



## Comic Resolution, Humorous Loose Ends in Austen's Novels

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*MODERN FAMILY* has nothing on Jane Austen. Austen's endings rework the mores of English villages, confined small-town communities that necessitate getting along with neighbors and relatives since, as in the scripts of television sitcom, there is no getting away from them. Austen's imperturbable comic resolutions, thronged with relationships that would be colloquially called "incestuous" today, carry this tolerant or at least courteous inclusiveness to its apogee, a live-and-let-live that would be inconceivable to a brittle personality. A crowd in a little room—one can but imagine the future family gathering that brings Mrs. William Elliot, formerly Mrs. Clay, and her husband together with Mrs. Frederick Wentworth and Miss Elliot.

To refer to *Persuasion* is to skip ahead; the gathered loose ends of all of Austen's happy endings look unholily entertaining, once detached from the control of the author's delicate prose. Even in *Northanger Abbey*, the earliest and least complex of the novels, Catherine's happy marriage to Henry Tilney gives her as brother-in-law Captain Tilney, the flirtatious jilt who broke up the engagement between Catherine's beloved brother James and her former best friend, Isabella Thorpe. Catherine has already clarified naively to Henry and Eleanor that she does not like their brother at all. The possibility that this cad-dish brother will be on hand at future weddings, christenings, funerals, and holidays, however, is not dwelt on by Catherine. Nor does it surface in the narrative, where it is overpowered on the level of plot by the General's offensive behavior and on a meta-critical level by a cheerfully provided grab-bag husband for

Eleanor. That “the most charming young man in the world” turns out with blatant absurdity to be “the very gentleman whose negligent servant left behind him that collection of washing-bills . . . by which my heroine was involved in one of her most alarming adventures” (251) leaves little room for speculation on what Captain Tilney and Catherine will talk about.

Like most happy endings, Austen’s endings accommodate the opposed demands of ethics on one hand and comic inclusiveness on the other. Juxtaposed to the uprightness with which the author tends to reward the helpful and punish the harmful, the inclusiveness can be breathtaking. Cheekily, *Northanger Abbey* heads to the tell-tale compression of its ending even after lampooning villains “who had persevered in every possible vice, going on from crime to crime, murdering whomsoever they chose, without any feeling of humanity or remorse; till a violent death or a religious retirement closed their black career” (190). Writing the novel must have reinforced early the merits of improbable inclusion for endings, over improbable reaching out.

Austen makes the same artistic choice in *Sense and Sensibility* and *Pride and Prejudice*, to the utmost. *Sense and Sensibility* alone retains enough final complications to have kept John Galsworthy writing another lifetime. When Marianne marries Colonel Brandon, she becomes linked to the grandchild of Brandon’s youthful love, his cousin Eliza, whom as the novel emphasizes Marianne resembles. Since Willoughby’s lover was Brandon’s *de facto* ward, Marianne’s marriage also links her to Willoughby’s jilted lover and to Willoughby’s love child, as Mrs. Jennings would say. Marianne thus becomes a sort of step-grandmother to Eliza’s baby through both of the men who compete for her. Not that the narrator puts it this way; Marianne is characterized at the end with some universality as “the mistress of a family, and the patroness of a village” (379). The village is rather thronged. If Marianne had married Willoughby, she could have become stepmother to his child. Mrs. Smith could have punished Willoughby by leaving some of her estate to his child, with Colonel Brandon as guardian, echoing the first Eliza’s family situation. But the novel forgoes these possibilities, leaving any unresolved complexities of Marianne’s relationships deeply in the background, where it is difficult to remember Willoughby as a sire simply because it is impossible to visualize him as a father.

The Elinor-and-Edward plot, meanwhile, involves no infant but equal tension from personalities. When Lucy Steele marries Robert Ferrars, Elinor can then marry Edward Ferrars. The two rivals thus become sisters-in-law, “sisters” in the contemporary idiom, and *Sense and Sensibility* establishes early

that Elinor “did not feel much delighted with the idea of such a sister-in-law” (129). Edward likewise now has as sister the woman who kept him in an engagement that made him miserable and who used the engagement to make Elinor miserable. Incidentally, with the marriages of John and Fanny, Elinor and Edward, a brother and (half-) sister have also married a sister and brother, but the narrator makes little of this. Given how Fanny in particular is sketched, the fact that two siblings marry two siblings leaves remarkably little footprint, much less than in *Emma*.

In *Pride and Prejudice*, current and former relationships really make the ending a rodeo. Had Austen wanted to produce a series, the ending of *Pride and Prejudice* contains even more left-over material than *Sense and Sensibility*. The interplay of personalities makes it comic that when Jane and Bingley marry, Elizabeth and Jane become sisters-in-law to Bingley’s sisters. Better yet, Bingley’s sisters also become sisters to the three youngest Bennet girls, dismissed early by Miss Bingley and Mrs. Hurst as not worth speaking to.

With the forced marriage of George Wickham and Lydia Bennet, Elizabeth Bennet has already become sister-in-law to Wickham, her purported suitor; “Come, Mr. Wickham, we are brother and sister now. In future, I hope we shall be always of one mind” (291). Wickham’s new family also includes sisters Jane Bingley and Mary and Kitty Bennet, and of course a father-in-law who despises him.

*Pride and Prejudice*, one of Austen’s sunniest novels, convincingly celebrates the happy marriages of two friends “in love with two sisters, and two sisters fond of each other” (SS 370). But the wrap-up of the deepest romantic relationship throngs a happy clan with some highly colorful possibilities. Darcy, marrying Elizabeth, becomes brother-in-law to Wickham (barred from Pemberley); Georgiana, whom Wickham pursued, also becomes his sister-in-law—and becomes sister-in-law to Lydia, the girl brought out too early, in symmetrical antithesis to the over-sheltered Georgiana. Darcy also becomes son-in-law to Mrs. Bennet and nephew by marriage to her sister Mrs. Phillips, in delightful counterpart to his other aunt, Lady Catherine DeBourgh. The shades of Pemberley might be polluted, but the god of comedy must be dancing.

