

17. Marianne Dashwood and Charlotte Lucas (The Christian Ideal of Marriage in Jane Austen)

Marianne Dashwood at seventeen believes in “wholeheartedness.” One should cultivate *right feelings* as far as one possibly can, and express them frankly and to the full; and all with whom one can relate properly must do the same. One’s feelings should be intense, and the expression of them should be enthusiastic and eloquent. Towards those whose feelings are right, but who cannot achieve this freedom of expression, one must be charitable; but one should avoid all whose thought and behavior is governed by *convention*. Following convention corrupts one’s “sensibility,” so that one can no longer tell what the truth of natural feeling is.

Thus, when Edward Ferrars and Marianne’s sister Elinor become mutually attached, Marianne approves of Edward — and she certainly agrees with her mother, who says, “I have never yet known what it was to separate esteem and love” (*SS*, I, iii, 16). But she cannot imagine how Elinor can be *in love* with Edward, because he lacks true “sensibility.” “Edward is very amiable, and I love him tenderly. But . . . his figure is not striking . . . His eyes want all that spirit, that fire, which at once announce virtue and intelligence . . . he has no real taste . . . I could not be happy with a man whose taste did not in every point coincide with my own . . . how spiritless, how tame was Edward’s manner in reading to us last night! . . . it would have broke *my* heart had I loved him, to hear him read with so little sensibility” (17-8). While for Mrs. Jennings, a kind-hearted, but rather vulgar widow, with strictly conventional ideas, Marianne has nothing but contempt.

Marianne does meet her beau ideal, in the shape of John Willoughby: “They speedily discovered that their enjoyment of dancing and music was mutual, and that it arose from a general

conformity of judgment . . . Their taste was strikingly alike. The same books, the same passages were idolized by each” (SS, I, x, 47). But this remarkable coincidence of feeling, does not extend to the sphere of moral *action* at all . When we meet him, John Willoughby has already seduced and abandoned a young woman; and soon he abandons Marianne, to marry a woman of fortune, for whom he has no feeling of attachment at all. Willoughby eventually suffers bitter remorse for this violation of the “sensibility” that unites him with Marianne. But the inadequacy of “sensibility” alone as a guide — or a control — for conduct, is graphically manifested.

At the other extreme, Charlotte Lucas (in *Pride and Prejudice*) holds that a happy marriage can be achieved without considering one’s “sensibilities” at all. She claims explicitly that “happiness in marriage is entirely a matter of chance.” As for any initial harmony of sensibility between the partners: “They always continue to grow sufficiently unlike afterwards to have their share of vexation; and it is better to know as little as possible of the defects of the person with whom you are to pass your life” (PP, I, vi, 23). Elizabeth Bennet laughs at her, and says: “You know it is not sound, and that you would never act in this way yourself.” But (allowing for a small measure of rhetorical excess) that is just what Charlotte does. She is a very intelligent girl, but she agrees to marry the egregious Mr. Collins, after she has known him only a few days. She knows that he is conventionally respectable, and that his capacity for independent thought is very defective. She probably guesses that his temper is fairly stable (and she would agree that it is better to know more rather than less about that). But there is *no* possibility of a harmony of “sensibility” here, because by Marianne’s standards (and indeed, by Charlotte’s), Mr. Collins is quite incapable of “sensibility.”

Elizabeth is duly appalled by what Charlotte has done. But Charlotte explains: “I am not romantic you know. I never was. I ask only a comfortable home; and considering Mr. Collins’s character, connections and situation in life, I am convinced that my chance of happiness with him is as fair, as most people can boast on entering the marriage state” (PP, I, xxii, 124-5). Both Elizabeth and her father think that Charlotte has made a terrible moral error; but Jane Bennet persists in thinking that the marriage may be a success — and earnestly hoping that it will be.

