virtuous behavior. Parallel to the two things that need to be adjusted in Emma’s world are two possible definitions of charity: Emma needs to learn to be charitable to others in thought as well as in action, and to be less forgiving of her own faults. Thinking makes her miserable, especially when she’s thinking of her own errors, but careful thought is essential to the practice of charity, and Emma comes to understand not only what her blessings mean for her own life, but also what these blessings require of her in her attitude toward those who are less blessed and who suffer more. Emma has to learn to love her neighbor as herself, and to be in love and charity with her neighbors rather than simply with herself.

Like Fanny Price, Emma has to think hard, and negotiate the tension between knowing her own mind and heart and knowing how to behave to relatives and friends around her. Self-knowledge can conflict with charity toward one’s neighbors, but in Emma, Austen proposes that it is important to endeavor both to know one’s self and to love God and neighbor. Emma Woodhouse experiences moments of moral recognition, and each of these three major revelations causes her to think carefully and to challenge her usual view of the world. In contrast to Elizabeth Bennet, who experiences one significant epiphany after reading Darcy’s letter, Emma undergoes three revolutions of mind in order to effect her moral education. Like Elizabeth, however, she finds that her education is prompted by the reminders the hero gives her to revisit her interpretation of the world. In Emma, Austen focuses on the theological virtue of charity, and explores its meaning as the Christian love of neighbors as well as its role in romantic love. Through intellectual suffering, Emma Woodhouse learns how to think about charity, and how she may live out charity in action.
CHAPTER SEVEN

Balancing the Virtues in Persuasion

My temper is even, my virtues innumerable, my self unparalelled [sic].
—Jane Austen, “Jack and Alice,” Volume the First (MW 25)

Loves comes late for Anne Elliot, the heroine so virtuous that Austen said “she is almost too good for me” (Letters, March 23, 1817; 335). Like Catherine Morland, she has had to learn prudence first and love afterwards. Anne “had been forced into prudence in her youth, she learned romance as she grew older” (P 30). The difference is that romance comes much later for her than for Catherine. Having followed the advice of her dear friend and surrogate mother, Lady Russell, Anne has lost her lover, Frederick Wentworth, to the claims of economic prudence. While Wentworth wishes she had been firm in her resolve to love him at all costs, he has been too proud to court her again in the eight years since they parted, even though he has made a name and a fortune for himself. Anne may not have been firm—she did yield to the persuasion of a friend—but she has certainly been constant in her love for Wentworth, despite the years that have passed since her refusal to marry him. She has been unhappy, but like Miss Bates, in fact, she has not been made mean or unkind by spinsterhood. She has resources of mind and spirit to support her—resources that Emma Woodhouse thinks she herself possesses. But Emma’s resources are not tested as Anne’s are. Emma suffers and is miserable when she learns more about her own mind, but her moral education is rewarded with “perfect happiness” relatively quickly. Anne has to seek harder to know her own happiness because it seems she has forfeited her one chance at happiness through marriage.
Firmness, specifically firmness in resisting persuasion, is a central concern for Austen in this novel. When is firmness a good thing, and how is firmness related to strength, fortitude, and hope? A number of critics have argued that *Persuasion* marks a change in Austen’s work, especially in her attitude toward family and independence. Rather than seeing *Persuasion* as a more passionate or more political novel than the earlier works, however, I argue that this novel provides further clues to Austen’s Aristotelian and Christian view of virtue, which can help to illuminate the other novels and explain how Austen sees the virtues in harmony as well as in tension with one another. Anne’s argument at the end of the novel that she was right to take Lady Russell’s advice, even if the advice was wrong, demonstrates that for Austen, ethics has to do with character rather than rules. Anne tells Wentworth that “‘It was, perhaps, one of those cases in which advice is good or bad only as the event decides’” (*P* 246), which seems to suggest that judgment of ethics is always relative, but her assessment that “‘I was right in submitting to her, and that if I had done otherwise, I should have suffered more in continuing the engagement than I did even in giving it up, because I should have suffered in my conscience’” (*P* 246), indicates that even though the future is uncertain, it is possible to act in accordance with reason and virtue. Like Elizabeth Bennet, Anne determines that it is right for her to make decisions about her future happiness with reference to people closely connected with her, as well as on the basis of her own inclination and judgment. *Persuasion* investigates what it means to cultivate the virtues of character. As in the earlier novels, Austen looks at tensions and problems related to pride, wisdom, amiability, and civility, but she also addresses the questions of firmness, constancy, and faith, and explores how the theological virtues make the practice of classical virtue possible.

**Firmness of Mind**

The central tension between Anne Elliot and Captain Wentworth has been over the relative merits of persuadability and firmness of mind. Wentworth confides his abiding belief in firmness to Louisa Musgrove, whose “‘character of decision and firmness’” he praises over her sister Henrietta’s lack of resolution: “‘It is the worst evil of too yielding and indecisive a character, that no influence over it can be depended on,’” he says, and concludes, “‘let those who would be happy be firm’” (*P* 88). Quite apart from the irony of Wentworth’s theory that Louisa should persuade her sister to resist
persuasion, this reflection of his recalls his own inability to succeed in persuading Anne not to be persuaded by Lady Russell. What Wentworth does not yet recognize is that Anne does have a strong mind, a stronger and more enduring kind of firmness than any of the women around her. When he describes to his sister Mrs. Croft the kind of woman who could capture his heart, he lists “‘A little beauty, and a few smiles, and a few compliments to the navy’” as the only requirements, but when he “more seriously described” the woman he would like to marry, “‘A strong mind, with sweetness of manner, ’ made the first and the last of the description” (P 62). Austen says that when he thinks of these qualities, “Anne Elliot was not out of his thoughts” (P 62), and yet we know that he thinks her mind is not strong or firm enough; presumably he is looking for a woman who possesses Anne’s virtues, with the added attraction of firmness.

Louisa Musgrove, however, is firm to the point of stubbornness, and her insistence on jumping from the rocks at Lyme leads to her painful fall and head injury. Immediately after her fall the question of hope or hopelessness arises, as her friends are “sick with horror,” while the surgeon examines her. The surgeon, however, is “by no means hopeless” about the possibility of recovery, and for Louisa’s friends “the ecstasy of such a reprieve, the rejoicing, deep and silent, after a few fervent ejaculations of gratitude to Heaven had been offered, may be conceived” (P 112). It may seem that this is a description of short, perfunctory prayers offered once there has been a renewal of hope—simply “a few fervent ejaculations of gratitude.” But what Austen calls “deep and silent” “rejoicing” at “the ecstasy of such a reprieve” indicates that beneath the “‘Thank God!’” uttered by Wentworth lies a more lasting foundation of hope and faith (P 112). As in the scene in Sense and Sensibility when Elinor begins to hope that Marianne will recover, and “Anxiety and hope now oppressed her in equal degrees” (SS 314), the outward expression of thankfulness is brief, while the inner gratitude endures. At first Elinor cries “tears of joy,” yet she “could not be cheerful. Her joy was of a different kind, and led to anything rather than to gaiety . . . . All within Elinor’s breast was satisfaction, silent and strong” (SS 314–15). In Persuasion, Anne observes Wentworth’s reaction to the news of Louisa’s probable recovery, and she watches him sitting “near a table, leaning over it with folded arms, and face concealed, as if overpowered by the various feelings of his soul, and trying by prayer and reflection to calm them” (P 112; emphasis added). The “as if” in this passage is significant, as it indicates that Anne is imagining that he is praying, but she also knows him well, and thus is able to gauge with sympathetic judgment what is going through his mind.
Later Anne begins to contemplate Wentworth’s adherence to the absolute virtue of firmness, and the problem of persuadability:

Anne wondered whether it ever occurred to him now, to question the justness of his own previous opinion as to the universal felicity and advantage of firmness of character; and whether it might not strike him, that, like all other qualities of the mind, it should have its proportions and limits. She thought it could scarcely escape him to feel, that a persuadable temper might sometimes be as much in favour of happiness, as a very resolute character. (P 116)

Austen’s reference to the proportions and limits on desirable qualities recalls Aristotle’s doctrine of the mean, in which virtuous qualities have proportions and limits. Though Wentworth himself does not realize it, he does think that to be sometimes persuadable is a good thing, as he has recommended that Louisa persuade Henrietta to be firm. Perhaps one of the reasons he dislikes the idea of persuasion is that in the situation where it most mattered to him, he failed to persuade Anne to marry him against all opposition. He comes to value Anne’s decisiveness as exemplified in her response to the accident at Lyme, and he consults her as to the best way of breaking the news to the Musgroves, showing a “deference for her judgment” (P 117) that suggests he might almost be persuaded by her if her opinion in this case were to be different from his own.

In conversation at the concert in Bath, Wentworth confesses to Anne his sense of responsibility for Louisa’s fall, and in doing so suggests that his values have not changed: “‘It had been my doing—solely mine. She would not have been obstinate if I had not been weak’” (P 183). He appears to criticize his own lack of firmness rather than Louisa’s too firm resolution. Such a reading would imply that Wentworth has learned little from the accident, and that he has not begun to question the universal justice of firmness. However, when this confession and explanation are read in light of his previous engagement to Anne, and of his further reflections on his own pride at the conclusion of Chapter 23, it becomes clear that Wentworth has reconsidered his own character. He comes late to an understanding of himself: “‘I was proud, too proud to ask again’” (P 247), he exclaims when he realizes that his own self-will has been the cause of six and a half years of their separation, and Lady Russell’s persuasion in the name of prudence was really only responsible for separating them for two years, the length of an ordinary long engagement. Just as he takes responsibility for the consequences of Louisa’s stubbornness, he sees himself as blamable for having been too weak, too
proud, and too confident in his assessment of Anne as proud and weak herself to propose to her after he achieves some financial independence.

Thus Wentworth has come to question firmness, and in doing so has learned something of Anne’s Aristotelianism, as well as of her Stoic fortitude and Christian patience and humility. As Austen summarizes his explanation to Anne of what happened to him after the events at Lyme, “he had learnt to distinguish between the steadiness of principle and the obstinacy of self-will, between the darings of heedlessness and the resolution of a collected mind” (P 242). His education means that Anne’s “character was now fixed on his mind as perfection itself, maintaining the loveliest medium of fortitude and gentleness” (P 241). It is Wentworth, not Anne, who must change in this novel. This is in contrast to Elizabeth and Darcy, who must both readjust their pride in relation to their ideals of justice, and it is more like the union of Emma and Mr. Knightley, where Emma is the one who must alter her behavior to become virtuous. Yet Anne is a more nearly perfect arbiter of justice than Mr. Knightley, and because of her perfections she is often read as less lovable than his imperfect Emma. She is, however, more loving. She is patient with the foolishness of her family and friends and she is faithful to the Christian ideal of charity: “Charity suffereth long, and is kind; charity envieth not; charity vaunteth not itself, is not puffed up” (1 Corinthians 13:4). Although Anne resembles Fanny Price in her kindness and adherence to moral principles, and although both women exemplify the virtue of constancy, Anne is more hopeful than Fanny.

Hope and Fortitude

For Anne, the primary virtue is hope. Although it may seem that she resists a temptation to hope, in that she hardly dares allow herself to think that Wentworth might renew his addresses to her, what she is avoiding is false hope, or expectation. She maintains her spirits and her very existence by not succumbing to the temptation to despair, even surrounded as she is by a cold family and wounded as she has been by her past disappointment. Elizabeth Bowen writes of Anne that “Endlessly, if she so willed, she could fret and brood. But no: she shows an unbroken though gentle spirit and, with that, a calm which does not fail.”3 She is patient, she is kind, and she has faith and hope. Being with the Musgrove family lends support to her spirits: as Isobel Grundy suggests, Anne “does not wait to be loved and happy before she can feel amused; she begins to feel this way as soon as she begins to mix at large in society. Indeed, for
lifting her melancholy and offering her resources, being anxiously in love seems almost as effective as being happily in love.” Grundy locates Anne’s happiness in her cheerfulness, but there is a more solid basis for Anne’s strength of character, and that is her practice of the virtue of hope. Susan Morgan argues that Anne has hope, and she too suggests that it is a hope not merely for an eventual reunion with Captain Wentworth, but also because she loves other people. It is in her engagement with other minds, other spirits, that she finds happiness. Morgan writes, “That is her hope for the future on which her strength depends. That is her self-love.” Yet self-love and hope do not fit together so neatly in this case, because Anne’s hope is something outside herself: if it exists at all, it is inspired by and directed toward something other than her self. If it were a selfish kind of hope, it would be simply for that reunion with Wentworth. According to Aristotle, it is necessary to love one’s self before loving another in friendship, but that self-love is a love of one’s best or higher self—it is not selfishness.

