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**“Not half so handsome as Jane”:
 Sisters, Brothers, and Beauty in the
 Novels of Jane Austen**

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AUSTEN FULLY APPRECIATES THE IMPORTANCE OF FAMILY. In *Mansfield Park* she writes, “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; and it must be by a long and unnatural estrangement . . . if such precious remains of the earliest attachments are ever entirely outlived” (235). As Souter observes, “The plots of all the novels are in fact made up of groups of siblings interacting with each other. . . . Sibships thus provide the essential intersubjective space in Austen’s novels and much of their psychological structure” (179). Austen establishes a focus on these sibling units by introducing siblings in pairs or groups characterized primarily by appearance. Sir John is delighted to discover the Dashwood sisters are “young, pretty, and unaffected” (*SS* 33). The Bingley sisters are “very fine ladies,” “rather handsome,” but “proud and conceited,” Elizabeth discovers (*PP* 15), and Mr. Bingley hopes to meet the Bennet sisters, “of whose beauty he ha[s] heard much” (9). Mrs. Bennet confides, “[T]he Lucases are very good sort of girls, I assure you. It is a pity they are not handsome!” (44). At Bath, the Thorpe sisters enter the scene as “three smart looking females” (*NA* 32). The Bertrams are “a remarkably fine family, the sons very well-looking, the daughters decidedly handsome” (*MP* 13), and the newly-arrived Crawfords are a brother and sister “of very prepossessing appearance” (41). The focus in each description falls decidedly on the physical attractiveness of the sibling set.

But almost immediately after introducing them, Austen begins to break down the sibling sets, differentiating the sisters and brothers who compose them and hinting at the conflicts and alliances to come. Peter W. Graham suggests that readers view the families in Austen’s novels as a “Darwinian microenvironment” in which “siblings vie with one another for the parental attention and favor that will help them to survive, thrive, and eventually reproduce.” This competition may be encouraged, albeit unconsciously, by the parents, for in Austen’s novels many do play favorites. Most parents are drawn to the child who exhibits characteristics they themselves esteem, and for parents in Austen’s novels, the trait most valued in their children seems to be beauty.

Psychologists have noted that parents consistently respond with extra affection and give more loving attention to their attractive offspring (Etkoff 35). This may be an instinctive rather than a conscious act for most parents, but some mothers and fathers in Austen's novels pointedly value one child's good looks above any other trait or talent. Mrs. Bennet, an acknowledged beauty in her youth, repeatedly draws attention to Jane's physical beauty yet never acknowledges her daughter's beautiful inner qualities. Fanny Price is not Lady Bertram's offspring, but she has lived at Mansfield Park and played the role of dutiful daughter from childhood. Although Lady Bertram values Fanny's services, this substitute mother does not see Fanny as a woman in her own right or truly perceive her as part of the Bertram family circle until she comes to see Fanny as beautiful (332). But perhaps Sir Walter Elliot is the parent who most noticeably prizes beauty in his offspring. He himself is handsome and vain; thus, it comes as no surprise that his favorite child is Elizabeth, a daughter "very handsome, and very like himself" (P 5).

Identity is first formed in the home. How a child is defined by the parents, how it is classified by its siblings, and how a child sees himself or herself in relation to his or her siblings all work together to form a self-concept, a sense of self that shapes character over a lifetime. According to sociologists Bank and Kahn, in most families "there is only one person who can occupy a certain psychological space in a family at any one time." Consequently, if one child is the *good one* or the *smart one*, it "preempts the possibility that any of his or her siblings can take over that role" (23). But what happens when one child is labeled "the pretty one"?

As Graham has noted, Austen seems more interested in the sibling differentiation of sisters than brothers, and this focus on females can be easily discerned in the physical descriptions of siblings. Though their manners are compared, Austen never ranks one Bertram brother above the other in looks. Even when Austen does note a difference in physical attractiveness, brothers do not seem to suffer from the comparison in the way that sisters do. The fact that "some people might think [his brother] handsomer" causes Henry Tilney no psychological damage (NA 131). Austen does not portray Henry Crawford as suffering because he is plain and his sister is beautiful. Although the plain Edward Ferrars does come in second to his brother Robert, the cause is not his looks, but rather a matter of personality and social ambition; and even then, Edward seems resigned rather than hurt or desperate.