Jane Bennet is a paradigm of “candour”; and “candour” is the ideal of Christian virtue as Jane Austen conceives it. It is quite good Christian morality to hope that good will come out of evil; but that is not Jane’s “candid” view of the case. What she says is: “Consider Mr. Collins’ respectability and Charlotte’s prudent, steady character . . . that as to fortune, it is a most eligible match; and be ready to believe, for every body’s sake, that she may feel *something like* regard and esteem for our cousin” (*PP*, II, i, 135; my italics). This is exactly right. Charlotte is not guilty of the mercenary indifference of Wickham pursuing Miss King; she has a steady good will towards William Collins, and she means to make him the best wife that she can (as a necessary condition for being as happy as possible herself with a good conscience). She will end by “loving” him — rather as a mother loves a backward child. Jane Austen’s critics all agree with Elizabeth’s initial stance. They fail to note that at Hunsford — although she says to Darcy, “I am not certain that I consider her marrying Mr. Collins as the wisest thing she ever did” (*PP*, II, ix, 177) — Elizabeth is quite impressed by Charlotte’s rationally contented plan of life; and, in the end, when she meets the Collinsees with their baby (*PP*, III, xviii, 383-4) she will have to agree that although her own assessment of Mr. Collins remains entirely just, her sister Jane was right. The woman who married him did “have a proper way of thinking.”

Together with Charlotte, we must consider Mrs. Grant. She must have made the same sort of deliberate choice. Dr. Grant is a scholar; and clearly he is far more intelligent than Mr. Collins. But he has serious faults of temper; and Mrs. Grant has no children. Yet she is a resolutely good wife. That is why Mary Crawford regards her lot as even more unhappy than that of some London friends of hers, who did indeed think that “selfishness is prudence” (as Elizabeth puts it). Poor Mrs. Grant made an unlucky bet in Charlotte’s marriage-lottery; and Mary’s comment is one of the wisest — as well as the wittiest — things that she says about the Mansfield ethics of “proper speech.” It glances, in anticipation, at the way in which those pious sermon-makers and hearers will uncharitably dismiss Mary herself from the company of the just: “I wish you a better fate Miss Price, than to be the wife of a man whose amiableness depends upon his own sermons” (*MP*, I, xi, 112).

In the center of the range between the extremes represented by Marianne and Charlotte, we must put Jane Bennet and Bingley. Theirs is a simple case, because they are both completely “candid.” They “fall in love” in a completely orthodox way; and it is only the reflexive aspect of their “candour” that enables others, less candid than they, to impede the course of true love. Dr. Johnson defined “candid” as “free from malice; not desirous to find faults”; and Elizabeth follows him when she defines Jane’s life-policy as “to take the good of every body’s character and make it still better, and say nothing of the bad” (*PP*, I, iv, 14). But this is only one side of the coin. The candid person thinks as well of others as (s)he reasonably can; but, on the other side, (s)he thinks as humbly as possible of herself.¹ Bingley thinks that he has “never met with so many pleasant girls in my life, as I have this evening”; and Jane, of course, is “the most beautiful creature I ever beheld” (*PP*, I, iii, 11). But he is very conscious of his own defects (of person, mind and insight). Jane is more intelligently discriminating; but this only makes her more keenly conscious of all the reasons why Bingley may not be seriously in love with her. Bingley has fancied himself in love before; but this time it is the real thing. He sadly accepts the judgment of others; but as soon as Darcy advises him that he was not mistaken about Jane’s affection, everything comes right for them both quite easily.

Elizabeth is not “candid” in the same way; she is satirical. Like her father she prides herself on her appreciation of the *follies* of others. About her own attitude to Darcy she says: “I meant to be uncommonly clever in taking so decided a dislike to him, without any reason” (*PP*, II, xvii, 225). This is a satirical exaggeration, first, because she had a personal reason for dislike; and secondly because the dislike was verbally proclaimed, rather than genuinely felt. Earlier, at the Lucases’, she remarked that “he [Darcy] has a very satirical eye” (*PP*, I, vi, 24). This assimilates the rather different forms of “pride” that they have in common. “Pride” is the opposite of “candour.” It is thinking of oneself as well as possible, and of others as contemptuously as is reasonable. In *Pride and Prejudice*, both parties are proud of their intelligence; but Darcy is proud of his position and its responsibilities (and contemptuous of those who are irresponsible, and lacking in dignity); while Elizabeth is proud of her freedom of mind and her insight. At Netherfield, in the last conversation that we hear there, they satirize one another: “*Your* defect,” says Elizabeth, “is a propensity to hate

