A Companion to Jane Austen

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Families shape the individuals born into them in large and small ways, consciously and unconsciously; but the kinship dynamics that structure power in families are perhaps the most invisible of these forces. I doubt that Jane Austen consciously mapped out the maternal and paternal lineage of her characters or calculated their social power within their families in these terms. But she was a creature of her society and well-attuned to gradations of material advantage and social power; and so the nuances of the families she imagined fully reflected the weighting of power that came from the kinship structures and inheritance practices of her day. In analyzing the kin arrangements she ascribes to her good characters and her thoughtless ones, their alliances and competitions, and the relative power of her heroines, one is struck again by how thorough and consistent her social arrangements were.

For example, the fact that her heroines are — famously — unmarried women, that is, daughters in a kinship system that was in the process of disinheriting female offspring both psychologically and fiscally, means that these characters (until we come to Emma) are automatically drawn from the ranks of the dispossessed (Elinor Dashwood), the displaced (Fanny Price), or the explicitly disinherited (Elizabeth Bennet). As I’ve explained at length elsewhere, the English kinship system in the late eighteenth century was changing to accommodate the new cultural drive to accumulate capital; marriage and inheritance increasingly played their roles in this process, allowing families to consolidate and focus wealth rather than distribute resources to their lateral branches (Perry 2004). What helped to collect and enlarge property in families — and ensure its transmission to the next generation — was the reduction of those family resources that went to maternal relatives or daughters so that wealth could build up for transfer in the paternal line. Although primogeniture had always been practiced in the aristocracy, it was beginning to be practiced at the turn of the seventeenth into the eighteenth centuries by gentry, merchants, and gentleman farmers. Middle and upper-class patriarchs wrote strict settlements into their children’s marriage contracts in imitation of the aristocracy; and they limited dowries for their
daughters to cash rather than land if there were male offspring. These practices ensured a patrilineal system of inheritance, reinforcing the accumulation of property in the male line and undercutting distribution. Increasingly as the eighteenth century wore on, lineal configurations of kin were privileged legally over lateral configurations of kin and male offspring over female offspring in matters of inheritance. As James Harlowe, Clarissa Harlowe’s brother in Richardson’s great novel of 1748–49, remarks “Daughters are chickens brought up for the tables of other men,” pithily encapsulating what was then a relatively new cultural understanding of women’s position in their natal families (1985: 77).

Austen’s novels give the latitude and longitude of her heroines’ social vulnerability and relative poverty as women, even though they come from genteel families. As Austen remarked to her niece Fanny, “Single Women have a dreadful propensity to be poor – which is one very strong argument in favour of Matrimony . . .” (Letters: 332). In order to instantiate fully this “dreadful propensity to be poor,” the heroines Austen imagines come from the disinheritied branches of their families (again, until Emma), operating in largely maternal rather than paternal family networks. Although the traditional English kinship system had been bilateral and cognatic, tracing lineage back through fathers and mothers, and women had inherited both land and rank in earlier times, by Austen’s day English inheritance practices had become largely patrilineal. The dreaded entail that gets so much attention in Pride and Prejudice was not even invented until the last decades of the seventeenth century – its function to consolidate rather than distribute property in extended families and thus to retain and enlarge estates rather than allow them to be subdivided. By Jane Austen’s era, family property – whether inherited from mothers or fathers – tended to be funneled to male children or even collateral male relatives (e.g., Mr Collins) in the father’s line (Perry 2004: 46–55, 214–18). So by way of expressing their vulnerability, Austen imagines her heroines as operating in the maternal branches of families where there was little or no material advantage to be had from their connections. Only the sickly Anne de Bourgh, an only child and the invalid daughter of arrogant Lady Catherine de Bourgh, stands to inherit a fortune from her mother – an embodiment, perhaps, of the wasting away of this earlier customary practice.