The supreme value of hope is reinforced for Anne in her friendship with Mrs. Smith, who has far less reason than Anne to hope for happiness in her future life. Mrs. Smith is not perfectly virtuous—she does, after all, revel in Nurse Rooke’s gossip about society in Bath (P 155), and she shows Anne a letter that should, perhaps, have been kept private—but her attitude toward her own indisposition and illness, and her lowered social and financial position, is indeed virtuous. Anne observes the vitality of her friend’s spirits, and “finally determined that this was not a case of fortitude or of resignation only” (P 154). Perhaps Anne has in mind her own strength and acceptance of her fate when she reflects that “A submissive spirit might be patient, a strong understanding would supply resolution, but here was something more; here was that elasticity of mind, that disposition to be comforted, that power of turning readily from evil to good, and of finding employment which carried her out of herself, which was from nature alone” (P 154). Anne’s understanding of the value of employment confirms that she herself has passed through the initial stages of resignation and fortitude after her broken engagement, and she has found the kind of “elasticity of mind” in which hope can thrive. Her relief at being thought helpful to her sister Mary (P 33), and her way of serving others by playing the piano at the Musgroves’—despite her tears, “she was extremely glad to be employed” (P 71)—and finally her “strength and zeal, and thought” in the moments after Louisa’s fall (P 111) demonstrate that she has not given in to despair and unhappiness, and that while she cannot live as she would like, she nevertheless is capable of action.
Austen’s use of the word “elasticity,” and the high value both she and Anne place on Mrs. Smith’s ability to maintain this quality of mind through all adversity, suggests an understanding of hope and virtue as dispositions that can never be fixed or static. Mrs. Smith’s hope, which is called “the choicest gift of Heaven” (P 154), is something that must be exercised to be strong. It is no more possible to maintain a strong mind without exercising it than it is to preserve strong muscles. Anne thinks of this gift as one of the qualities of mercy that come from heaven—it is a “merciful appointment” (P 154). The description of Mrs. Smith’s virtues has been described as “what is probably [Austen’s] most explicit statement of Christian virtues,” but the emphasis on strength and elasticity also has to do with the exercise of cardinal virtues. It is through the gift of divine grace and mercy that a woman with no earthly reason for strength or hope is able to maintain a flexible, elastic, adaptable disposition, and to unite the classical virtue of fortitude with the theological virtue of hope. John Wiltshire remarks on the influence of the Stoic tradition in *Persuasion*: “enough features of the stoic regimen are displayed incidentally in the first volume of *Persuasion* to demonstrate that Anne Elliot has absorbed many of the characteristic exercises through which the Stoics both guarded and constituted the self.” He concludes that “Her attempts to ‘harden’ herself are a version of the Stoic’s armour against calamity.” One such attempt appears early on when Anne is passed over as a companion for her sister Elizabeth in Bath, and Mrs. Clay is chosen instead: “Anne herself was become hardened to such affronts; but she felt the imprudence of the arrangement quite as keenly as Lady Russell” (P 34). Despite the way she is treated by her family, and despite her broken engagement, Anne exemplifies the inward excellences of fortitude, patience, and elasticity.

“Too Generally Agreeable”

Anne has far more in common with Mrs. Smith than with either of her own sisters. Her sister Elizabeth lives by a code determined by what is pleasant rather than by what is good. Called upon by family duty to show some form of hospitality to the Musgroves when they are in Bath, Elizabeth undergoes an internal struggle, because she cannot bear to have the Musgroves witness the inferiority of the Elliots’ situation in Bath as it would be evidenced during a formal dinner. And, “for a short time,” she suffers “a good deal,” before deciding on an evening party instead: “It was a struggle between propriety and vanity; but vanity got the better,
and then Elizabeth was happy again” (p 219). Here Austen makes use of the language in which virtue involves tension and struggle, but for Elizabeth this struggle is a conventional one between good and evil, the virtues of propriety and the vices of self-interest. For her, as for her father Sir Walter Elliot, “Vanity was the beginning and the end” of character (p 4). Inger Sigrun Brodey argues that in *Persuasion* Austen follows Hume in suggesting that vanity can lead to virtue. But while Brodey may be right that vanity is not always completely wrong, because proper pride can be virtuous, pure vanity is selfishness. Proper pride, according to Aristotle, has to do with an accurate estimation of one’s own abilities. The challenge of negotiating tensions that surround the social virtue of truthfulness has to do with accurately gauging one’s own worth as well as with deciding when honesty is more important than civility. Elizabeth Elliot, like Sir Walter, is interested in propriety and vanity, rather than civility and truthfulness.

The hypocritical character of Mr. William Elliot poses some difficulties of interpretation for Anne and for Austen’s readers. Like Elizabeth and Sir Walter Elliot, he is proud, but that he “judged for himself in every thing essential” (p 146) is a mark in his favor, as are the attributes of being “sensible,” “agreeable,” and “a man of principle” (p 160). His present conduct to Anne’s family seems proper—“He certainly knew what was right, nor could she fix on any one article of moral duty evidently transgressed”—and still Anne cannot explain the inconsistency of his previous with his current behavior (p 160). She suspects that bad habits die hard, and she even makes the Evangelical complaint that one of those bad habits has been “Sunday–travelling” (p 161). Anne’s conversations with and judgments of Mr. Elliot make clear the difficulty of assessing virtue or vice adequately. She can see that he is proud, but she is not yet sure what kind of pride he has. He is proud, but seems amiable. She wants to leave open the possibility that her cousin could change, and so instead of basing her distrust of him on events from the past, she fixes on his current sensibilities as the subject of her criticism: “Mr. Elliot was rational, discreet, polished,—but he was not open” (p 161). This sounds at first like a complaint of Marianne Dashwood regarding the evils of the reserved character, but Anne’s criticism goes deeper than Marianne’s would, for she concludes her early analysis of Mr. Elliot’s character with the judgment that he “was too generally agreeable. Various as were the tempers in her father’s house, he pleased them all” (p 161). How can agreeableness be considered a bad thing? Here Anne’s judgment resembles Mr. Knightley’s judgment of Frank Churchill, as Mr. Knightley thinks Frank may be “‘aimable,’ ” but not truly amiable (E 149). Aristotle’s
theory of friendship requires that we behave alike to intimates and to strangers, and so it may seem odd that one could be thought “too generally agreeable.” But Mr. Elliot, though he may be adept at judging for himself, and though he has judged Mrs. Clay to be contemptible in her designs on Sir Walter, persists in behaving excessively agreeably to all, without regard for the individual claims of each person’s situation or understanding. In this he is like Frank Churchill or Mr. Weston, or Sir James Middleton.10

Once again, amiability is an extraordinarily difficult balancing act that takes into consideration what is due to each person, not solely on the basis of birth or fortune, but on the basis of understanding and value. Sir Walter is famously blind to the value of his middle daughter: “Anne, with an elegance of mind and sweetness of character, which must have placed her high with any people of real understanding, was nobody with either father or sister: her word had no weight; her convenience was always to give way;—she was only Anne” (P 5).11 “Only Anne” here is like “only a novel” in Northanger Abbey—only the sweetest, kindest, most elegant, and most intelligent woman in Persuasion. Mr. Elliot, like Wickham, has been dissolute in the past and has been succeeding in recent society on the basis of good manners and the appearance of virtue. The difference here, however, is that while the inhabitants of Longbourn and Meryton accept Wickham’s goodness in ignorance of his past, the Elliot family is much more to blame for receiving and encouraging the flatteries of someone they know to have behaved badly toward them and in general in the past.

Mrs. Smith is the means of confirming for Anne what no one else in her family has suspected or remembered, and that is that Mr. Elliot’s old maxim rules his life now as it did in previous years: as Mrs. Smith says, “‘To do the best for himself,’ passed as a duty” (P 202). Mr. Elliot may have matured into a greater sense of the importance of respectability as well as of financial gain in the interests of self, but his mode of acting has changed very little beneath the veneer of assumed good breeding. Anne suspects that he is guilty only of the fault of not being open: “There was never any burst of feeling, any warmth of indignation or delight, at the evil or good of others” (P 161). The proof of Mr. Elliot’s consistently negative character comes in the letter Mrs. Smith shows Anne, an occasion which Anne realizes transgresses a code of honor: “She was obliged to recollect that her seeing the letter was a violation of the laws of honour, that no one ought to be judged or to be known by such testimonies, that no private correspondence could bear the eye of others” (P 204). Despite this breaking of the rules, however, Anne must judge what is most important, most tending toward virtue, in this situation.
Like Elinor Dashwood, like Fanny Price, Anne has to struggle with all the strong moral principles she holds in order to determine which principle is most important in a given situation. Situations such as this one demonstrate how Austen’s characters inhabit a world where there is a whole range of virtues related to every act, every character. Aware of the range of virtues, the educated heroines choose how to balance the claims of different virtues, in the most virtuous way. They do not choose from a list of virtues or rules, and decide which one to apply—the virtues are not a grab bag of possibilities—but they aspire to approach life as a process of making judgments and decisions in the way that best maintains harmonious unity among the virtues. In *Persuasion*, the code of honor that protects a man’s private life and letters conflicts with the attempt of two women to establish the truth. In this case, truth must win in order for Anne to preserve her own character, and to separate herself and her family from the designs of Mr. Elliot. Honesty is shown to be more important than a code of honor, and the real virtue of truth triumphs over mere rules, not merely for the pragmatic preservation of the Elliot pride, but for the greater good. For Anne, as for Elizabeth Bennet, character is complex and difficult, but not impossible, to interpret.

**Virtuous Constancy**

In her well-known discussion with Captain Harville about the nature of constancy, Anne Elliot engages with questions about philosophical authority and ethical action. It is Captain Harville, not Anne, who anticipates the objection that the books he would quote (if he could remember them) on the subject of “‘woman’s inconstancy’” were all written by men (*P* 234). And in her response on the difference between men and women as to who loves longest, Anne insists that she not be misunderstood, and that she is far from claiming constancy as a solely female virtue. Answering Harville’s argument that “‘all histories are against you, all stories, prose and verse,’” Anne agrees that “‘Men have had every advantage of us in telling their own story. Education has been theirs in so much higher a degree; the pen has been in their hands. I will not allow books to prove any thing’” (*P* 234).

Metaphorically taking the pen into her own hands just moments after Captain Wentworth’s “pen had fallen down” (*P* 233) while he was writing his letter(s), Anne argues that the difference in constancy has to do with the presence of an “‘object’”; that is, although men may be “‘capable of every thing great and good in [their] married lives,’” they
are less likely than women to love when hope, or the life of the beloved, is gone (P 235). In dismissing the authority of books, Anne appears to rely on women's experiences: she says that both men and women will tend to build on the “‘bias towards our own sex’” and to interpret anecdotes from within their own circles in light of that bias (P 234). Yet she admits that often these experiences will be “‘precisely such as cannot be brought forward without betraying a confidence, or in some respect saying what should not be said’” (P 234). Thus, although she has dispensed with tradition as a judge of the virtue of constancy, she has not given a single instance of experience in favor of her argument that women are more constant than men. The reader and Captain Wentworth, who overhears her, know it is from her own experience that she speaks, but Captain Harville does not, and he bases his acceptance of her conclusion on the fact that “‘when I think of Benwick, my tongue is tied’” (P 236). Neither Anne nor Harville alludes to Louisa as an example of inconsistency, despite the fact that Harville was not the only observer who had considered Louisa and Wentworth to be as good as engaged (P 242–43).