every body.” “And yours,” he replied with a smile, “is wilfully to misunderstand them” (*PP*, I, xi, 58). She means her “every body”; but for “hate,” we must read “despise.” He means his “misunderstand”; but for “them” we must read “me.” Each thinks they have said what is true, and that the other is mistaken. But they have both spoken a deep truth; and they are both mistaken. In both of them, real attraction is struggling with real contempt. Elizabeth has to recognize the attraction, and Darcy has to recognize the contempt. In his first proposal, Darcy is more shamefully contemptuous than he was before he began to be attracted; and the more her resentment of his contempt grows, the more Elizabeth misunderstands the real virtues that have always attracted her. There are some rational grounds for pride and contempt on both sides. But only when they achieve “candour,” will they finally enjoy the ideal marriage that can be theirs. Jane and Bingley are morally alike (and without pride) but they are not equal; Darcy and Elizabeth are different but perfectly equal and rationally complementary. They must recognize their prejudices, and mortify their pride. Darcy has to learn charity towards “inferior” connections, and Elizabeth has to recognize the substantial worth of the moral responsibility that has made him outwardly “proud.” (Her pride is inward. He is proud of his *position*. She is proud of *herself*.)

Mansfield Park offers us a sharp contrast between the Christian conception of marriage, and the conventional view of it. But the most interesting thing about the book is the way in which the Mansfield conception of life distorts the Christian ideal. Critics tend to regard the book as being about “the education of Fanny Price.” But that is a mistake. The novel called *Emma* is about the education of Emma Woodhouse; but the one called *Mansfield Park*, is about the park that takes itself to be God’s garden, when it is actually man’s own field. All of the young people at Mansfield receive the same education — though it is only the girls who are educated entirely at Mansfield. Both the boys and the girls turn out very differently in spite of this. We must look at the story through a very different lens; let us try the relations of the sexes.

Fanny Price’s love-story is a simple one. She is naturally both loving and humble; hence she is an ideally candid witness of what happens — at least until her love becomes sexually focused, so that she has to struggle with the demon of selfish jealousy. The chief agent of her moral formation is

her cousin Edmund; and her love for him evolves quite naturally from family affection into sexual fixation. At both stages it supports the inculcation of Christian moral values and attitudes, because Edmund is a younger son destined for the Church. Both Edmund and Fanny are morally *serious* by nature; that is to say that, like Darcy, they identify powerfully with the social *responsibilities* of the position that God has given them. The other children identify with their positions selfishly; and in the case of the girls, that mode of identification is strongly encouraged by their aunt, Mrs. Norris.

Into this small moral world come the Crawfords — whose education has left them quite alienated, and without any sense of moral identification at all. Henry is determined not to accept any social responsibility; and even when he falls in love with Fanny, and identifies with her as his life-partner, this has no moral effect on him. Life is still simply a box of toys to be played with. In his play he completely subverts Maria's identification with her social position. She finds that her feelings cannot be ignored; but she also discovers that Henry cannot be blackmailed into marriage. Fanny is saved from a marriage that would have been a moral disaster by the tug-of-war between Henry's selfishness and Maria's; and Henry emerges as the absolutely unmarriageable man.

The one who really suffers unfairly through this conflict, is Mary Crawford. She falls in love with Edmund, and so begins to learn the meaning of properly responsible social identification with a marriage partner. With the good example of her sister, and the bad examples of her friends before her eyes, she was always ready for a responsible marriage. She is "candid" in our contemporary sense, even in her condition of alienated conventional consciousness; and her moral appreciation of Fanny is unflinching. But when disaster strikes, she is judged by the standard of her speech, not by that of responsible action.

Mansfield would be happy enough to accept the conventional cover-up that Mary wants, if it could be achieved — something similar is found acceptable in the less heinous case of Julia. Mary is cast into outer darkness, because she cannot *talk* about the moral situation properly. Jane and Elizabeth Bennet regard Lydia's marriage with the proper moral horror (and Darcy tries first to persuade Lydia to return home). But they all accept the conventional compromise, as the most

bearable solution. In Maria's case the compromise is not seriously attempted; and her return home is barred.