By contrast, the labeling of sisters according to attractiveness causes pain. In Austen's families this labeling is often done by a parent, quite likely within the hearing of the children being labeled. Mrs. Thorpe introduces her daughters with this proclamation: "[T]he tallest is Isabella, my eldest; is not she a fine young woman? The others are very much admired too, but I believe Isabella is the handsomest" (32). In *Pride and Prejudice*, Elizabeth's own mother declares that she is "not half so handsome as Jane" (4), and throughout the novel Mrs. Bennet repeatedly affirms Jane's position as the most beautiful of the sisters. Although these mothers are quite likely worried about the marriageability of their eldest daughters and therefore further motivated to elevate their beauty, the repeated rankings must have some effect on the self esteem of their younger daughters. Naomi Wolf argues from a prescriptive definition of beauty and claims that in Western culture "women's identity must be premised on our 'beauty' so that we will remain vulnerable to outside approval, carrying the vital sensitive organ of self-esteem exposed to the air" (14). Female beauty was even more necessary and valued in Austen's culture. Conduct books championed modesty, virtue, and inner beauty, but as marriage was the "expected means for single young women to gain or retain social and economic security," a woman's physical beauty was "a precious commodity, bait for the marriage trap" (Smith 88-89).

The ridiculousness of judging worth by beauty, especially in one's own child, is most clearly seen in Austen's portrayal of Sir Walter. Austen no sooner reveals his opinion of his daughters—Elizabeth "handsome" and "dear," Anne and Mary "of very inferior value"—than she immediately undermines his judgment. She reveals that Anne, who is "nobody" with her father, actually has "an elegance of mind and sweetness of character, which must have placed her high with any people of

real understanding” (5, emphasis mine). This statement effectively labels Sir Walter as an unreliable witness and alerts readers to discount his absurd vanities, judgments, and opinions through the rest of the novel.

But parents are not the only ones who play a role in labeling the most attractive daughter. In Elizabeth’s hearing, Darcy describes Jane as ““the only handsome girl in the room”” and Elizabeth as only ““tolerable”” (11-12). Mary Crawford relates the community consensus regarding the Bertram sisters: Maria ““is in general thought the handsomest”” (45), and, in *Sense and Sensibility*, Mrs. Palmer’s backhanded compliment informs Elinor that she takes second place to Marianne (116). Indeed, this ranking of sisters seems almost unconsciously done, as if the fact that these young women belong within a sibling set entitles observers to judge, rank, and comment.



Of course, being unable to claim the title of “prettiest” does not necessarily relegate a sister to “unattractive” status. Elizabeth may not be as beautiful as Jane, but she is still considered a pretty girl, and so are her sisters Catherine and Lydia. Elinor may not receive top billing, but she has plenty of physical charms to recommend her, as does Julia Bertram. The younger Thorpe sisters may never be quite as beautiful as Isabella, but “by pretending to be as handsome as their sister, imitating her air, and dressing in the same style, [they] did very well” (34). These young women may not be number one, but they clearly belong; they are still Members in Good Standing of the Good Looks Club. But what of those sisters who are excluded completely—those who have been labeled “plain”?

These siblings have been born at a disadvantage, and as Austen repeatedly illustrates, they feel great pain. These sisters also want to be appreciated, but because they are born plain and therefore unworthy in a world that values beauty, they must devise other ways to gain attention. Bank and Kahn maintain that siblings perceive themselves as “set against the backdrop of parental ideals, wishes, values, and projections,” and they pay “close attention to the characteristics . . . that the parents might find most endearing” (52). This account explains the desperation of Mary Bennet, “the only plain one in the family.” Since she inherently lacks the quality most prized by her mother, she sets her sights on pleasing her book-loving father. Though she “worked hard for knowledge and accomplishments,” unfortunately she “had neither genius nor taste,” and consequently is never able to replace Elizabeth or even Jane in her father’s esteem (25).

Mary has no status in her family, even among her sisters. Elizabeth is repeatedly mortified by her sister’s behavior, and Lydia “never attended to Mary at all” (223). These persistent defeats lead Mary to seek approval and attention outside the family. She is “always impatient for display,” eagerly playing and singing at the slightest encouragement. Because she is bankrupt in beauty, Mary attempts to “purchase praise and gratitude” with her musical performances (25) and consequence with her pedantic moralizing. Only after the Bennet home is emptied of beautiful sisters does Mary gain both relief and importance. She is “no longer mortified by comparisons between her sisters’ beauty and her own,” and her companionship is finally valued by a mother “quite unable to sit alone” (386).