Is constancy more a female virtue than a male virtue? Captain Wentworth proves ultimately to have been constant in his love for Anne, though admittedly “he had been constant unconsciously, nay unintentionally; . . . he had meant to forget her, and believed it to be done” (P 241). Charles Hayter’s constancy in his regard for Henrietta Musgrove outlasts her inconsistent temporary preference for Wentworth even though he “had met with much to disquiet and mortify him in his cousin’s behaviour” (P 77), and once Louisa has persuaded her sister to fix her affections, Henrietta and Charles are reunited. But Anne’s later assessment of the necessity of an object would be right in this case: Charles still has an object and a reason for his constancy, as Henrietta “had too old a regard for him to be so wholly estranged, as might in two meetings extinguish every past hope” (P 77).

What Anne claims for women is the virtue “‘of loving longest, when existence or when hope is gone’” (P 235). She is surely thinking of herself when she imagines a woman loving a man long after his death, in contrast to Benwick’s short-lived mourning for Fanny Harville. She has imagined, during an earlier conversation at Uppercross, what her feelings would have been had she read of the death of “‘a gallant Captain Wentworth,’” as he describes it, “‘in a small paragraph at one corner of the newspapers’” (P 66). But has she really lost all hope? She may have lost the power of seeing Wentworth as a possible object of matrimonial desire, but even during the eight years of their estrangement she knew that he was alive, and in recent months she has been seeing him as a very
present object, while at the same time trying not to love him. Despite her early disappointment and loss of the hope that he would ever be her husband, she has not lost all hope.

Anne may not credit histories of women’s inconstancy, but she has been obliged nevertheless to rely on the male-authored word for news of Wentworth in the intervening years: “She had only navy lists and newspapers for her authority, but she could not doubt his being rich;—and, in favour of his constancy, she had no reason to believe him married” (P 30). As Jocelyn Harris has noted, Anne is like Chaucer’s Wife of Bath in her suspicion of men’s tales of women, and I would suggest that Jane Austen is like Chaucer in her exploration in *Persuasion* of the source of true nobility and virtue. Both Austen and Chaucer suggest that it is behavior rather than the accident of birth that makes for a noble character. But Jane Austen, like any great writer, never merely represents or incorporates writers or ideas of the past; and her articulation of the tradition of the virtues is something she has made her own.

Alasdair MacIntyre suggests that the virtue of constancy is Austen’s extension of the tradition. Although I agree with MacIntyre that Austen stresses constancy as virtuous, constancy is not a new virtue, but the natural consequence of uniting the classical virtue of fortitude with the Christian virtue of hope. Austen is Aristotelian, and she is also Christian. David Fott argues that Austen “leaves us to decide for ourselves whether it is possible to reconcile Aristotle and Christianity”; however, Austen is not an ambivalent writer, and I suggest that it is through constancy and faith in *Persuasion* that she demonstrates the unity of the virtues. Constancy is a result of the union of the classical and Christian traditions. Another way of looking at constancy, however, is to see it as the faith on which all the virtues are grounded. Anne Elliot is able to be constant because she is strong and hopeful, but prior to the exercise of these virtues, she has faith. Her strength is not just stoicism, and her hope is not just romantic. She has faith in something larger than herself, larger than her own life; that is, she has faith in God. In *Persuasion*, as in Austen’s other novels—aside from *Lady Susan*—religious faith underlies the virtues of the heroines. As Lesley Willis argues, “An affirmation of the fundamental importance of God in Jane Austen’s fictional world is to be found in her references to prayer, for no one can pray to an abstraction.” Referring to the aftermath of Louisa’s fall at Lyme, Willis says that in *Persuasion* “prayer is seen as the heartfelt response of people of faith to a crisis.” Not surprisingly, Anne has more faith in God than in man.

She is skeptical about male writers on constancy not just because they are male, but because they are human and prone to distort truth. Austen
raises the question of whether constancy is a gender-specific virtue, but Anne’s argument in favor of women’s superior constancy is not borne out by the text. Wentworth is shown to be just as constant in his enduring love, if not as conscious of it, as Anne is, and other characters in the novel, both men and women, demonstrate the more common behavior of human inconsistency in love. As Wickham would like to have it in *Pride and Prejudice*, “we are none of us consistent’” (PP 81). But some are consistent, and that both Anne and Wentworth prove to be so despite vicissitudes suggests that the ideal is possible. And Anne’s rejection of the authoritative male writers, which is ironically instigated by Captain Harville presuming to speak for her, is contradicted by her injunction to Captain Benwick that he study the works of “our best moralists” in order to “rouse and fortify the mind by the highest precepts, and the strongest examples of moral and religious endurances” (P 101). For Austen, male authority is worth questioning, but not necessarily dismissing; and the conventionally female virtue of constancy is neither limited to women’s love, nor superior to male virtues.

### The Unity of the Virtues

Austenian constancy in *Persuasion* is not so much an extension of Aristotelian and Christian tradition as it is part of a unification of the two traditions. Constancy is closely related to faith: Anne has kept faith with the one she loves, and has done so because she has faith in the theological virtues. She is loving, hopeful, and faithful. *Persuasion* raises the problem of firmness and then shows that elasticity and flexibility are more important to the practice of virtue than is firm adherence to rules. Flexibility does not imply relativism, however, as in this novel it has to do with the adaptability that hope gives to fortitude. The classical virtues are thus revivified in Austen’s work through the theological virtues. Far from reading *Persuasion* as a departure from the ideas Austen puts forth in her earlier novels, I see her last completed novel as a continuation of her work toward uniting classical and Christian traditions. In its focus on constancy, flexibility, and the elasticity of hope, the novel can also help to illuminate the earlier novels. *Persuasion* is in fact Austen’s clearest articulation of her interest in both classical and Christian virtues, as the passages on the proportions and limits of Wentworth’s idea of firmness, and on Mrs. Smith’s elasticity and hope demonstrate. If she had lived to revise this novel, perhaps she would have made the references to virtue more subtle, as they are in other novels, but as it is in *Persuasion*, we have
references to balancing the claims of virtue, and to the importance of flexibility in the practice of virtue. While *Pride and Prejudice* offers the best dramatic examples of how to practice the virtues, and *Mansfield Park* shows Austen’s strongest heroine in the act of philosophical contemplation, *Persuasion* contains the closest thing to an explicit theory of the unity of classical and Christian virtues.
Conclusion: After Austen

Even people whose lives have been made various by learning, sometimes find it hard to keep a fast hold on their habitual views of life, on their faith in the Invisible . . . .

—George Eliot, *Silas Marner*

What happens to the virtues after Austen? There is certainly an Austen-inspired tradition of the country-house novel and/or the novel of manners, but is there a tradition of novels after Austen that represent the classical and theological virtues as a coherent, positive, and flexible tradition of ethical thought and behavior?1 When MacIntyre addresses this question, he suggests Henry James as the author after Austen who has the best claim to the continuation of the tradition, yet he qualifies this possibility by pointing out that by the time James was writing, the “substance of morality was increasingly elusive.”2 Robert B. Pippin argues in *Henry James and Modern Moral Life* that James wrote in a time of “historical crisis” that “greatly complicated our moral assessments of each other.” Pippin suggests that this “complexity has to do with the increasing unavailability of what we used to be able to rely on in interpreting and assessing each other.”3 A common language of morality becomes harder and harder to find. For James, as for Edith Wharton, also a novelist of morals and manners, ethical thought is tremendously important, but incredibly difficult, almost to the point of being impossible. If James is part of the possible tradition of the virtues after Austen, to what extent is this tradition related to the “Great Tradition” of English novelists that F.R. Leavis famously identified as leading from Austen to Eliot, James, and Conrad? One of the defining characteristics of a “great” novelist, for Leavis, was moral seriousness.4 He did not include Edith Wharton in his list, but in my view, the best candidates for the “great, effective, imaginative voice” for the continuation of the tradition of the virtues after Austen are
Eliot, James, and Wharton, although there are certainly many other writers who represent aspects of the tradition, and many who try to capture something of the harmony of that tradition even in the midst of the uncertainty of the postmodern world.

George Eliot and the Duty to Sympathize

George Eliot, like Jane Austen, clearly sees the dangers of a life lived according to an inflexible moral code. In *Silas Marner* (1861), she describes the coldly regulated ethical life of Nancy Lammeter, later Mrs. Godfrey Cass: “It was as necessary to her mind to have an opinion on all topics, not exclusively masculine, that had come under her notice, as for her to have a precisely marked place for every article of her personal property: and her opinions were always principles to be unwaveringly acted on.” Morality can be organized in the same way that property or belongings can be organized, with categories and systems that prescribe what is right. For Nancy Lammeter, subjective opinion becomes a rigid moral code: Eliot says that her principles were firm “not because of their basis, but because she held them with a tenacity inseparable from her mental action.” Ethics can easily become prematurely fixed and inflexible. In this case, “pretty Nancy Lammeter, by the time she was three-and-twenty, had her unalterable little code, and had formed every one of her habits in strict accordance with that code.”

In *The Mill on the Floss* (1860), Eliot criticizes the inadequacy of ethical systems advocated by the “men of maxims.” In this novel, Maggie Tulliver provides a stunning criticism of her brother Tom’s unchristian and uncharitable belief in his own righteousness. She tells him, “‘You boast of your virtues as if they purchased you a right to be cruel and unmanly as you’ve been to-day,’ ” and she chides him for having “‘no pity’”: “you have no sense of your own imperfection and your own sins. . . . You thank God for nothing but your own virtues—you think they are great enough to win you everything else. You have not even a vision of feelings by the side of which your shining virtues are mere darkness!” Tom’s assessment of his own virtues is too confident; just as Benjamin Franklin needed to be reminded by a friend to add “Humility. Imitate Jesus and Socrates” to his list of the virtues to strive for, Tom needs to learn how to rate his own virtues more reasonably and more humbly.

Maggie’s outburst here signals a central concern in George Eliot’s fiction generally, which is the importance of sympathy. The point of
Maggie’s criticism, however, is not that Tom needs to learn more about the range of rightly practiced virtues, which would make him more humble and more kind to others, but that the route to virtue is found through sympathy with the feelings of others. The duty to sympathize is a consistent theme in Eliot’s novels, as critics such as Elizabeth Deeds Ermarth and James Eli Adams have argued. Although this is not the place to analyze in detail the implications of the importance of sympathy for Eliot’s characters, I would suggest that sympathy becomes the primary virtue in the world of these novels, not replacing the range of the virtues entirely, but displacing them in importance to become the reigning moral duty. Sympathy is the alternative to faith as the grounding of all virtue, and without it ethical behavior is not possible.

One of the few characters to criticize the concept of sympathy is Will Ladislaw, who argues against Dorothea’s conviction that “I should like to make life beautiful—I mean everybody’s life” by saying, “I call that the fanaticism of sympathy. . . . If you carried it out you ought to be miserable in your own goodness, and turn evil that you might have no advantage over others. . . . I suspect that you have some false belief in the virtues of misery, and want to make your life a martyrdom.” Although Will Ladislaw may be right in this instance, he is not the moral authority in *Middlemarch*. The moral authority is Dorothea, among the characters, and above all it is the narrator. And the narrator’s primary lesson to the reader—through the narrative technique of alternating storylines chapter by chapter in order to show how to understand other people’s lives, and through explicit interventions that enjoin the reader to imagine the feelings of the less likable characters—is that it is the reader’s duty to sympathize with other people, whether fictional or real. As Rohan Maitzen writes, “Over and over . . . *Middlemarch* challenges the assumption that a single point of view suffices for understanding. Just as individual characters learn by revisiting, rethinking, what they have seen or done, the novel and its implied author enact the moral obligation to see things from a different angle.” In *Middlemarch*, Dorothea does ultimately renounce the “fanaticism of sympathy,” choosing to moderate her devotion to the needs of others, but although she does not become a martyr to Casaubon’s work after his death, she turns her talents toward sympathetic support of Will in his political activities, and as many critics have argued, her powers are not really challenged in this new sphere.