The perspective of Mansfield is that of "divine justice." There is no room in it for God's mercy. But what Mansfield takes for God's law is not "divine" because it is quite evidently unjust. Maria is punished, and Henry is not. Mary urges Edmund not to be ordained: "Come, do change your mind. It is not too late. Go into the law." "Go into the law!" he retorts, "with as much ease as I was told to go into this wilderness" (*MP*, I, ix, 93-4). But we should notice that in the end he takes himself for the ordained minister of God's law; and it is actually the law of "man's field" that he administers. This is not "easy" for him; but Fanny is there, waiting to make him happy, as soon as he gets over the struggle. He dwells in the park, while poor Mary is left in the wilderness.

Charlotte Lucas rightly sees that, in this shockingly unfair world, marriage is the only route for an intelligent woman to a life of freely responsible self-expression. *Emma* tests this generalization at its extreme limit, since marriage appears to be the one way forward that is barred for Emma Woodhouse, when she reaches the ideal age for it. She cannot leave home, because she recognizes her absolute moral responsibility for her father. He has all the servants anyone could need, but without Emma he would pine to death. Even within the limited range of activities then open to a woman, a clever and imaginative girl, who was also rich, might have found something rewarding to do; but, like Charlotte, Emma's only real interest is in what we may call a "parish" life. Her great virtue is that with all her outstanding natural and social gifts, she can be perfectly happy in a very narrow compass. But her energies must go somewhere; so she begins to play with projects for the marriage of another girl.

Only someone who was both a natural and a social cipher could be played with in this way by someone else who has a sensitive moral conscience; and not very much can be achieved in a game of this sort with a cipher. Harriet Smith is not quite a cipher, either naturally (because she is beautiful) or socially (because she has a good moral character). She has already found an appropriate destiny for herself in the love of Robert Martin, and the friendship of his family. But she

is as humble about her own judgment as Charles Bingley; and her emotions are more fickle. By playing with her matrimonial future, Emma runs a serious risk of doing moral harm. Mr. Knightley points this out to her; but Emma chooses to believe that Harriet has substantial social claims which have gone unrecognized. Even the comic failure of her plan to marry Harriet to Mr. Elton does not disabuse her of this prejudice.

When Frank Churchill comes on the scene, Emma believes, with rather better reason, that he is in love with *her*; but she shows her complete incomprehension of that condition, by supposing that his affection can easily be transferred to Harriet. Harriet's own feelings are as movable as that by imaginative focusing; and Emma believes that they have been refocused in the right place. It is only when she discovers that Harriet has actually persuaded herself that she is in love with Mr. Knightley, that Emma's eyes are opened. The fearful jealousy of her own reaction teaches her that she is herself in love with Mr. Knightley. Knightley is sixteen years older than Emma, and he has been like a surrogate father to her. But unlike Fanny Price, Emma has never recognized the transformation of her affection into a sexual fixation, because she is not meek and biddable, but impulsively rebellious. "Falling in love," for her, is the simple discovery that she must continue to be "first" with Mr. Knightley, as he has always been with her. Because of her responsibility for her father, it is not essential that he should marry her; but it *is* essential that he should not marry someone else (cf. *E*, III,).

The belief that Emma will become engaged to Frank Churchill, has a very similar effect on Mr. Knightley. He *says* that he has been in love with her since she was thirteen (cf. *E*, III,); but it is the advent of Frank Churchill, which makes him properly aware that he wants to marry her. In his case too, the desire is to be "first." But this is a morally interesting kind of primacy, because he is quite prepared to join with Emma in putting Mr. Woodhouse "first."

Harriet Smith, meanwhile, accepts Robert Martin as soon as he asks her face to face, when she is away from Emma's influence. Harriet is like Catherine Morland, in that she is only seventeen and has no experience of the world. But her ability to think herself in love with three different men

within a year is a significant reflection on Catherine's experience. We need not suppose that Catherine's imagination was as fickle as Harriet's, but we can surely concede that if Henry Tilney had not come to Fullerton with his offer fairly quickly, Mrs. Morland would have reasoned and cajoled her daughter out of her romantic obsession quite soon; and yet we need not doubt, either, that both Harriet and Catherine become happy and faithful wives.