Thus in Pride and Prejudice, it is Mrs Bennet whose family of origin dominates the lives of the Bennet girls, disinherited as they are by the entail which will leave their father’s estate away from them when he dies. Mr Collins, who will inherit Longbourn, is the son of Mr Bennet’s cousin – with whom Mr Bennet apparently quarreled. But sycophantic Mr Collins only briefly touches the lives of the Bennet girls, a comic example of upward mobility for Mr Bennet to mock. It is Mrs Bennet’s sister, Mrs Phillips, married to their fathers’ law clerk who succeeded him as an attorney in Meryton, whom the younger sisters visit daily. And it is Mrs Bennet’s brother, Mr Gardiner, in “respectable trade in London,” with a good marriage and the ability to go into business to better his condition, who looks out for the two oldest Bennet girls. In traditional cultures, it is usually the mother’s relatives who take responsibility for her daughters. This branch of Jane and Elizabeth’s maternal kin, the Gardiners, are
the relatives with whom Elizabeth and Darcy keep up after their marriage. Their paternal relative, on the other hand — Mr Collins — the relative with the initial material advantages to offer, is represented unsympathetically as ambitious, materialistic, morally obtuse, and self-serving.

Similarly, in *Sense and Sensibility*, it is their maternal relatives, Sir John Middleton and his mother-in-law Mrs Jennings, who befriend and help Mrs Dashwood and her daughters. However vulgar and whatever their shortcomings of tact or taste, both Sir John and Mrs Jennings are well-meaning, kind, and generous and look out for Elinor and Marianne. Their paternal relatives, on the other hand, true to Austen’s usual pattern, are materialistic, selfish, and calculating. Mr John Dashwood, his wife Fanny and her brother Robert — as well as their mother Mrs Ferrars — have little family feeling but are governed instead by greed and competitive consumption. Robert’s ostentatiously self-absorbed selection of an ornamented toothpick case is a priceless episode illustrating the triviality, insolence, and sense of entitlement of the type. Right at the beginning of the novel, we watch John Dashwood, Elinor and Marianne’s half-brother through their father — whose young son Henry has just inherited Norwood, their home of many years — easily swayed by his wife’s crude exaggerations against giving a fraction of their now-lavish wealth in a one-time gift to his disinherited half-sisters. Although John Dashwood promised his dying father to make his mother-in-law and sisters “comfortable,” his wife complains that his generosity would “ruin himself, and their poor little Harry, by giving away all his money to his half sisters” (SS 8). She easily leads him into reducing his initial plan of giving his sisters £1,000 apiece to an occasional gift of game in season, the equivalent of nothing.

It seems unlikely that Austen tooted up the relative advantages of maternal and paternal relatives in so many pounds and pence; but in working out the particulars of her families, and how their members were positioned vis-à-vis one another, she generally put those in patrilineal succession — those who were in line to inherit, who stood to gain materially because of the accident of their birth — several degrees lower in the moral scale. One obvious manifestation of this principle can be found in her portrayal of the thoughtlessness of eldest brothers. Protected against paternal displeasure or any other consequence of careless selfishness by mechanisms like the strict settlement which guaranteed their inheritance, these fast young men were out for their own pleasure, heedless of the good of their younger brothers and sisters. Like spoiled, rich children of any era, the characters of Tom Bertram (*Mansfield Park*) or Frederick Tilney (*Northanger Abbey*) showed that assured wealth without accountability could lead to moral bankruptcy. Uncontrolled and uncontrollable, older brothers can figure privileged positionality in Austen’s kinship universe. Irresponsible about their obligations to their parents and their siblings — especially their vulnerable sisters — they were automatically handed wealth and consequence by virtue of their birth order without having to lift a finger.

Indeed, Austen holds all brothers accountable for how well they take care of their sisters. As in many another eighteenth-century novel, in Austen’s books the way a brother treats his sister is a kind of moral litmus test. Because there were no legal
provisions to enforce it, but only a time-honored ethical expectation, a brother's responsibility for his sister's welfare had come to feel supererogatory in this age of (male) individualism. We know that Henry Tilney is decent by his worries about abandoning his sister, Eleanor, when he goes to Woodston and by the intimacy of their affectionate teasing; and we know that John Thorpe cannot be trusted because he never seems to care about obliging any of his sisters (Perry 2004: 143–89). Darcy, on the other hand, an exceptional older brother, takes his obligations to Georgiana seriously; and Bingley provides an establishment and a home for his sisters, even including the married Mrs Hurst. These instances also illustrate the truism that women have more power where sibling solidarity is strong (the identification of brothers with their sisters). Darcy's sister and Bingley's sisters enjoy a secure and stable social position that even the brilliant Mary Crawford cannot command because she cannot "persuade her brother to settle with her at his own country-house" (MP: 41). Henry Crawford's aversion to "a permanence of abode, or a limitation of society," a selfish indulgence that he will not subdue even for Mary's sake, prevents him from making a home for his sister (MP: 41).