For George Eliot, sympathy is not just the first of the virtues, but also the end of the virtues. Sympathy is not necessarily the path through to the other virtues, including justice and faith. It appears as an all-encompassing virtue that is related to love, but even more closely related to tolerance.
In Eliot’s novels, unlike Austen’s, faith is discussed explicitly and frequently, but the reason why it is addressed directly is that it is often either lost or endangered. In Eliot’s life, faith had already disappeared, and moral duty alone remained. Eliot’s novels may offer the hope that an education in sympathy will prove effective, but the melancholy mode of her work suggests that the virtue of sympathy cannot replace faith in a tradition that has been lost.

**Ethical Deliberation in Henry James**

For James, as for Eliot, the tradition of the virtues can be known only through its fragments. James values the ethical awareness of his characters very highly, but his novels demonstrate little hope that ethical contemplation may lead to moral action. His characters analyze, agonize, and make excruciatingly careful discriminations about ethics, but they rarely act, and they have little confidence that thinking about ethics will lead to positive ends, let alone to happiness and fulfillment. Defining a character as virtuous is not sufficient as a key to character either, as the case of Madame Merle demonstrates in *The Portrait of a Lady* (1881). Ralph Touchett identifies her as someone who “‘pushes the search for perfection too far—. . . her merits are in themselves overstrained,’ ” and he tells Isabel Archer that “‘She’s indescribably blameless; a pathless desert of virtue’ ” (204). In many of the novels of previous writers, the characterization of a woman as perfectly virtuous might make her seem dull, but at least one would know that she could be counted on to be virtuous. This is emphatically not the case with Serena Merle, as Isabel eventually discovers. In the meantime, however, ethics in this novel does appear to be elusive, in the way that MacIntyre suggests. And even once Isabel has asked Madame Merle, “‘Who are you—what are you? . . . What have you to do with my husband? . . . What have you to do with me? ’”11 and begins to understand the situation, the ethical atmosphere does not clear. Morality has become hazy, and the process of deliberation, judgment, and action that is so essential for Austen’s characters no longer seems possible. As Edith Wharton’s heroine Susy Lansing experiences this dilemma about ethical decision-making in *The Glimpses of the Moon* (1922), “The queer edifice of Susy’s standards tottered on its base—she honestly didn’t know where fairness lay, as between so much that was foul.”12

By the time of James’s later novels, virtue seems not just a mysterious desert, but an unfathomable sea. The preoccupation of Lambert Strether throughout *The Ambassadors* (1903) with the question of whether or not
Chad Newsome’s relationship with Madame de Vionnet is “a virtuous attachment,” and the unwillingness of other characters to specify what constitutes a virtuous attachment, are evidence of the shifting nature of the language of virtue and value. Strether comes to see that what is more important for Chad than virtue is “the truth that everything came happily back with him to his knowing how to live.” Aesthetics replaces ethics. Chad’s confidence, elegance, and taste are the foremost indicators of the quality of his life—it is not morality, piety, or charity that defines happiness or the ultimate good for him.

In *The Golden Bowl* (1904), the code by which Prince Amerigo and Charlotte agree to abide has to do not with charity or truth, but with “care,” a less precise term of kindness. James describes what is for them “that intimacy of which the sovereign law would be the vigilance of ‘care,’ would be never rashly to forget and never consciously to wound.” Although the language of this ideal sounds like general benevolence, it in fact allows the two to carry on their illicit liaison, while guarding their respective spouses from the harmful knowledge of their intimacy. For them, the creation of an alternative language of care makes possible the tolerance of unethical situations. Ethical deliberation here works toward not what is right or good, but toward what makes life easier, more comfortable. It can, of course, be argued that the Prince and Charlotte do not represent the moral center of the novel (and neither does Chad Newsome in *The Ambassadors*) and that there are unethical characters in Austen’s novels as well, who manipulate language to try to conceal vice. But in Austen’s novels, it generally becomes clear where the moral center of the novel is, and in *The Golden Bowl* even Maggie Verver’s ethical sense is imprecise, despite all of James’s attempts to portray the finest nuances of character and feeling. For Maggie, the old house, Fawns, represents her sphere of ethical influence: “Here was a house, she triumphantly caused it to be noted, in which she so bristled with values that some of them might serve, by her amused willingness to share, for such of the temporarily vague, among her fellow guests, such of the dimly disconcerted, as had lost the key to their own.” Increasingly, for James’s main characters, the virtues are replaced by the values of modern life, values that are negotiable rather than flexible. The absence of a narrative point of view in the later novels has been seen as a way of demonstrating an increased focus on the ethical lives of the characters, but as Maitzen argues, “In a way, James’s effacement of authorial responsibility allows him to avoid moral responsibility: his commitment to subjectivity as an aesthetic perfection precludes the activity of negotiation crucial to ethical decision-making. This is not to argue that James is
not interested in moral problems, but it is to suggest that his interest in them is clinical: the interest of an analyst, not a moralist.” James is interested in analyzing the ethical life, in knowing the subtleties of how it works, but not in judging it. Just as for Eliot the main virtue becomes sympathy, for James the main virtue becomes knowledge.16

The important thing may be the process of searching for knowledge, as the following exchange between Isabel Archer and her aunt early in The Portrait of a Lady suggests. Isabel says,

“But I always want to know the things one shouldn’t do.”
“So as to do them?” asked her aunt.
“So as to choose,” said Isabel.17

Clearly concerned with ethical choice, Isabel sees the intellectual aspect of morality as central. Whether she follows the rules or breaks them, she seeks above all to understand the context in which she acts, whatever the action might be. Knowledge as a virtue, then, in James’s novels, may have to do with process and ethical deliberation, with searching for intellectual understanding, but it is debatable whether James represents knowledge or intellectual wisdom as something that can be achieved. Like many writers influenced by nineteenth-century skepticism, both James and Eliot found it difficult to imagine faith and hope as active parts of the moral life.

Edith Wharton and the Value of the Authentic Self

If the definitions of “virtue” were shifting at the time that Austen was writing, the very concept of morality had been translated into the more vague language of value by the time James and Wharton took up the novel of morals and manners. In The Age of Innocence (1920), Edith Wharton shows her hero, Newland Archer, in contemplation of his fiancée, coming to recognize what their life together will mean. When he pictures “his permanent relation with May Welland,” Newland “perceived that such a picture presupposed, on her part, the experience, the versatility, the freedom of judgment, which she had been carefully trained not to possess.” May possesses negative virtue in a different way from Madame Merle: while the latter’s apparently perfect virtue in fact covers a multitude of deceptions, the former’s virtue has been trained to be perfectly empty. There is nothing to hide because there is nothing there; that is, there is no independence of thought, no intellectual vitality or individuality. May
Welland lacks precisely the powers of intellectual engagement that Austen’s heroines learn to develop through the moral education they experience. May’s education is complete in its emptiness. She has not developed her ability to judge, and therefore will be incapable of dealing with ethical questions in any complex or flexible way.¹⁸

Ellen Olenska, by contrast, is independent, and loves Newland because he loves honor more than he loves her, but although Wharton emphasizes the value of their love, she sees little possibility for hope in their lives. Q.D. Leavis has suggested that Wharton could see “only negatives, her values emerging I suppose as something other than what she exposes as worthless.”¹⁹ I take this to mean that Wharton’s novels, like those of James and Eliot, lack some form of hope. Hope does not require happy endings, but it does require faith in something positive. Ellen and Newland reach a kind of compromise between their values and the values of their society: “It was the perfect balance she had held between their loyalty to others and their honesty to themselves that had so stirred and yet tranquillized him; a balance not artfully calculated, as her tears and her falterings showed, but resulting from her unabashed sincerity.” At first this passage appears to hint at the kind of tensions that Austen’s heroines have to balance, as Ellen finds a balance between loyalty to forms and honesty to self. But the larger aim, in the service of which these characters strike this balance, is authenticity and sincerity of the self, rather than the cultivation of good habits, a disposition to act rightly, or a desire to serve others or God. For Wharton’s hero and heroine, then, the ruling virtue is love, but the ruling value is authenticity. Although Wharton is sharply critical of what she calls “all the dim domestic virtues,” she does not show her characters participating in all the vivid social and spiritual virtues.²⁰ Instead, she focuses on sincerity and love as common values.

**Austen’s Achievement**

Despite the intense interest in ethics throughout the novels of Eliot, James, and Wharton, each of these writers focuses on a single virtue that defines moral life, whether that virtue is sympathy, knowledge, or sincerity, and this focus can limit ethical possibility in the novels. Just as Austen’s contemporaries often saw virtue as sexual purity, writers after Austen tend to focus on a particular kind of virtue that informs the ethics of a given situation. Eliot, James, and Wharton may engage with the tradition of ethical contemplation, and represent aspects of the classical and theological virtues in their novels, but if even these novelists of morals
and manners do not represent the full range of a plurality of virtues, as Austen does, then MacIntyre may well be right that Austen is unique in the literature of the last two centuries in her extensive understanding and demonstration of how these virtues can be lived as well as analyzed philosophically.

There are other writers after Austen—such as, for example, Charles Dickens, Elizabeth Gaskell, Thomas Hardy, C.S. Lewis, Walker Percy, Barbara Pym, or Evelyn Waugh—whose names could be put forward as possible inheritors of the tradition of the virtues. Yet in the two centuries of religious skepticism since Austen’s novels were first published, the classical and Christian virtues have not figured prominently in novels or poetry. The theological virtue most commonly represented in literature has been charity, although its definition is also fragmented, as romantic love and good works are seen as very separate aspects of moral life. Many writers after Austen are interested in ethics and virtue, but few see the classical and theological virtues as a unified tradition. Even among writers of her time, Jane Austen’s exploration of the unity of the virtues is original and exceptional.

From an early interest in virtue in her juvenilia, as noted here in my choice of epigraphs for my own chapters, Austen went on to develop her understanding and dramatic representation of a range of virtues in her novels. Although her earliest short novel Lady Susan understands right behavior through a playful investigation of wrong behavior, and her early novel Northanger Abbey is thin in its analysis of ethical deliberation and action, Austen’s mature novels—and I include Sense and Sensibility in this category—represent a considered approach to ethics, an approach formed through her immersion in a tradition of Christian thought that incorporates classical ideals of regulated behavior and heroic choices. Whether she read the work of such writers as Aristotle and Aquinas or absorbed her philosophy of the virtues through literature and culture, she inherited a relatively coherent ethical framework of four cardinal virtues and three theological virtues, and her novels reflect that inheritance.

Not only did she inherit ideas about virtue, but she extended them to include a more intimate focus on how the virtues work in women’s lives, how women acquire the kind of moral education that can lead them to wisdom, and how the virtues function in dramatic tension. In highlighting particular virtues in each novel, even while incorporating a whole range of virtues, Austen provides a reference point for the interpretation of her work. Focusing on the education of the heroines in the novels, I have emphasized the development of virtue as a process of learning to handle the tensions among virtues in a flexible way, while still adhering
to absolute standards of ethical behavior. The source of those absolute principles is Austen’s own Christian faith, which firmly underlies her work and the world of her novels. Faith, I have argued, comes first for her most mature heroines, including Elizabeth, Fanny, Emma, and Anne. In contrast to readers who have seen love as the guiding force behind the novels, I suggest that faith was so firmly there to begin with that Austen’s characters are shown to rely on faith to help them practice other virtues. Unlike Eliot or Gaskell, Austen does not discuss faith often or very explicitly, but the evidence of her own religious training, the prayers she wrote, and the importance in the novels of contrition, confession, and repentance help to establish that her fictional world is founded on faith in God as well.