Henry Tilney is an interesting case, because according to the author's commentary "his affection originated in nothing better than gratitude, or, in other words, that a persuasion of her partiality for him had been the only cause of giving her a serious thought" (*NA*, II, xv, 243). This is an ironic reversal of the convention stated by Richardson, according to which the young lady is not supposed to become attached to the young man, until he declares himself. But we must look a little more closely. No doubt Henry knew that Catherine was stricken, before he gave her a serious thought. But it is also true that he began to court her because General Tilney told him to. At that stage, he knew that she was a naive, but very nice girl, and that he rather liked her. He would have defied the General if he felt that she was impossible. Association and conversation with her confirmed that she was bright and intelligent, and that her disposition was a very happy one. We can pinpoint fairly exactly the moment when Henry decided to propose: it was when he described her to Eleanor, and Eleanor said how welcome to her such a wife would be (*NA*,) — all this in Catherine's presence, but without her recognizing herself. At this point, Henry is as much "in love" as Catherine; but what matters is that after this he feels inwardly obligated to defy the General, when the original order is countermanded. This analysis shows us how imaginative attraction, rational intelligence, and voluntary moral commitment come together in Marianne's simple "wholehearted" feeling; and the example of Henry Tilney shows why moralists who agree with Jane Austen are bound to condemn Edmund Bertram as a mealy-mouthed coward. The fact that he had not spoken to Mary ought to be morally *irrelevant* for Edmund, as it was for Henry. He ought to have engaged himself to Mary, and supported her efforts to make Henry Crawford behave properly.

We must turn back now to consider the case of Jane Fairfax. She has entered into an engagement with Frank Churchill, which must be kept secret for fear that Mrs. Churchill will insist

on Frank's being cast off, just as she caused Frank's mother to be cast off before he was born. The author, and all of her competent characters, agree that this secret engagement was morally wrong. The consent of parents or guardians on both sides is essential to a valid engagement. Thus the Morlands cannot sanction the engagement between Henry Tilney and Catherine until General Tilney gives his consent — though they turn a blind eye to a correspondence which the strictest propriety would have forbidden (*NA*, II, xvi, 249). We may find all of this absurd; but we cannot deny that the secrecy had consequences that are genuine moral evils. Poor Emma's imagination might have landed her in worse misery than Catherine Morland was in when she returned to Fullerton; and Jane Fairfax herself was tortured by jealousy arising from uncertainty about Frank's real intentions. Indeed, there was lying and deceit on Frank's part every day, which Jane could not help becoming involved in.

Everyone forgives Jane readily, because we are all convinced that she was drawn into her immoral predicament by sincere affection and voluntary commitment. Her rational judgment is what must waver when jealousy tortures her — and eventually it causes her to dissolve the engagement. Jane Fairfax is not like Lucy Steele (who was certainly not committed to Edward Ferrars, and probably feels no commitment to Robert Ferrars either, whatever fantasies she may spin for his mother). But the prudential motive for the concealment was morally disgraceful; and Jane's consent to it shows her actual uncertainty about the substantial reality of Frank's commitment. Supposing that he were cast off, she would have been willing enough, no doubt, to settle with him in Highbury with whatever help his father could give them. But her real fear was that Frank would give her up, rather than let that happen; and if he did marry her in spite of being cast off, what security was there that he would not bitterly regret his decision later? Frank Churchill is genuinely in love, and he has a working conscience (he feels guilty about the danger of trifling with Emma's emotions — *E*, III, xvii, 476-7). He is no John Willoughby. But our confidence in *his* fidelity — and so in Jane's happiness — depends on the combination of his Enscombe inheritance with his regained connections in Highbury: father, "mother," Emma, and even the mildly skeptical Mr. Knightley. Thus, the sacrifice of her conscience — with all the consequent rational torture — was essential to the eventual happiness of Jane Fairfax.

The case of Anne Elliot highlights how rational judgment can reinterpret conventional principles in this situation. At nineteen, she accepted the proposal of Frederick Wentworth; and her father, though he did not decisively forbid the match, would not consent (*P*, I, iv, 26). But the crucial influence was that of Lady Russell, who stood for Anne in the place of her mother. Anne, who might have persisted against her father, “was persuaded to believe the engagement a wrong thing — indiscreet, improper, hardly capable of success, and not deserving it” (*P*, I, iv, 27). She persuaded herself that it would be bad for Frederick Wentworth (as, indeed, his early engagement was bad for Edward Ferrars). Then Anne spent seven years regretting her decision. No one else appeared who could attract her. Charles Musgrove proposed; but we see enough of him to know why he could never drive the thought of Frederick Wentworth from her mind.