Austen’s two plain Marys have much in common. Like Mary Bennet, *Persuasion*’s Mary Musgrove is a highly comic character, and she, too, is “inferior to . . . her sisters” (P 37). But while Mary Bennett seeks approval through accomplishments, the former Mary Elliot seeks attention through hypochondria and complaints. Her father has proclaimed her low status, and even though she has “connected herself with an old country family of respectability and large fortune,” her marriage earns her only an “artificial importance” in his eyes (6, 5). Mary does not have Elizabeth’s good looks, but neither does she have “Anne’s understanding or temper.” She has “no resources for solitude” and is “very prone to add to every other distress that of fancying herself neglected and ill-used” (37). Upon Anne’s arrival, Mary greets her with a litany of woes that only subsides under

Anne's gentle appeasement and constant attention. Mary continually complains about the neglect and disrespect of the larger Musgrove family, and upon hearing that she has missed meeting their cousin Mr. Elliot, she characteristically grumbles: "I have my usual luck, I am always out of the way when any thing desirable is going on; always the last of my family to be noticed" (163). Mary's whining, though irritating and self-defeating, has a basis in the "truth" she learned from her father in childhood, a "truth" based solely on his ranking of her as lowest and last on the scale of sibling attractiveness.

Anne Steele, "nearly thirty, with a very plain and not a sensible face, nothing to admire," no longer has a parent's favor to court (SS 120). Nevertheless, because the Steele sisters are both unmarried and financially insecure, Anne is bound by economic necessity to her beautiful sister on a joint quest for survival. These sisters have neither education nor social standing, and both rely on flattery and fawning to gain attention and make their way in the world. Lucy, however, with her good looks and shrewdness, has a definite advantage over her older, plainer sister. Anne's upbringing did not give her the opportunity to acquire accomplishments for show like Mary Bennet, and she realizes that complaints and hypochondria will ingratiate her with no one. Instead, Miss Steele attempts to draw attention to herself by repeated verbal assertions of her own desirability and importance. Her fixation on "beaux" grows so marked that Lucy must reprimand her (124), and after sharing a post-chaise with the unsuspecting Dr. Davis, Anne constructs a courtship out of thin air. Anne also imprudently drops inside information, first in hints and then in outright declarations, that ultimately sets off a storm of controversy in the Dashwood and Ferrars households (258-59). If being the plain sister causes psychological pain, these young women are driven to extreme measures to achieve validation and a sense of self-consequence—measures that Austen plays for comedy.



Just as Austen uses a parent's response to a daughter's beauty to reveal parental character, how a brother judges and reacts to a sister's beauty is also a reliable gauge of his character. Brothers who value sisters for their integrity, talents, and innate value as humans rarely comment on their sister's looks. Henry Tilney obviously values Eleanor, yet he is not given to discussions of her beauty. Darcy clearly cares deeply for Georgiana, and when he speaks of her, he honors her character—her truthfulness, her love and respect for him—not her looks. Even Edmund, who from the time of Fanny's arrival at Mansfield Park has valued her high principles, only mentions her beauty after his father has made much of it (197). In contrast, John Dashwood, an egotistical, mercenary, and extremely class-conscious brother, comments freely and callously on his sisters' beauty. He sees only their lovely exterior and does not really know or value them at all. John Thorpe reveals his own boorish character through his comments about his sisters. Upon his arrival at Bath, he crassly "observe[s] that they both looked very ugly" (49). Later, in his frustration over Catherine's refusal to accompany him to Blaize Castle, he vows not to drive his sister Anne "because she had such thick ancles" (117). These "impudent" (45) statements reveal nothing about his sisters' actual appearance and everything about his own base character.

The effect of beauty on the relationships between sisters is complex. Some of Austen's characters seem to take it for granted that beauty will always be a reason for competition between sisters, and all of the plain sisters' desperate attempts for attention can be interpreted not only as ways to gain parental approval but also as forms of competition with their sisters' beauty. Even these attempts at self-promotion, however, are not so much directed toward a beautiful sister as outward against a society that judges individual worth primarily by appearance. Josephine Ross suggests that Austen herself was "outshone in looks" by her sister Cassandra and was "insecure enough about her own looks to record the occasional compliments she received" (141). Yet, by all accounts, Jane and Cassandra enjoyed an extremely close life-long friendship. Perhaps for this reason beauty, though obviously important, does not often separate sisters in Austen's novels. In fact, hardly any sisters in her fiction are blatant enemies, and the few outright rivalries that do form

are based not so much on the question “Who is fairest of them all?” but on competition for a desirable mate.