With faith as a foundation, in *Pride and Prejudice* Elizabeth and Darcy demonstrate how love can exert an educative power that leads to the establishment of the beautiful and harmonious relations of justice. Although *Emma* has a strong claim to be considered one of Austen’s masterpieces, its exploration of the process of intellectual awakening and subsequent education is not as well-developed as the exploration of the same process is in *Pride and Prejudice*, and Mr. Knightley’s consistent virtue distracts from even as it contributes to Emma’s education in virtue. *Pride and Prejudice*, then, is Austen’s most compelling treatment of the practice of the virtues. While in *Sense and Sensibility*, Elinor deserves more credit for the exercise of her virtue under pressure, and Marianne can be read as a powerful character who discovers Christian grace in the midst of suffering, this novel is still constrained by its relatively didactic method of having the sisters teach each other. My chapter on *Mansfield Park* demonstrates that Fanny is far more interested in growth and development than has hitherto been suggested by other critics, and that she is much closer to philosophical wisdom than Austen’s other heroines are. Many of Fanny’s habits are defensible, and dramatically interesting as well as ethical, and the importance for her of ongoing and active contemplation of things that are universally true means that Fanny Price reaches philosophical wisdom. Anne Elliot is taken seriously and appreciated for her virtues by the author if not by most of the characters in *Persuasion*, yet the fact that the process she has had to go through in order to arrive at her calm sense of self, with a heart full of hope, is not so fully dramatized in the novel, means that her character is less engaging than that of Emma Woodhouse or Elizabeth Bennet. Both Emma and Elizabeth undergo painful moral education under the eyes of the reader, thereby demonstrating both that moral education is possible, and that an education in virtue can be dramatically interesting.
Both Elizabeth and Darcy, however, are subject to a reexamination of their own minds before they can understand each other and join together in the pursuit of happiness and justice. Austen does not dramatize Darcy’s change of heart and mind in anything like the detail she lavishes on Elizabeth, but she nevertheless makes it evident that he has had to undergo a similar kind of reassessment and revaluation of his earlier ethical standpoint. That Elizabeth and Darcy together come to understand justice through the educative power of love is central to the brilliance of this novel. *Pride and Prejudice* is, therefore, Jane Austen’s greatest achievement. I have attempted to explicate some of the ways in which Austen and her heroines engage with the classical and theological traditions of the virtues in order to show that the world of Austen’s novels is grounded on this unified tradition of ethical thought from Aristotle to Aquinas. I have also suggested that Austen participates in the analysis of that tradition—as Dante, Chaucer, and Shakespeare do—in a creative, flexible way. Although many novelists since Austen’s time, including Eliot, James, and Wharton, have focused on questions about how to live the ethical life, writers after Austen are much less likely to engage with the full range of the classical and theological virtues. To modify MacIntyre’s formulation of Austen’s relation to this tradition, then: Jane Austen is the most recent effective, imaginative, and great writer who engages in her novels with the tensions and balances among the classical and theological virtues. That she will not be the last, we can continue to hope.
Introduction: How Should I Live My Life?

1. The term “virtue ethics” has gained currency in recent decades, but it is not a term that would have been familiar to Aristotle, Aquinas, or Austen, and it is at best a vague term. It is clearer to speak of “virtues” or of “ethics.” The term “virtue ethics” has emerged as part of an effort to distinguish a way of talking about ethical life in which the virtues of character figure prominently, from ways of talking about ethics in which rules, duties, utility, or acts are emphasized. Focusing on the virtues not only means paying attention to the character of the individual, but also to the place of the individual within the community. Elizabeth Anscombe's landmark essay “Modern Moral Philosophy” (1958) revivified debate about how to understand moral behavior, and launched a series of discussions about whether moral theory should provide procedures for what a person should do, or offer guidance for what kind of person he or she should be. In recent decades, more and more attention has been paid to the virtues, with several philosophers advocating the importance of ancient ethical theories. See, e.g., Philippa Foot, Virtues and Vices; Alasdair MacIntyre, After Virtue; Martha Nussbaum, Love's Knowledge; Michael Slote, Morals from Motives; and Bernard Williams, Ethics and the Limits of Philosophy. “Virtue ethics” has to do not just with the consequences of a person's action, but also with the whole context of his or her own life: it focuses on lifelong preparation for virtuous action rather than on deliberation in the case of each ethical question. Addressing the problem of how to live so as to be ready to act ethically instead of the problem of how to make specific choices, virtue ethics aims at the education of character more than at obedience to rules of conduct. Current thought about the virtues is usually (although not exclusively) along the lines of Aristotle's ethics; “neo-Aristotelian” virtue ethics is accorded its prefix partly because, as Rosalind Hursthouse explains, “its proponents allow themselves to regard Aristotle as just plain wrong on slaves and women, and also because we do not restrict ourselves to Aristotle's list of virtues” (On Virtue Ethics, 8). She adds that charity, e.g., is now considered to be on the list, although it was not an Aristotelian concept. See also Roger Crisp, ed., How Should One Live?: Essays on the Virtues.

2. Prominent among such critics is Marilyn Butler, who concludes her study of Jane Austen and the War of Ideas by arguing that “Jane Austen is conservative in a sense no longer current. Her morality is preconceived and inflexible” (298). Alistair M. Duckworth, e.g., also argues for Austen's staunch conservatism and her relatively straightforward “affirmation of inherited structures” (The Improvement of the Estate, 23). Although I disagree at a number of points with Butler's and Duckworth's specific arguments, I am indebted to their work on Austen's conservatism, and my argument, therefore, is intended to explicate further her conservative tendencies and to modify the idea that this conservatism is inherently inflexible.
3. While a number of critics have been interested in expanding the political context of the novels and implications of Austen’s attitude toward it (see, e.g., Claudia L. Johnson, *Jane Austen: Women, Politics, and the Novel*; Edward Neill, *Politics of Jane Austen*; and Warren Roberts, *Jane Austen and the French Revolution*), some have argued instead that we find the breadth of her art in her thorough understanding of the family and social life (see Julia Prewitt Brown, *Jane Austen’s Novels*; David Monaghan, *Jane Austen: Structure and Social Vision*; and Brian Crick, “Jane Austen on the ‘Relative Situation’”) or in her dramatic representation of character and action (see George Whalley, “Jane Austen: Poet”).


5. In *The Pleasures of Virtue*, Ruderman offers an excellent analysis of the importance of moderation in Austen’s novels, and her emphasis on virtue as primarily happiness rather than power is especially helpful. Both Ruderman and Gallop (in his article “Jane Austen and the Aristotelian Ethic”) analyze Austen as an Aristotelian writer, but neither of them investigates the theological context of her novels. Michael Giffin analyzes Austen’s eighteenth-century religious context, but not her classical inheritance, and he sees her novels as “works of didactic meta-fiction” (*Jane Austen and Religion*, 9). Jan Fergus also reads the novels as “primarily didactic” (*Jane Austen and the Didactic Novel*, 3). For an analysis of Austen’s use of the allegorical tradition of the Seven Deadly Sins, see Nancy W. Miller, “Sloth: The Moral Problem in Jane Austen’s *Mansfield Park*.”

6. Although like Fott I find both classical and Christian influences in Austen’s work, my argument differs significantly from his, most notably in my contention that some of Austen’s heroines reach philosophical wisdom.


10. MacIntyre, *After Virtue*, 239; 243. See also Simon Haines, who argues that Austen, along with Scott, Edgeworth, and Peacock, was among the few writers between the 1790s and the 1820s who escaped “that central Cartesian self, with its search for a theoretical account of the world and, often, its sceptical disillusionment with the eventual failure of the search.” Haines suggests that in contrast to these novelists, most of the English poets of the time failed to escape (“Deepening the Self,” 38). Similarly, Martha A. Turner argues that unlike most nineteenth-century novelists, Austen represents a teleological and Aristotelian view of the world, and that the drive toward closure in *Pride and Prejudice* exemplifies the workings of a pre-mechanistic world (*Mechanism and the Novel*, 44). Bharat Tandon suggests that “the social and ethical environments which Austen’s fiction describes, and on which the morality of polite eighteenth-century conversation had depended, were themselves being displaced by the time she died” (*Jane Austen and the Morality of Conversation*, 241). For criticism that interprets Austen instead as strongly influenced by Enlightenment thought, see Margaret Kirkham, *Jane Austen, Feminism and Fiction*, and Peter Knox-Shaw, *Jane Austen and the Enlightenment*; for criticism that interprets her work in the context of the Romantics, see Beth Lau, “Placing Jane Austen in the Romantic Period,” and Clara Tuite, *Romantic Austen*.


12. Austen, “Biographical Notice,” 8; Whately, Rev. of *Northanger Abbey* and *Persuasion*, 95; Oliphant, “Miss Austen and Miss Mitford,” 217. See also Lawrence Lerner, who argues in *The Truth-tellers* that for Austen, George Eliot, and D.H. Lawrence, morality is important, but there is no personal, Christian God.


David Fott, and Bruce Stovel also argue that Austen’s outlook is fundamentally Christian. On the role of religion in Austen’s life, see Collins, *Jane Austen: The Parson’s Daughter*.


16. See 453–57 in *Minor Works*. The manuscripts of these prayers are in the Heller Rare Book Room of the F.W. Olin Library at Mills College in Oakland, California.


18. C.S. Lewis sees the importance of Marianne’s confession as central to the climax of *Sense and Sensibility*. He writes that in Austen’s moral world “All is hard, clear, definable; by some modern standards, even naively so. The hardness is, of course, for oneself, not for one’s neighbours.” That moral principles are “hard, clear, definable” does not mean that they are rigid judgments, however. The emphasis on self-knowledge means that “Contrasted with the world of modern fiction, Jane Austen’s is at once less soft and less cruel” (“A Note on Jane Austen,” 363).

19. Koppel’s focus is on Christian rather than classical morality, but he too argues that Austen’s “natural-law morality fuses both classical and Christian elements, and remains essentially the same in all six novels” (*Religious Dimension*, 128 n.27). Thomas Beattie, on the other hand, argues that while Austen is both a classical and a Christian moralist, it is only in *Emma* that she synthesizes the two traditions (*From Pride and Prejudice to Emma: A Study of Jane Austen as Moralist*).

20. The exception here is the epigraph to the conclusion, from George Eliot’s *Silas Marner*, which I invoke in a more serious mood. I approach the major completed novels, *Northanger Abbey, Sense and Sensibility, Pride and Prejudice, Mansfield Park, Emma*, and *Persuasion*, in the order of their completion, as many critics do.

21. Baillie’s first volume of *Plays on the Passions* includes *De Monfort*, which focuses on hatred, and *Count Basil*, which focuses on love.

22. Although Austen inherits ideas from previous writers, she also creates the tradition that leads to her, renewing old ideas in her fiction. F.R. Leavis writes that “her relation to tradition is a creative one. She not only makes tradition for those coming after, but her achievement has for us a retroactive effect: as we look back beyond her we see in what goes before, and see because of her, potentialities and significances brought out in such a way that, for us, she creates the tradition we see leading down to her.” Austen’s work, he says, “like the work of all great creative writers, gives a meaning to the past” (*Great Tradition*, 5). Contrary to contemporary misrepresentations of Leavis’s theory of *The Great Tradition* that suggest he sees novelists in a rigid linear system of inheritance and indebtedness, this comment on Austen reveals his theory as nonlinear, even circular, in its willingness to revisit and revalue earlier writers in light of later creative achievement.

23. In *Secresy* (1795), Fenwick’s wise and witty Caroline Ashburn is an exception, but the virtue of Caroline’s friend Sibella depends wholly on her chastity, and therefore not at all on wit.

24. Sandra M. Gilbert and Susan Gubar argue that “When the heroines are able to live Christian lives, . . . the daughters are ready to become wives” (*Madwoman in the Attic*, 163); their implication is that this is a negative process involving humiliation and submission. As I argue below, especially in chapters four and six on *Pride and Prejudice* and *Emma* respectively, the process of moral education is not humiliating, though it is humbling. But Anne is living a Christian life long before her marriage, just as Fanny is. When an Austen heroine begins to live a Christian life, she is ready to be herself. Faith does not require the submersion of the individual in the collective: it can involve participation in a community, but Austen’s heroines are more, not less, themselves once their moral awareness is heightened.

**Chapter One: The Virtues According to Aristotle, Aquinas, and Austen**

1. Plato, *Republic*, 427e. These virtues are known as cardinal because they are the primary virtues on which lesser virtues, or subcategories, depend; “cardinal” is from the Latin word *cardo*, “hinge.”
2. Kant’s influence becomes much stronger in the nineteenth-century novel, as can be seen, e.g., in George Eliot’s insistence on the absolute and peremptory nature of moral duty. Eliot’s articulation of her belief in duty above all can be found in her conversation with F.W.H. Myers as described in his Essays—Modern (1883).