In this period Wentworth prospers; and the claims of Anne Elliot to social consequence are completely undermined. At twenty-seven she thinks she would have done better to maintain the engagement. But she never doubts that she did right to follow Lady Russell’s advice. She only feels that the advice was too categorical. Instead of Lady Russell persuading her, she ought to have persuaded Lady Russell. She could, at least, have persuaded her to approve of a correspondence; and she could surely have prevailed upon Wentworth to accept a suspension of the engagement upon those terms (cf. *P*, II, xi, 247; also 231). She glances at the predicament of Jane Fairfax, when she says “I was right in submitting to her [Lady Russell] and . . . 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*, II, xi, 246).

Persuasion is a novel about good luck. The ruin of the social position to which Lady Russell attached such importance, has the effect of bringing Wentworth back to Anne, with an independent fortune of twenty-five thousand pounds; and the happy ending is possible because of the fidelity of Anne’s feelings. As she says to Captain Harville at the climax of the most famous conversation in the book, “All the privilege I claim for my own sex (it is not a very enviable one, you need not covet it) is that of loving longest, when existence or when hope is gone” (*P*, II, xi, 235). In the course of

the conversation this “privilege” is carefully justified through consideration of the differing opportunities and responsibilities laid upon men and women by life; and the story itself confirms what Anne claims in the conversation, by presenting us with Captain Wentworth’s courtship of Louisa Musgrove. Wentworth may say that this was “the attempts of angry pride”; and he may persist “in having loved none but her [Anne].” But “only at Lyme had he begun to understand himself”; and he might have become engaged but for Louisa’s fall (*P*, II, xi, 241-2). We must not suppose that Jane Austen thought there was anything substantial or sane about Anne’s fidelity of feeling. She says firmly that a “second attachment” is “the only thoroughly natural, happy and sufficient cure” at nineteen (*P*, I, iv, 28). Anne herself is not sure what would have happened if Mr. Elliot had courted her before Captain Wentworth returned. It was Wentworth’s reappearance that made her feelings constant in fact (II, ix, 192, 211). In the absence of a correspondence, it was the limitations of Anne’s country neighborhood that determined her fate. Otherwise, Frederick Wentworth might have come back and married Louisa Musgrove, without anyone being unhappy. In Jane Austen’s view, successful marriages are not “made in heaven.”

It is important to remember this when we return finally to Marianne and Charlotte. For we have not yet examined the end of Marianne’s story. Colonel Brandon, who is about eighteen years older than she, falls in love with her because she resembles his childhood sweetheart (who was coerced into marrying his brother for financial reasons). When his partiality is first suggested to the seventeen year old Marianne, she finds it quite absurd: “thirty-five has nothing to do with matrimony” (*SS*, I, viii, 37). Even the eminently sensible Elinor agrees that “Perhaps thirty-five and seventeen had better not have anything to do with matrimony together.” But “a woman who is single at seven and twenty” (Charlotte’s age) might think of marrying him. Marianne actually anticipates Charlotte’s situation, by claiming that such a one “can never hope to feel or inspire affection again.” But we are probably not meant to take this rhetorical excess seriously, for it is almost certain that Marianne would agree with Elizabeth in condemning what Charlotte does. Marianne agrees that there could be a “commercial exchange” — but “no marriage at all” — between a single woman of twenty-seven and a man of thirty-five. Elinor, who thinks there could be love between the parties, would probably agree with Jane Bennet (and be justified by the event).

After all this, Marianne is persuaded to marry Colonel Brandon two years later. The Colonel is not ill suited to her. She finds the library at once in every house (*SS*, III, vi, 304; cf. III, x, 343). He loves books and music as much as she does (*SS*, I, vii, 35). She is no more “lively” than he (*SS*, I, xvii, 93);ⁱⁱ and Elinor correctly forecasts her maturity (*SS*, I, xi, 56). What matures her is her illness; and in that crisis the Colonel has confessed his love for her both to Elinor and to her mother. Marianne herself becomes aware of it; and she no longer finds it absurd. She believes that “no one can ever be in love more than once” (I, xvii, 93); and she marries him “with no sentiment superior to strong esteem and lively friendship”; but being, as she is, someone who “could never love by halves . . . her whole heart became, in time, as much devoted to her husband, as it had once been to Willoughby” (*SS*, III, xiv, 379).