The Crawfords provide another interesting example of the energy and privilege of those whose power comes from paternal kin networks. They stand in direct contrast to Fanny Price in Mansfield Park, whose kinship claims come entirely through her mother's sister — as befits a small, pale, and insignificant heroine. The novel opens with the three Ward sisters — Lady Bertram, Mrs Norris, and Mrs Price — slotted into their different classes by three very different marriages, with Mrs Price sinking her pride to ask for assistance from her better-off sisters. It is a testimony to Sir Thomas Bertram's sober and family-minded character that he is so willing to help his wife's relatives. We know nothing of his family. Once again, the action involving the displaced heroine is played out among her maternal relatives. Even the Crawfords are invited to Mansfield Park by a daughter of their mother by a first marriage; Mrs Grant is their half-sister. But their money, their sophistication, their social brilliance — and their morals — come from their father's relatives. The Admiral with whom they lived until his wife died and he installed a mistress (thereby making it impossible for his unmarried niece, Mary, to continue under his roof) is their guardian and their father's brother. Their money must have come from that side of the family too, since Mrs Grant, offspring of their mother, never had more than £5,000. With a few notable exceptions, money tends to follow the men's side of the family in Austen's universe.

Not until we come to Emma does Austen offer us a heroine raised up with all the power of unalloyed paternal backing. "Handsome, clever, and rich," Emma is situated very differently from the disadvantaged protagonists of earlier novels. Her verve, energy, and, as Lionel Trilling put it, her "self-love," are unique among Austen's protagonists (and scarce in women characters more generally); they are key to why, according to Trilling, Emma "has a moral life as a man has a moral life" (1965: 154). He says, "We understand self-love to be part of the moral life of all men; in men of genius we expect it to appear in unusual intensity and we take it to be an essential
element of their power.” Emma, raised “with the power of having rather too much her own way, and a disposition to think a little too well of herself” (E: 5), has been favored and given freedoms that are rare for a woman in any period but may be more common in the upbringing of men. She has been raised to think as well of herself as men are taught to do, which is what Trilling meant when he referred to her extraordinary “self-love.” In the terms of this essay, it is worth observing that with the exception of Lady Susan, which revolves around the patriarchally organized Vernon family, Emma is the first of Austen’s novels in which the main characters operate almost exclusively in paternal kin networks rather than maternal kin networks. The Knightley brothers and their paternal birthplace, Donwell Abbey, make up one such node; Harriet Smith and Jane Fairfax also have their destinies determined by their fathers and their father’s contacts. And Frank Churchill, that weak, unmanly, Frenchified fellow whose amiability does not translate into English, has been appropriately enough swallowed up by his maternal relatives, the Churchills.³

It stands to reason that Emma, a woman with confidence and self-approval like a man, and an itch to influence others, a person slow to recognize her own egocentrism although generously disposed towards others, sure of her place in the world and quick to take umbrage at social slights (e.g., first upon the thought of receiving, and then of not receiving, the Coles’s invitation) – such is the character whom Austen places in the protective circle of her paternal kin. Austen maximizes Emma’s social strength by the way she configures her social world. Emma is a woman without brothers who stands in the direct line of her father’s authority and material wealth; he thinks she can do no wrong and he does not want her to marry. Although she is a woman, she thus operates with the full power of her father’s unconditional backing and she is the only one of Austen’s heroines of whom this can be said.⁴ Mr Bennet favors his “Lizzy” but does not set her apart materially from her sisters. Moreover, he can do nothing to insure a home for her once he dies. Anne Elliot in Persuasion operates within her father’s orbit, but he ignores her advice and dismisses her importance since she has “lost her bloom.” Anne, in turn, feels stifled by the world of her paternal kin – her favored sister Elizabeth, her cousins William Elliot, Lady Dalrymple, and Miss Carteret, and that hanger-on, Mrs Clay, who appears to be angling for her father. She escapes to the company of her mother’s friend, Lady Russell, or her former school-fellow, Mrs Smith, whenever possible. And in the end, she decamps altogether with Captain Wentworth and leaves her father and his values behind. It is worth noting that her connection to Captain Wentworth this time around is through his sister, Mrs Croft, wife of her father’s tenant.