3. Richard Whately says, “We know not whether Miss Austin [sic] ever had access to the precepts of Aristotle, but there are few, if any writers of fiction who have illustrated them more successfully” (Rev. of Northanger Abbey and Persuasion, 96). Although Fott and Gallop cite this remark in connection with Austen’s ethics, Whately is more likely referring to the principles of Aristotle’s Poetics rather than to those of the Ethicus, as he is discussing Austen’s command of action and probability. George Whalley also discusses the ways in which Austen’s prose fiction exemplifies the “dynamic and radical” view of tragedy that Aristotle held (“Jane Austen: Poet,” 113). Whether she was influenced by the ideas of the Ethicus, the Poetics, or both, it is difficult to know if she read Aristotle or acquired Aristotelian principles indirectly. A number of Austen’s critics, including Alasdair MacIntyre and Allan Bloom, have identified Austen’s affinities with ancient writers, and many of them, from Whately to Gilbert Ryle, D.D. Devlin, John Rowell, Lorrie Clark, Ruderman, Fott, and Gallop have named her an Aristotelian. While Fott sees her fiction exemplifying and revivifying Aristotelian principles, Gallop, intriguingly, suggests that perhaps it is more the case that Aristotle anticipates Austen. This latter possibility helps get around the question of whether or not Austen actually read Aristotle, or, for that matter, any other philosophy. Richard Simpson, writing in 1870, tended to see her as a Platonist. Gallop first likens her to Plato before aligning her with Aristotle, suggesting that Austen’s characters, like Plato’s, illustrate abstract concepts—as in Pride, Prejudice, Sense, Sensibility, Persuasion—and display personal growth (“Jane Austen and the Aristotelian Ethic,” 98; 96). Yet his acceptance of these titles as didactic formulae for Austen’s characters neglects the complexities of the novels and perpetuates an interpretation that has long been called into question by a number of Austen critics. While I invoke some of Plato’s ideas about ethics in this chapter, I conclude that Austen has more in common with Aristotle.


5. Spenser, Faerie Queene, 2. Because Austen wrote about reading Robert Henry’s History of Great Britain (1788), Doody speculates that she “could have read some fragments of Anglo-Saxon and of medieval poets including Chaucer. . . . But we have no idea whether she did complete her task and read all the volumes.” Doody doubts that Austen read Spenser, and suggests that the great works of the past were made meaningful to her through novels, rather than through her direct reading of history, poetry, or philosophy (“Jane Austen’s Reading,” 352; 356; 362). Yet as Frank Bradbrook concludes in his study of Jane Austen and her Predecessors, “Though the exact extent of [her] reading can never be known . . . it is probably more comprehensive than has been suspected” (139).


9. Fielding, Tom Jones, 55; 7; 82.

10. Annas, Morality of Happiness, 27.

11. Aristotle, Nicomachean Ethics, 1098b.21–22. All quotations from Aristotle, unless otherwise noted, are from W.D. Ross’s translation of the Ethicus.

13. MacIntyre, After Virtue, 240.
17. Claudia L. Johnson is right to say that “Marriage is an unquestioned necessity in Austen’s novels, but it is never the first or only necessity, and the women, as well as the men, who pursue it as though it were never enjoy the full benefits of authorial approval, even if they are spared the burden of specific censure” (Jane Austen: Women, Politics, and the Novel, 92). See also Ruderman, Pleasures of Virtue, 11–12.
18. Plato, Symposium, 178d.
19. This distinction helps to explain, in Susan Morgan’s phrase, “Why there’s no sex in Jane Austen’s fiction.” Morgan argues that “Offering forms of passion other than what tradition has defined as natural and sexual is at the heart of what Austen brings to portrayals of women in British fiction” (Sisters in Time, 38).
20. Although it is difficult to distinguish the views of the historical Socrates from the views of Plato’s fictional Socrates, “Socrates is thought to have held that virtue is a kind of wisdom or knowledge concerning what is truly good, possession of which is the only genuine human happiness”; “since all the virtues are forms of this wisdom, they are all essentially expressions of one quality, a view which came to be known as the unity of the virtues” (Jean Porter, “Virtue Ethics,” 97).
21. Plato, Phaedo, 68e.
23. Aristotle, Eudemian Ethics, 1249b.16.
25. Annaas, Morality of Happiness, 38; 453.
30. Ibid., 1099b.1–2. The question of whether “equipment for virtue” is necessary comes up in my discussion of Mrs. Elton in chapter six.
31. See Mark 12: 42–44. In chapter six, I also discuss Miss Bates in relation to the ideal of Christian charity.
33. Ibid., 1099b.19; 1100b.35–1101a.8.
34. See Aquinas, Summa Theologica, I–II 55.4.
35. Aristotle, Nicomachean Ethics, 1111b.2 ff; 1111a.22–24; 1111a.19–21. The distinctions among the roles of choice and of voluntary and involuntary actions in the practice of virtue resurface in my treatment of Sense and Sensibility in chapter three.
39. Plato, Republic, 452d.
40. My account of Christian thought about the virtues in this section is indebted to Jean Porter’s comprehensive summary in “Virtue Ethics.”
42. Aquinas, Summa Theologica, I–II 57.5.
43. See De Moribus Ecclesiae Catholicae I 15.25, cited in Porter, “Virtue Ethics,” 100. For further analysis of Augustine’s view of virtue, see John M. Rist, Augustine.
44. Aquinas, Summa Theologica, I–II 61.5; II-I 61.2.
45. Ibid., I–II 62.4.
Chapter Two: Propriety’s Claims on Prudence in Lady Susan and Northanger Abbey

1. Sandra M. Gilbert and Susan Gubar suggest, rightly, I think, that Lady Susan is “the first of a series of heroines, of varying degrees of attractiveness, whose lively wit and energetic imagination make them both fascinating and frightening to their creator” (Madwoman in the Attic, 155).
Mary Poovey suggests that “the ‘heroine’ of Lady Susan is Austen’s version of the energy that [Mary] Shelley was to call a ‘monster’ ” (Proper Lady, 174).

2. In contrast to Gilbert Ryle, who writes that Northanger Abbey has “no abstract ethical theme” (“Jane Austen and the Moralists,” 113), I argue that both Lady Susan and Northanger Abbey address the theme of prudence.

3. Fielding, Tom Jones, 93.

4. The distinction between living in the world and being of the world comes up later in my discussion of Sense and Sensibility in chapter three.

5. In the terms Dante uses in Hell, Lady Susan is guilty not only of selfish desires of the flesh, which harm only herself, but of the desire to injure others, and ultimately of deception, hypocrisy, and fraud. According to Dante’s system of classification, she therefore would belong in one of the lowest circles of hell.

6. Ruderman, Pleasures of Virtue, 163. Ruderman also points out that “There is an echo of Lady Susan in Mary Crawford’s attempt to win over Edmund.”

7. Poovey, Proper Lady, 178; Ruderman, Pleasures of Virtue, 163. On the question of female power in Lady Susan, see also Lloyd W. Brown, “Jane Austen and the Feminist Tradition.”

8. OED, “virtue, n., I.6.a.”

9. Stewart, Domestic Realities, 71.


13. Ibid., 41.

14. McMaster, “Clothing the Thought in the Word,” 216. Julia Prewitt Brown describes Henry Tilney as a “Virginia guide” who, like Mr. Knightley, represents the archetype of the “teacher-hero” (Jane Austen’s Novels, 41). Patricia Menon analyzes him as the prototype of the mentor-lover, but points out that Catherine does not need very much instruction from him (Mentor-Lover, 27).

15. It is Frank Churchill who says this in Emma, but Mr. Knightley later echoes unconsciously the sentiment when he tells Emma and Mrs. Weston that Jane Fairfax is “reserved, more reserved, I think, than she used to be—and I love an open temper. . . . I saw Jane Fairfax and conversed with her, with admiration and pleasure always—but with no thought beyond” (E 289).

16. In chapters three and four in particular, I take up the question of what happens in Austen’s novels when honesty conflicts with the practice of other virtues.


18. Geach, Virtues, xviii.


Chapter Three: Sense and Sensibility: “Know Your Own Happiness”

1. Jane Nardin, e.g., writes that “The code of propriety which Sense and Sensibility as a whole suggests is morally valid is a rule-oriented code, a code which places conventional ideas concerning duty to society and to self before the dictates of personal judgment and desire” (Those Elegant Decoums, 45).

2. Jan Fergus suggests that the real conflict is between “sensibility and its genuine opposite, sensitivity” (Jane Austen: A Literary Life, 93). John Wiltshire argues that instead of a binary opposition between the sisters, there is a triangular relationship at the center of the novel that includes Mrs. Dashwood (Jane Austen and the Body, 25). Marilyn Butler sees the first half of the novel as conforming to the rigid formula of the title, while the second half becomes more
natural and flexible in its presentation of the sisters (Jane Austen and the War of Ideas, 188–89). See also Ian Watt, “On Sense and Sensibility,” 46–47; and Mary Lascelles, Jane Austen and Her Art, 120. Among those who read the novel as a radical critique of convention and conservative ideology are Claudia Johnson (Jane Austen: Women, Politics, and the Novel, 69) and Moreland Perkins (Reshaping the Sexes, 5).

3. Two of the most prominent examples of this interpretation are Marilyn Butler’s and Alistair Duckworth’s. I take up Butler’s argument later in this chapter. Duckworth argues in The Improvement of the Estate that Austen is a conservative Christian writer, but while he is adamant that “there remains behind the perversions of moral conduct everywhere described a steady vision of ideal social modes” (83), he objects to the ending, in which, he says, “Marianne’s marriage to the rheumatic Colonel Brandon is a gross over-compensation for her misguided sensibility” (104).

4. See, e.g., John Rowell, “Virtue and Moral Authority,” and Michael Giffin, Jane Austen and Religion. One of the reasons readers often dislike what they see as Marianne’s transformation into an even more repressed version of Elinor is that they mistake sense for self-denial; but self-denial is not in itself a virtue. The right reason advocated by the novel’s conclusion is a positive force, not a barren sacrifice of self.

5. Thomas à Kempis, Imitation of Christ, 92; Augustine, City of God, 477; 461; Milton, Areopagitica, 729.

6. Milton, Areopagitica, 728. Even though Elinor and Edward agree that contact with the larger world is necessary, their choice of words suggests that while women should perhaps cultivate an acquaintance only, men should be encouraged to mix with the world. Hence in Evelina Mr. Villars’s anxiety about his female ward’s “entrance” into the world.


9. See Aristotle, Nicomachean Ethics, 1126b.11–1127a.13. Some translations of the Ethics use the word “amiability,” while others translate philia as “friendliness” or “friendship.” W.D. Ross chooses “friendship,” while J.A.K. Thomson uses both “friendliness” and “amiability.” Aristotle’s discussion of the nature of friendship in Books 8 and 9 of the Nicomachean Ethics is distinct from his discussion of philia as a social virtue. I agree with Alasdair MacIntyre that Austen gives more weight to amiability than Aristotle does (After Virtue, 183).

10. Burney, Evelina, 156.

11. Sandra M. Gilbert’s and Susan Gubar’s description of the novel as “especially painful” (Madwoman in the Attic, 157) is representative of the difficulty many twentieth- and twenty-first-century readers have had in accepting the way the narrator of Sense and Sensibility sides with Elinor on moral questions of duty, responsibility, and the repression of the self; both Wiltshire (Jane Austen and the Body, 27) and Butler (Jane Austen and the War of Ideas, 191) comment on the resistance of readers of this novel to the very idea of objective morality.

12. Butler says that “Elinor was never intended to be infallible, but to typify an active, struggling Christian in a difficult world. Indeed, Jane Austen clearly argues that we do not find the right path through the cold, static correctness of a Lady Middleton, but through a struggle waged daily with our natural predisposition to err” (Jane Austen and the War of Ideas, 192). For the most part I agree with this statement, though I question the degree to which Elinor’s struggles are specifically Christian.