Although Austen does differentiate individual sisters by appearance, the sister-pairs in Austen’s novels often seem to be aligned according to looks. Elinor and Marianne, Jane and Elizabeth, Catherine and Lydia, Maria and Julia—each pair of sisters is attractive. Additionally, with the exception of the Elinor/Marianne pairing, which excludes a sister on the basis of age, each twosome excludes a less-attractive sibling (or, in the case of the Bertram sisters, a pseudo-sibling). However, a closer examination reveals that these sibling-pairs are aligned more by character and temperament than beauty. Elinor and Marianne are often viewed as juxtaposed—two sisters, each representing a way of seeing and reacting to the world. Austen intends readers to observe this dichotomy, for these differences are central to the theme of the novel. Yet there is much more to this sister-pair than these readily apparent differences. In fact, Austen goes to great lengths to show that Elinor and Marianne have much in common. As previously noted, both sisters are very attractive. Austen reveals that Elinor, in addition to “strength of understanding, . . . had an excellent heart;—her disposition was affectionate, and her feelings were strong,” a description that, interestingly enough, could also fit Marianne. Austen explains: “Marianne’s abilities were, in many respects, quite equal to Elinor’s. She was sensible and clever. . . . She was generous, amiable, interesting: she was every thing but prudent” (6). Both sisters value education and the arts. Both value good character in others. Both have a strong regard for their mother and each other. No fundamental difference separates their characters; the difference is a matter of degree and self-control.

The two sister-pairs in *Pride and Prejudice* also illustrate a pairing based on character rather than beauty. One might conclude that Mary is excluded from these pairings because she lacks beauty, but this observation is not exclusively true. As Steven D. Scott asserts, “Mary does not think in the ways that most of the women in the novel think. Mary is different” (236). She may well have taken up her literary and musical pursuits in reaction to her sisters’ beauty, but these pursuits have caused her to focus on matters and act in ways that do not complement either of the Bennet sibling-pairs. And though the sisters are often mortified or bored by Mary, Austen never records them slighting her on the basis of her looks—only her actions and attitudes.

Jane and Elizabeth are much like the Elinor/Marianne pairing. Although one sister is considered more beautiful, both are very attractive. And though on the surface their characters seem quite different—Jane humble and trusting, Elizabeth witty and worldly—they too are actually very much alike. Both are sensible, cheerful, and intelligent. Both strive to counteract their mother’s breaches in decorum, and as even the hurt and angry Darcy admits, Jane and Elizabeth are the only members of the Bennet family who conduct themselves ““so as to avoid any share”” of the censure heaped on the rest of the family for their ““total want of propriety”” (198). Both sisters, though certainly not perfect, do care deeply about doing what is right. They check and balance each other, Jane questioning Elizabeth’s cynicism and prejudice, and Elizabeth challenging Jane’s self-effacement and reluctance to note the faults of others. Actually, Jane and Elizabeth model the type of friendship promoted in eighteenth-century conduct books. A friend should be “steady in the correction, but mild in the reproof of your faults—like a guardian angel ever watchful to warn you of unforeseen danger, and, by timely admonitions, to prevent the mistakes incident to human frailty and to self-partiality” (Pennington 55). This type of loving correction stands in sharp contrast to Mary’s cold moralizations and insensitive proclamations. Jane and Elizabeth are confidantes and companions, not because they are both beautiful or perfect, but because they deeply love and value each other.

The pairing of Catherine and Lydia, on the other hand, does not illustrate so noble a purpose. Though also attractive, the narrator explains that “their minds were more vacant than their sisters’,” and Mr. Bennet describes his ““two youngest daughters”” as ““uncommonly foolish”” (28-29). In contrast to the admirable conduct of the elder Bennet sisters, Lydia is “always unguarded and often uncivil” (126), “self-willed and careless.” Catherine is “weak-spirited, irritable, and

completely under Lydia's guidance" (213). When Jane and Elizabeth attempt to extend the same correcting influence to their youngest siblings that they practice between themselves, Catherine and Lydia become "affronted" and will "scarcely give them a hearing." The elder sisters' efforts are further thwarted "by their mother's indulgence" and their father's laziness and indifference. These two younger sisters form a sibling-pair, not just because they are beautiful, but because they have found identity in their beauty alone and have become "ignorant, idle, and vain" (213).