Novel by novel, these explorations of the relative moral weighting of maternal and paternal kinship uncover another layer of power and privilege in the archeology of class and gender. Nowhere is this more apparent in Austen’s novels, however, than in the way she handles marriages between cousins. Paternal first cousin marriages among the landed classes in the England of her day had a material advantage: they tended to consolidate property. Maternal first cousin marriages, on the other hand, had all the coziness and family feeling of endogamous marriage but without the
additional benefit of keeping property in the family. Thus, in *Pride and Prejudice*, if one of the Bennet girls had married Mr Collins, their father's cousin, they would have kept Longbourn in the family. But Austen makes this paternal relative on Mr Bennet's side so repugnant that all material advantage pales in comparison to the dreadful alternative of actually being married to him. Similarly, the prospective marriage between Darcy and Anne de Bourgh discussed by Lady Catherine de Bourgh, although literally a maternal first cousin marriage, has the aura of a paternal first cousin marriage because Anne de Bourgh stands to inherit the way an eldest son would inherit. Imagined by their mothers, who were sisters, the match would have consolidated the property in these two branches of the family. But Austen never favors such marriages — probably because their material advantages call into question their spiritual and emotional bases — and so this marriage, while mentioned, never really has a chance.

The most promising paternal first cousin marriage in the Austen canon, the only one we believe possible, however briefly, is that in *Persuasion* between William Elliot, Sir Walter Elliot's heir apparent, and either Elizabeth or Anne Elliot. Lady Russell allows herself to imagine it when William seems to be taken with his pretty cousin, Anne: "I own that to be able to regard you as the future mistress of Kellynch, the future Lady Elliot — to look forward and see you occupying your dear mother's place. ... would give me more delight than is often felt at my time of life," she says to Anne (P: 159–60). Nor is Anne immune to the appeal of having Kellynch Hall restored to her as her home forever, even though she does not entirely like or trust Mr Elliot: "For a few moments her imagination and her heart were bewitched" (P: 160). William Elliot, a widower, has already been married to a woman of inferior birth with a large fortune but has latterly become more interested in his status as a future baronet; he now values "rank and connexion" (P: 148) more than he used to and so his cousin Anne's social status and cultivation are added attractions to his present choice. Like Sir Walter Elliot — and to Anne Elliot's disgust — he cares more than he ought for the family's connection (in the paternal line) to the aristocratic but otherwise awkward and uninteresting Dowager Viscountess Dalrymple and her daughter the Honorable Miss Carteret.

Paternal first cousin marriages — which, according to one historian, constituted 50 percent of the marriages among the British upper class (Trumbach 1978: 19) — must have carried with them a tinge of ambition and materialism in Austen's day for they never succeed in her novels. A marriage of true minds did not need the material advantage of consolidating two fortunes; one fortune was sufficient to content a couple in love. It was not the closeness of the family tie in cousin german or first cousin marriages that was at issue; such marriages were certainly legally and socially acceptable in Austen's day and as Glenda Hudson pointed out long ago, Austen had a warm spot in her heart for unions built on the foundation of habit and long familiarity (Hudson 1989: 125–31). As she exclaims in *Mansfield Park* when referring to William and Fanny Price's pleasure in each other's company, "Children of the same family, the same blood, with the same first associations and habits, have some means of enjoyment in their power, which no subsequent connections can supply" (MP: 235). Thus,
marriages between adopted siblings, between in-laws, and between first cousins are not proscribed in Austen’s texts but on the contrary, are imagined with disinterested love and reciprocity. Knightley and Emma act like brother and sister — in fact they are brother-in-law and sister-in-law, as are Elinor and Edward in Sense and Sensibility. Colonel Brandon and his beloved Eliza, as he tells the story, were brother and sister several times over. They were brought up as siblings; she was an orphaned cousin, a ward of Brandon’s father, who was her uncle. Although she loved Brandon, she was forced to marry his older brother, in what seems to have been another disastrous paternal first cousin marriage. Her uncle guardian wanted her married to his heir to secure her fortune in the family; but the marriage was so miserable that Brandon tried to rescue her from it by eloping with her — in which attempt they were foiled.

But if paternal first cousin marriages are tainted in Austen’s novels — the match in Persuasion between Anne and William Elliot has something unholy about it, the shade of some darker motivation behind it — maternal first cousin marriages are free from this corruption. The maternal first cousin marriages in Mansfield Park and Persuasion seem fitting, appropriate, and welcome. Indeed, they are longed for throughout, interrupted or postponed as they are by infatuations of the wrong sort.