13. Morgan, In the Meantime, 123.


15. Nardin outlines the rules she believes Elinor must follow in order “to be as attentive to others as they deserve,” saying that Elinor “proportions her attentions to the merits of the recipients.” She is right that Elinor assesses appropriate behavior relative to context, but this idea in fact refutes her statement that morality in the novel is a “rule-oriented code,” because it demonstrates that Elinor exercises individual judgment in order to practice virtues (Those Elegant Decourms, 27; 45).
20. Although punctuation was altered in a number of places for the second edition of the novel, this was not one of them.
22. Morgan, *In the Meantime*, 127; 129. David Monaghan argues that “Elinor’s social life is conducted almost entirely in the company of good-natured fools like Sir John Middleton or cold materialists like John Dashwood and, therefore, her good manners can rarely be more than a means of concealing her true reaction to the stupidity or cynicism of her companions” (*Jane Austen: Structure and Social Vision*, 44); however, it is precisely because Elinor is obliged to practice good manners in bad company that she is able to demonstrate how deep her moral understanding of other people is.
24. Ibid., 1145a.15ff.
27. See Stuart M. Tave’s chapter on “The Sensibility of Marianne and the Exertion of Elinor Dashwood.”
29. Butler, *Jane Austen and the War of Ideas*, 196. Jan Fergus’s argument that Austen is more interested in analyzing relationships in communities of women than relationships between men and women offers a rare defense of Marianne’s marriage (*Jane Austen: A Literary Life*, 90). Giffin defends the marriage by defending the character of Colonel Brandon (*Jane Austen and Religion*, 83–91). Marvin Mudrick argues that the marriage means Marianne is the victim of social conformity (*Jane Austen: Irony as Defense and Discovery*, 91–93); A. Walton Litz suggests instead that Austen is the victim of artistic convention in feeling it necessary to marry off Marianne and reward Brandon (*Jane Austen: A Study of Her Artistic Development*, 81–83); Tony Tanner says it is not the “real” Marianne who submits to this marriage (*Jane Austen*, 101). Patricia M. Spacks says only that “One feels a faint sadness at her sensible marriage,” yet her assessment of Brandon and Edward as “slightly tarnished figures” fails to consider how much more than tarnished the once sparkling Willoughby would have been as an alternative (“Sisters,” 149; 150). Perkins makes the most extreme case for a reading of Marianne’s marriage as a betrayal, arguing that because the reformed Marianne is not represented dramatically she does not count: he rejects the moral education and marriage because they do not “cohere” with his ideas of “the gender-dissonant Marianne” that he finds earlier in the novel (*Reshaping the Sexes*, 196; 193).
30. Morgan, *In the Meantime*, 125; 126.
34. A number of critics argue that both Elinor and Marianne have to learn and develop through the course of the novel. See, e.g., Kenneth L. Moler, *Jane Austen’s Art of Allusion*, and Tony Tanner, *Jane Austen*. Morgan argues instead for this important distinction: she says that Elinor “does not mature in this novel, but she is in a constant process of developing her vision” (*In the Meantime*, 130). Duckworth similarly suggests that Elinor “does not so much evince a moral growth as a constant internal moral struggle” (*Improvement*, 114).
35. Wollstonecraft, *Vindication*, 305.
Chapter Four: *Pride and Prejudice*  
and the Beauty of Justice

1. See e.g., Judith Lowder Newton, *Women, Power, and Subversion*; Mary Poovey, *Proper Lady*; and Susan Fraiman, *Unbecoming Women*. The argument that Austen’s heroines are forced into humiliating submission stems from Sandra M. Gilbert’s and Susan Gubar’s influential *The Madwoman in the Attic*, which argues that Austen’s imaginative heroines are “mortified, humiliated, even bullied into sense” (159), and that “the happy ending of an Austen novel occurs when the girl becomes a daughter to her husband, an older and wiser man who has been her teacher and her advisor, whose house can provide her with shelter and sustenance and at least derived status, reflected glory” (154).

2. Johnson sums up the attitude of many recent critics of Austen when she argues that “*Pride and Prejudice* invites us not to chide Elizabeth with threadbare morality about original sin, but on the contrary, if not actually to flatter people’s pride as Wickham and Collins do, then at least to honor it” (*Jane Austen: Women, Politics, and the Novel*, 83).

3. For example, in their biographies of Austen, both David Nokes and Carol Shields miss the irony of Jane Austen’s comments about adding “shade” and stretching out the novels with “a long chapter of sense.”


6. Unlike most critics who argue that Austen is political, Roger Gard sees Austen as politically representative precisely because her work is not overtly political: “Unpolitical, she is therefore the realistic novelist of an evolving national democracy” (*Jane Austen’s Novels: The Art of Clarity*, 17).

7. See Aristotle’s *Politics*. Austen’s heroines begin with the ethical question “How should I live my life?” and the novels also open up political questions about how our collective life should be lived, in the context of a civil society.

8. Andrew Davies’s 1995 miniseries based on *Pride and Prejudice*, though well-done and for the most part faithful to the spirit of the novel, is particularly guilty of reinforcing the image of the wedding as the climax of the story, with its focus on costumes, carriages, and kissing forming a sharp contrast to Austen’s single-sentence reference to the weddings of Jane and Bingley, Elizabeth and Darcy: “Happy for all her maternal feelings was the day on which Mrs. Bennet got rid of her two most deserving daughters” (*PP* 385). One-line weddings do not translate well to the screen. The wedding scene in Emma Thompson’s version of *Sense and Sensibility* (1995) is just as elaborate. Ironically, it is the scripts that invent wholly new concluding scenes that are more successful at conveying the spirit of Austen’s conclusions. Davies does better in his 1996 *Emma* than in his version of *Pride and Prejudice*. This film version of *Emma* concludes with an invented country dance that celebrates the engagement of Emma and Mr. Knightley, but more prominently symbolizes the harmonious future of the community. Despite the fact that it too departs from the novel, Nick Dear’s 1995 film version of *Persuasion* also offers a satisfactory solution by briefly showing Anne and Wentworth together on board ship. This conclusion suggests that their life lived together, in its resemblance to the marriage of Admiral and Mrs. Croft, is far more important to Austen than the mere wedding ceremony. For an overview of the relation between the novels and the recent films, including the various approaches to the endings, see Sue Parrill, *Jane Austen on Film and Television*; Linda Troost and Sayre Greenfield, eds., *Jane Austen in Hollywood*; and Gina Macdonald and Andrew F. Macdonald, eds., *Jane Austen on Screen*.


10. The difficulty of taking Austen both seriously and lightly simultaneously is nicely summarized by Park Honan, who says that “As the twentieth century ends, Jane Austen’s power is credited, though her lightness disguises her profundity” (*Jane Austen*, 420).
11. Dorothy Van Ghent remarks that Jane Austen, like Cervantes and Molière, knew how closely comedy and tragedy are related. Van Ghent cites the ending of Plato’s *Symposium*, in which Socrates tells Aristophanes and Agathon that the genius of tragedy is the same as the genius of comedy (*English Novel*, 195).


14. Poovey writes that “It is precisely the latitude of interpretations permitted by this compromise of ethical and moral absolutes that finally imperils the didactic design of *Pride and Prejudice*. For the family of readers that Austen posited did not necessarily exist; even in her own day, the consensus of values she needed to assume was as wishful a fiction as Elizabeth Bennet’s marriage to Darcy” (*Proper Lady*, 207).

15. Booth, *Rhetoric of Fiction*, 266. For a useful discussion of some of the dangers of assuming that Austen’s readership is limited to a select few in either her time or ours, see Gard, *Jane Austen’s Novels: The Art of Clarity*, 2–7.


17. He does, at least, compose them himself. The reason he looks so foolish here is not so much that he studies in preparation for delivering compliments, as that he reveals this, proudly, to another.


22. Compare the OED definition of *prejudice* as “Preconceived opinion; bias or leaning favourable or unfavourable; prepossession; when used *absolutely*, usually with unfavourable connotation.” As an example of prejudice as a favorable leaning, the OED cites Edmund Burke’s use of the word in his *Reflections on the Revolution in France* (1790): “Prejudice renders a man’s virtue his habit . . . . Through just prejudice, his duty becomes a part of his nature.”


26. Ibid., 45.

27. This desire for entertainment means that Mr. Bennet resembles his wife: she too is anxious for entertainment and some kind of excitement. For him, however, the entertainment has little point. For her at least it is constructive, because the goal of her entertainment is to find husbands for her daughters and solve the problem of the entail.


29. Ibid.

30. Ibid., 81.

31. Ibid.

32. In the words of the Confession, “We acknowledge and bewail our manifold sins and wickedness, Which we from time to time most grievously have committed, By thought, word, and deed, Against thy Divine Majesty, Provoking most justly thy wrath and indignation against us. We do earnestly repent, And are heartily sorry for these our misdoings.” Margaret Doody suggests that the *Book of Common Prayer* was probably a stronger influence than the style of Samuel Johnson on the rhythm and balance of Austen’s sentences (“Jane Austen’s Reading,” 347).


35. Her statement here therefore indicates that Darcy was right to point out in one of their conversations at Rosings that she finds “great enjoyment in occasionally professing opinions which in fact are not your own” (PP 174). The fact that Darcy is right about this does not belittle Elizabeth, however, because she is speaking in hyperbole.


Lionel Trilling writes, “Nobody, I believe, has ever found it possible to like the heroine of *Mansfield Park*” (“Mansfield Park,” 296). Even Jane Austen’s mother found her “insipid” (*MW* 432). Laura G. Mooneyham and Anne Ruderman are among the few critics who challenge the reading of Fanny as priggish and dull (*Romance, Language and Education*, 69; *Pleasures of Virtue*, 85). Mary Waldron explains Fanny’s character as understandable in the context of Evangelical fiction (*Jane Austen and Fiction of Her Time*, 84–111), while Amy Pawl argues that Austen’s characterization of Fanny is part of the tradition of the sentimental novel (“Fanny Price and the Sentimental Geography of *Mansfield Park*”).

2. See, e.g., Jill Heydt-Stevenson, “‘Slipping into the Ha-Ha’”; Nina Auerbach, “Jane Austen’s Dangerous Charm”; and Jenny Davidson, “A Modest Question about *Mansfield Park*.”

3. My discussion of morality in *Mansfield Park* focuses on scenes in which characters discuss and contemplate ethical issues, and thus I do not take up the “‘dead silence’” that succeeds Fanny’s question to her uncle about the slave trade (*MP* 198). For an excellent analysis of the relation of slavery and imperialism to *Mansfield Park*, see John Wiltshire, who suggests that in her mention of William Price’s experiences at sea, Austen “acknowledges war, and implicitly the dependency of English domestic life upon the activities of its imperial defenders, while directing her readers’ attention elsewhere”; likewise, he argues, “Austen knew about slavery in the West Indies but it did not preoccupy her” (“Decolonising *Mansfield Park*,” 314; 317).

4. Heydt-Stevenson, “‘Slipping into the Ha-Ha,’” 328.


6. In *The Age of Virtue*, David Morse cites the phrase “the perfect model of a woman” as a statement of narrative fact about Fanny as part of his argument about Fanny’s faultlessness (168), ignoring both Edmund’s suggestion that Fanny is not that yet, and Fanny’s determination never to submit to what her relatives require of “the perfect model of a woman.”

7. The *OED* defines *prig* as “A precisian in speech or manners; one who cultivates or affects a propriety of culture, learning, or morals, which offends or bores others; a conceited or self-important and didactic person.”


14. Later in the novel, Fanny’s sister Susan is referred to as “the stationary niece” (*MP* 472).


16. Compare the point at which Mary Crawford struggles with herself and with what is the right response to the elopement of Henry and Maria: Edmund reports that “I imagined I saw a mixture of many feelings—a great, though short struggle—half a wish of yielding to truths, half a sense of shame—but habit, habit carried it. She would have laughed if she could” (*MP* 458).