Readers are first introduced to the young women of Mansfield Park by appearance—Maria and Julia "decidedly handsome," Fanny with "not . . . much in her first appearance to captivate" (12)—and one can easily focus on this comparison as a reason for the pairing and overlook another. Soon after giving physical descriptions of these young women, Austen also provides contrasting descriptions of their moral character. Maria and Julia have received all the advantages of rank, wealth, and education, and they scorn Fanny's lowly origins, her excessive shyness, her poor clothing, and her uninstructed ignorance. At their young ages and with proper care and guidance, these differences and attitudes might easily have been corrected, but Aunt Norris's prejudiced affirmations and repeated reminders that "'there should be a difference'" cement the exclusion of Fanny. Consequently, the Bertram sisters, "with all their promising talents and early information," are "entirely deficient in the less common acquirements of self-knowledge, generosity, and humility" (19). In contrast, Fanny has "an obliging, yielding temper" as well as "an affectionate heart, and a strong desire of doing right" (17). Her character is the exact opposite of this sibling-pair's; she does not fit.

Austen illustrates the idea that moral quality rather than physical appearance unites sibling-pairs by finally splitting the Bertram sisters over a difference in moral sensibilities. At home under the restraining influence of their father, the two sisters seem much alike—both attractive, both doted on by Aunt Norris, both generally admired by the community, both alternately pursued by Henry Crawford, both invested in the competition his attention engenders. But the sisters reveal their true characters by their final reactions to Henry: While Maria is willing and eager to forsake her wedding vows and pursue him, Julia has "the merit of withdrawing herself" from temptation (466). Even Julia's elopement with Mr. Yates is an attempt to distance herself from her sister's gross indiscretion. Austen informs readers that a lower ranking on the beauty scale paradoxically contributed to Julia's salvation:

That Julia escaped better than Maria was owing, in some measure, to a favourable difference of disposition and circumstance, but in a greater to her having been less the darling of that very aunt, less flattered, and less spoiled. Her beauty and acquirements had held but a second place. She had been always used to think herself a little inferior to Maria. (466)

In the latter passages of the novel, Austen carefully contrasts the characters of the two sisters. Maria displays "high spirit and strong passions" and "was not to be prevailed on to leave Mr. Crawford" (464), while Julia, whose feelings are "more controulable" (466), "was humble and wishing to be forgiven" (462). Maria is guilty of "vice," Julia only of "folly" (452). This beautiful sibling-pair is broken when true character is revealed. One then returns to the family circle while the other is excluded forever.



Deborah Kaplan suggests that in the late eighteenth and nineteenth centuries, "the bonds of the women's culture followed lines of association marked out by the ideology [of genteel domesticity]. The family was the key unit of relationship" (65-66). One should not find it surprising, therefore, that Austen explores the connection of beauty, character, and self-worth within the family unit. One should feel most safe, most valued, most accepted in the home. Nowhere should outward appearance matter less than among one's own family.

But as Austen repeatedly illustrates, this validation is not always provided—especially for women. Mary Bennet’s and Mary Musgrove’s ridiculous attempts to gain attention are motivated by a lack of self-esteem based, at least in part, on a failure to be perceived as beautiful, especially within their own families. But other Austen females proactively and positively seek validation, not by forcing someone to admire or acknowledge their beauty, but by finding people of like character to provide substantial emotional support and proper affirmation based on their moral worth. Sometimes validation does come from a family member. Edmund honors Fanny for who she is, not what she looks like, long before she grows into a beautiful young woman. Some of the sister-pairs definitely perform this function reciprocally. Others, like Anne Elliot, have a surrogate parent who provides acceptance. To Lady Russell, Anne is “a most dear and highly valued god-daughter, favourite and friend” (6). Sometimes validation comes through friendship. The “sensible, intelligent” but plain Charlotte Lucas finds acceptance from her “intimate” friend Elizabeth Bennet (18), and their attachment is strong enough to withstand even their differing opinions of Charlotte’s marriage to Mr. Collins.

Austen never denies the pleasure of being perceived as beautiful, especially by the members of one’s own family, but she refuses to let it be the defining attribute of the characters she creates. She repeatedly values a woman’s strength of character over her beauty, and esteems those characters, both male and female, who honor one another for who they are rather than how they look.

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