There is, first of all, the attachment between Henrietta Musgrove and her maternal first cousin, Charles Hayter, who grew up together, living just a few miles apart. Their mothers were sisters whose marriages made a significant difference in their material fortunes. Carping Mary Musgrove, filled with her own family pride, does not think that Charles Hayter, “a country curate” (P: 76), is a suitable match for Miss Musgrove of Uppercross, even though, as a first-born son, he stands to inherit freehold property. Mary does not even like to acknowledge the family connection. And then Henrietta is, briefly, distracted by Captain Wentworth. But true love triumphs in the end, as the honest and right-thinking characters believe it should, and Henrietta’s “old,” and “established” regard for her cousin Charles asserts itself again; the minor obstacles in their path dissolve — Captain Wentworth seems to choose Louisa and Dr Shirley wants a curate — and we are assured of their future happiness.

The other significant maternal first cousin marriage sanctioned by Austen’s plot structure is, of course, between Fanny Price and Edmund Bertram in Mansfield Park. Again, nothing material can be achieved by this match because neither stands to inherit within the family. The insignificance of Edmund’s expectations, both in terms of income and status, is emphasized by Mary Crawford’s scorn and her refusal to marry him if he sticks to his plan to be a clergyman. The point is accentuated when her interest in him revives when his older brother, Tom, lies ill, thus opening a possibility of Edmund’s inheriting their father’s baronetcy. “I never bribed a physician in my life” (MP: 434), writes Mary slyly to Fanny, suggesting that a future “Sir Edmund” would do very well with the Bertram property if he were to come into it. But of course, Tom does not die, Maria disgraces herself with Henry, and Edmund, in time, becomes “as anxious to marry Fanny, as Fanny herself could desire” (MP: 470). Austen’s description of their coming together makes it clear how close to siblings they have been; this is another Austen marriage between close kin.
Loving, guiding, protecting her, as he had been doing ever since her being ten years old, her mind in so great a degree formed by his care, and her comfort depending on his kindness, an object to him of such close and peculiar interest, dearer by all his own importance with her than any one else at Mansfield, what was there now to add, but that he should learn to prefer soft light eyes to sparkling dark ones. (MP: 470)

Modern readers with a preference for exogamous romance, for otherness, may find the match tame, but in Austen’s scheme, the pleasure of a first cousin marriage comes from a similarity of habits and mind and from long proximity. There will be no extraordinary wealth, no title in this marriage. Fanny will never overreach herself and Edmund will be content to be a clergyman and a second son. “Comfort” is the watchword of their marriage – the word is repeated five times on the first page of the last chapter. Comfort, not excitement, is what maternal first cousin marriages offer. But there is never a question about the probity of the match; its purity is guaranteed by the principals’ status as maternal first cousins. Related through their mothers, they are protected from the effects of unearned privilege as Austen protects most of her good characters, by placing them carefully in the hierarchies of birth order and fortune. They have the advantage of kinship without the contamination of inherited power.

Thus does Austen imagine the kin arrangements of her characters as corroboration and guarantee of their fundamental qualities. Generosity and benevolence can generally be found among one’s maternal relatives, although not usually accompanied by much cash. Paternal relatives, on the other hand, those who have been dealt wealth and power, are usually more withholding. Which comes first, however, the inherited privilege and wealth or attitudes of entitlement and selfishness, one cannot say. Nevertheless, one can see even in this brief survey that the uneven distribution of resources within families, naturalized by sex and birth order, when placed in tension with the more liberal imperatives of “family feeling,” gave Austen a certain amount of material for her moral satire. Or, to put it another way, the new system of individualism and capital accumulation was often at odds with the older belief in reciprocity, loyalty, and the shared interests of extended families; and Austen was quick to see and satirize how this new economic basis for society affected family matters.

Notes

1. The strict settlement was a provision, invented in the 1680s, which when written into a marriage contract, settled the lion’s share of the property of the estate on the as yet unborn first son of the union-to-be and specified what portions he was to pay out to daughters and younger sons of that union when he came into the property.
2. James Harlowe also says on the same page, “daughters were but encumbrances and drawbacks upon a family.”
3. For a brilliant statement of Frank’s shortcomings as an Englishman, see Claudia L. Johnson (1995b), “Not at all what a man should be.”
4. Miss Elliot, Anne’s older sister in *Persuasion*, has a similarly reflected power from their father, Sir Walter Elliot, but she is not the only unmarried daughter that Sir Walter has and he is a less doting and more selfish father than Mr Woodhouse.
FURTHER READING