18. See also my article on “‘My idea of a chapel’ in Jane Austen’s World.”

19. Yet even Lady Bertram’s attitude toward Fanny changes by the end of the novel: this is evident in the fact that although she looks forward to Fanny’s return to Mansfield following the crisis,
she herself is no longer indolent, and thus is more sincere than she has been wont to be when she greets her by saying, “Dear Fanny! Now I shall be comfortable” (MP 447).


Chapter Six: Learning the Art of Charity in *Emma*

1. Mark Schorer describes “The Humiliation of Emma Woodhouse.” Gilbert and Gubar, e.g., argue that Emma is humiliated and “must accept the fate of being mastered” (*Madwoman in the Attic*, 161–62), and Edward Neill criticizes the “ultra-patriarchal Mr Knightley” (*Politics of Jane Austen*, 95).

2. Michael Giffin argues that in addition to the novel’s focus on the education of an individual into charity, Austen explores the predicament of the fallen community of Highbury (*Jane Austen and Religion*, 150). Jane Nardin also argues that *Emma* is about charity, but she emphasizes the narrower definition of charity as “the act of giving material aid or advice to those, especially those in a worse social or financial position, who seem to need it” (*Charity in Emma*, 66).

3. Barbara K. Seeber argues that Harriet is the “other heroine” of the novel, and that “the dominant narrative tries to naturalize Harriet’s exclusion and to naturalize her inferior class position as her inferior personal worth.” Seeber suggests that “Harriet, like Frankenstein’s monster, takes on a life of her own and it is precisely this that the main narrative cannot accommodate” (*General Consent*, 43). While Emma does make use of Harriet more as an accessory than as a friend, Harriet is not monstrous, she is just ordinary. Upon their marriages both she and Emma take up new responsibilities that mean their parting is not “The ‘unmerited punishment’ of Harriet Smith” that Seeber’s chapter title claims it to be. When Seeber argues that Harriet is “exiled to the periphery of Highbury” (*General Consent*, 45), she cites the passage in which Emma thinks that “every blessing of her own seemed to involve and advance the sufferings of her friend, who must now be even excluded from Hartfield” (*E* 450). But in this passage Emma still believes that Harriet is in love with Mr. Knightley, and she imagines the exclusion of Harriet as necessary to spare Harriet the pain of seeing Emma and Mr. Knightley happy together. Once Emma discovers that “Harriet had always liked Robert Martin” (*E* 481), their friendship begins to “change into a calmer sort of goodwill” (*E* 482), but there is no banishment, no punishment here.


5. Compare 1 Timothy 1:15, where the Apostle Paul writes, “This is a faithful saying, and worthy of all acceptation, that Christ Jesus came into the world to save sinners; of whom I am chief.” On the relation between embarrassment and shame, see David Southward, “Jane Austen and the Riches of Embarrassment.”

6. Folsom, “‘I Wish We Had a Donkey,’” 160.

7. Miss Bates is the only Austen character who quotes—in her case, misquotes—from the Bible: commenting on Emma’s kind gift of Hartfield pork, she says, “We may well say that ‘our lot is cast in a goodly heritage’ ” (*E* 174). The reference is to Psalm 16:7. As Margaret Doody points out, Miss Bates has no heritage, no estate to inherit, and her good fortune here is that she is the recipient of charity (“Jane Austen’s Reading,” 348). It is typical of her good nature, however, to see even the smallest kindnesses, whether given or received, as examples of Christian charity. Koppel contrasts Miss Bates’s Christian charity with the negative version of Christian perfection represented by the Eltons (*Religious Dimension*, 26).


9. Emma is less charitable in her attitude toward Robert Martin and his family than she is to the poor, however. David Wheeler attributes her snobbery toward manual laborers to her “old-fashioned attitudes toward agrarian economy,” and points out that she seems unaware of recent economic changes in her society (“Jane Austen and the Discourse of Poverty,” 253). For a discussion of the
relation between economics and virtue in Austen, see also Elsie B. Michie, “Austen’s Powers: Engaging with Adam Smith in Debates about Wealth and Virtue.”


13. The Order for Morning Prayer, in The Book of Common Prayer. Koppel also argues that Emma’s repentance and desire to reform can best be understood with reference to the Christian ideal of moral behavior; he suggests that Emma is “by Christian standards the most deeply flawed of Jane Austen’s heroines” (Religious Dimension, 31; 37).

14. Patricia Menon suggests that Austen downplays Mr. Knightley’s role as a mentor, as she does in the case of Henry Tilney in Northanger Abbey and Mr. Darcy in Pride and Prejudice as well, because these novels propose a model of marriage in which moral equality is necessary for “perfect happiness” (Mentor-Lover, 45).

Chapter Seven: Balancing the Virtues in Persuasion

1. Those who see Persuasion as a departure from the previous novels include Duckworth, Monaghan, Poovey, and Tanner; see also Auerbach, “O Brave New World”; Clausen, “Jane Austen Changes Her Mind”; Litz, Jane Austen: A Study of Her Artistic Development; and Millgate, “Prudential Lovers and Lost Heirs.” Recent critics have challenged this interpretation, however, suggesting instead that Austen shifts her political focus onto the democratic virtues of the navy. I agree with John Wiltshire (Jane Austen and the Body) and Susan Morgan (In the Meantime), who argue that Persuasion is very much of a piece with Austen’s previous novels. Wiltshire objects to readings of Persuasion that see this novel as “anticipating the modern, or even postmodern, conviction of the relativity of all value and perception,” and suggests that such readings are most likely “motivated by the still-lingering embarrassment that a novel should be . . . ‘only a novel’ ” (Jane Austen and the Body, 157–58; 159).

2. Julia Prewitt Brown argues that in this novel “no Aristotelian ethical mean is put forth as a solution” to the ethical dilemmas raised (“Private and Public in Persuasion,” 172); however, as I argue in this chapter, Persuasion is actually more explicit about the importance of finding the mean and acting according to it than the earlier novels are.


5. Morgan, In the Meantime, 189–90. A. Walton Litz argues that Anne experiences the “despair” of the “modern ‘personality,’ forced to live within itself” (Jane Austen: A Study of Her Artistic Development, 154); John Wiltshire argues against despair, saying that for Anne “there is no terror in her comparative emotional isolation, and her self-reflection and self-consciousness are depicted as at least in part a strength, a resource” (Jane Austen and the Body, 178). For further discussions of the classical idea of love of self, see Basil Willey, English Moralists, 64, and Julia Annas, Morality of Happiness, 127. Michel Foucault describes love of self as an end in itself, rather than as a way to improve friendship and the love of another person. He is interested in an art of the self that “emphasizes the importance of developing all the practices and all the exercises by which one can maintain self-control and eventually arrive at a pure enjoyment of oneself” (Care of the Self, 238).


7. Wiltshire, Jane Austen and the Body, 175–76.

8. See Brodey, “When Vanity Leads to Virtue.”


10. Somehow, though, excessive amiability is less forgivable in a young man than in an older man. Austen is far more critical of Mr. Elliot and Frank Churchill than she is of Frank’s father or
Sir James. It is the pretensions of a man of “three-and-twenty” to be wise and benevolent, as Mr. Knightley complains, that are insufferable (E 150).

11. Judith Terry argues that although “We recognise easily enough on a first reading how Anne is excluded by her family and their friends,” “we are much less likely to notice how she is also squeezed out of the text, how the text itself seems calculated to make everyone else seem—not better—but more interesting” (“The Slow Process of Persuasion,” 126). However, if we perceive, with Jane Austen’s direction, how Anne is squeezed out by family and friends, then the text is not squeezing her out.

12. Harris, *Jane Austen’s Art of Memory*, 188. The Wife of Bath swears,

By God, if wommen hadde writen stories,  
As clerkes han withinne hire oratories,  
They wolde han writen of men more wikkednesse  
Than al the mark of Adam may redresse.  

(Chaucer, *The Wife of Bath’s Prologue and Tale*, ll. 693–96)


15. Willis, “Religion in Jane Austen’s *Mansfield Park*,” 68. Willis also suggests that in *Sense and Sensibility* and *Mansfield Park* especially Austen demonstrates “both that religion vitalizes and sustains community and that lack of religious faith, and the morality which attends it, lead to isolation” (ibid., 69).

16. Anne does not specify male moralists, but it is probable that she is thinking of such writers as Johnson, Sherlock, Bishop Butler, Samuel Clarke, and William Law (Devlin, *Jane Austen and Education*, 49).

17. Grundy observes that “Throughout this novel, men and women repeatedly contradict the stereotypes of what male and female ought to be” (“The Triumph of Cheerfulness,” 9).

**Conclusion: After Austen**

1. For a discussion of the country-house novel after Austen, see Clara Tuite, “Decadent Austen Entails”; for a discussion of novelists influenced by Austen, including George Eliot, Elizabeth Gaskell, Anthony Trollope, Henry James, E.M. Forster, and Barbara Pym, see Norman Page, “Influence on Later Writers.”


4. Leavis argues that the tradition extends from Jane Austen through George Eliot, Henry James, and Joseph Conrad, with the possible inclusion of Charles Dickens and D.H. Lawrence. *The Great Tradition* treats Eliot, James, and Conrad, and includes brief discussions of Dickens and Lawrence. The mention of Jane Austen is cursory, even though she inaugurates this tradition, probably because Q.D. Leavis had done extensive work on Austen’s novels and at one point planned a book on Austen (which never appeared). To analyze the differences between Leavis’s “Great Tradition” and the tradition of writers who represent the range of the virtues, however, would require more space than this conclusion permits; and my focus in this book is on Austen’s engagement with the tradition that precedes her, rather than on attempting to define a canon of moral writers who follow her.


10. Maitzen, “Moral Life of Middlemarch.”


15. Ibid., 472.

16. Maitzen, “Moral Life of Middlemarch.” For further analysis of the power of knowledge in James’s work, see e.g., G.L. Hagberg, *Meaning and Interpretation*. Michael Bell suggests instead in *Sentimentalism, Ethics, and the Culture of Feeling* that the main virtue for James was kindness (171–86). He writes that “although kindness now seems the most unquestionable of virtues it never made it into the big seven of the morally confident Christian conception. And Charity, as one of the three theological virtues, is strictly speaking the love of God before the love of man. Against this background, mere kindness has something of a fall-back status, a diminished ambition suitable to a confused and secular age” (171).


18. Wharton, *Age of Innocence*, 63. If May represents empty virtue, are there characters in the novels of Wharton, James, and Eliot who represent fulfilled virtue? The virtuous characters in their novels are more likely to be in the tradition of Fanny Price than after the model of Elizabeth Bennet: see e.g., Eliot’s Dinah Morris and Daniel Deronda, or Wharton’s Gerty Farish in *The House of Mirth* (1905). The virtuous character is less likely to be dramatically interesting (Dinah and Deronda are both almost too consistently good) or heroically central (Gerty is drab in comparison with the less virtuous Lily Bart, just as Fanny may seem dull in comparison with the apparently more vibrant Mary Crawford).


21. Victorian virtue, e.g., is much more complex than the stereotype of the Victorian virtue of “respectability” would lead us to believe. Thomas Carlyle identified one of the prevailing virtues of the “profit-and-loss” moral philosophy of the time in *Sartor Resartus* (1833–34), when Teufelsdröckh asks, “What . . . is the universally-arrogated Virtue, almost the sole remaining Catholic Virtue, of these days? For some half century, it has been the thing you name ‘Independence’ ” (175). As Barry V. Qualls points out, the age-old maxim “Trust in God” received “the superbly Victorian addition” of “‘and yourself’” so that it began to read, “Trust in God and you yourself” (*Secular Pilgrims*, 61). Further study of Victorian virtue after Austen might profitably focus on Dickens, whose appreciation of the Aristotelian mean makes an appearance in *Dombey and Son* (1846–48). Near the end of the novel, Mr. Morfin explains Dombey’s pride in dealing with his bankruptcy honorably: “Ah Miss Harriet,” he says, “it would do us no harm to remember oftener than we do, that vices are sometimes only virtues carried to excess! His pride shows well in this” (*Dombey and Son*, 684).
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