Being still wholehearted, Marianne *might* have decided that “strong esteem and lively friendship” were not enough for marriage. She might have told Colonel Brandon that she loved him like a father but that “thirty-seven and nineteen had better not have anything to do with matrimony together.” It seems to me, however, that — in view of Marianne’s restricted circle at Barton and at Delaford — what she actually decided was entirely natural. She is a very *serious* girl; she certainly wants to do as much good as she can in the world. The sight of her sister as an active vicar’s wife, with a child, would recommend marriage to her more powerfully than anything that Elinor or her mother might say about Colonel Brandon’s affection or his goodness.

We must never forget — for Jane Austen certainly never did — what the Prayer Book says about the sacrament of matrimony: “first it was ordained for the procreation of children.” It is her children who will be the salvation of Charlotte Collins, just as childlessness is the heaviest affliction of Mrs. Grant. The “child-relation” of Mr. Woodhouse to Emma is her greatest problem. Anna Taylor becomes Mrs. Weston in time to have one child, and probably more. For Sophia Croft, that almost modern paragon of active wedded partnership, the bell must soon toll — Jane Austen never tells us how old she is, but she is surely the *elder* sister of Frederick Wentworth, who is thirty or thirty-one. She will be a contented aunt soon (just as Emma would have become one); and happier

certainly, than Mary Musgrove, mother though she is. But Mary seems to have been born to be unhappy — she can never forget (I think) that Charles proposed to Anne first.

Happy marriage begins with an outgoing and sympathetic disposition. It is only in a stably contented disposition that “good principles” can be planted. The experience of “falling in love” which may seem to come like a thunderclap — as it does to Elizabeth just when she thinks that Darcy is finally lost to her (*PP*, III, iv, 278) — is a function of the imagination. Whenever it happens — spontaneously as with Marianne and Willoughby, or with twenty years of experience behind it, as with Emma — it must be both morally and prudently assessed. It is only safe and sound when experience has established a reliable foundation for judgment. There is no need for it to happen at all; but Charlotte Lucas takes a terrible risk because she must move so quickly, and with only a rational resolution. Emotional inclination wavers, and is dangerously fickle. It must be confirmed by moral resolution and commitment. But one should not ignore it, if it exists; and one should certainly not resolve to suppress it (as Maria Bertram does). A selfish resolve is far worse than wholehearted (but still morally respectful) commitment to inclination.

The most interesting cases are those of Edmund Bertram, who resolves to give up Mary Crawford on what he takes to be moral grounds; and Jane Fairfax, who allows her inclination to override her conscience. The presence of Fanny turns Edmund’s case into that of Marianne. But unlike her, he seems not to deserve his second chance, because his moral position is dubious, not to say quite unsound. Jane Fairfax proves, by recovery from her moral misstep, that her inclination and her judgment were not badly out of harmony after all. But it is all a very relative matter. If Jane Austen has the equation right, there is rather more wisdom in the cynical axiom of Charlotte Lucas, than Elizabeth is disposed to admit: “Happiness in marriage is entirely a matter of chance.” One must cultivate the moral habit of unselfish service for that reason. We should always be mindful of Mrs. Grant (and of Anne Elliot before Captain Wentworth returned).

Notes

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- i. For Jane Austen's commitment to the ideal of "candour" in this sense, see the third prayer she wrote for herself (*MW*, 456). (All of the prayers are very evidently conceived as simple extensions of the *Book of Common Prayer* especially adapted for "family prayers" at nighttime. But the definition of "a truly Christian spirit" is significant for the moral ideal of the novels.)

 - ii. Readers who think that Marianne could not be happy as Mrs. Brandon, have probably fallen into Edward's mistake. Because she is such an *enthusiast*, they "set her down as a lively girl." But as Elinor says, "She is very earnest, very eager in all she does . . . but she is not often really merry."