In the DeBourgh family tree, when Elizabeth marries Darcy, Anne DeBourgh, who intended to marry Darcy, becomes cousin to Elizabeth and to Wickham. Lady Catherine becomes aunt by marriage to Elizabeth, and she too has new family ties to Wickham and to Lydia. On a happier, less caustic note, the novel shows Darcy and Elizabeth sincerely fond of Elizabeth’s appealing uncle and aunt, the Gardiners; Mrs. Gardiner’s reaction on becoming better

acquainted with Wickham is lightly sketched. The gathered loose ends and residual complexities at the ending affirm the title as well as fulfill the plot of the novel: the future happiness of the main characters will entail continuing to check both pride and prejudice.

In one of Austen's striking reversals, the next novel, *Mansfield Park*, is the darkest of Austen's novels, with some of the deepest irony. Fanny Price has a sublimely spiritual outlook compared to either Maria Bertram or Mary Crawford, yet Fanny is the successful cuckoo in the nest—except that a cousin is not considered an interloper (unless by Aunt Norris) the way a Heathcliff or a Barry Lyndon is in nineteenth-century English novels. Cuckoos are apparently not all bad; the narrative ends with Fanny's little brother and sister cuckoos explicitly assisted by Mansfield. England's navy, decimated by frequent wars, needs the manpower in the service and the population at home. William and his brothers are assisted in their naval careers; Susan is taken in at the household, where she like Fanny becomes indispensable to Lady Bertram—and not only are these ongoing future relationships not deplored, except by Aunt Norris, they are celebrated.

With Aunt Norris and Maria isolated in the country, and Henry and Mary Crawford at a distance, few potential irritants remain at the end of *Mansfield Park* to be coated over with the nacre of tacit acceptance. With breathtaking mannerliness, the novel blesses its central union of first cousins Edmund Bertram and Fanny as “sterling” (471). Poor Maria may be the biggest exception to tolerant inclusiveness in all of Austen's novels; she is exiled to a secular hell with Aunt Norris, and the few unanswered questions in *Mansfield Park* revolve around her long-term fate—whether she will outlive Aunt Norris, what will become of her after her parents die. One hopes that Maria might be accepted in her brother's household—after all, Tom Bertram faults himself for exposing his sisters to Henry Crawford—but if so, she will also be part of Mrs. Edmund Bertram's family, seated in the congregation near her pastor-brother's wife. How Maria might accept their altered relative status is difficult to imagine, but Fanny has long forgiven her, and anyway Maria's eloping with Crawford facilitates Fanny's union with Edmund. We already know that the fact that she has broken up Crawford's relationship with Fanny is some consolation to Maria.

Fortunately leaving guilt and infamy behind, *Emma* is the most maturely achieved Austen novel in acknowledging and defusing future social complexities as in other regards. The narrator clarifies that Harriet Smith's friendship with Emma will sink into a calmer goodwill, clarifies that the Reverend Mr.

Elton's marriage will account for his diminished visits to Hartfield, clarifies that at the ending Emma sees Elton only as the minister who joins her hand with Knightley's. This comparative smoothness is the more easily achieved for material reasons also clarified. Emma is an heiress, not pressed to marry for financial reasons, and her family situation, as she herself points out to Harriet, further heightens her comparative independence; Emma is the only daughter living at home with a widowed, indulgent father. Her constricted social network is highlighted in the novel, as in the Elton debacle when Elton is comically pictured "in the same room at once with the woman he had just married, the woman he had wanted to marry, and the woman whom he had been expected to marry" (271). But the very explicitness with which the narrative deals with Emma's social constrictions makes them, like Emma's financial circumstances, less fearsome. "Brother and sister! no, indeed," Knightley says (331)—and the marriage of a second brother to a second sister is gracefully celebrated, inevitable but not predictable.

The ending of *Persuasion*, in another reversal, is less graceful. Like Emma, Anne Elliot is not unduly concerned with finding a husband, although in Anne's case it is because she is already attached to Captain Frederick Wentworth and she can always command a home with Lady Russell. Still, complexities remain. When Anne marries Wentworth, she gets only a small portion of the 10,000 pounds to be hers later, when her father dies and his estate will owe her the money. In other words, her dowry will be paid off by the new Sir William Elliot, the man who hoped to marry Anne himself and spent considerable time and energy on the pursuit. The inheritance will also benefit his fortunate rival, Captain Wentworth, not that Wentworth needs the money. But as Wentworth learns more about Elliot, the bequest should further spice up his life.

Literary criticism has always designated as "autumnal" this gently romantic novel, shaded by elegiac tones. But it wraps up with prickly shockers. Elliot ends up with Mrs. Clay under his protection in London, and the narrator teases that she might become his wife. Thus any ceremonial family gathering will bring the pleasure of seeing the future Mrs. Elliot, and possibly her neglected children, to Elizabeth Elliot, whom Elliot seemed to pursue—as Mrs. Clay insisted—and to Anne, whom he actually pursued. While Sir Walter lives, any such gathering will bring him together with the man who took Mrs. Clay from him, who took him from Mrs. Clay, and who disappointed one daughter and imposed on another.

Generally these potential complications are dealt with by strategic elision.

*Persuasion* establishes early that Anne was not persuaded to marry by Charles Musgrove, who later married her younger sister, Mary. Yet Mary shows no jealousy in this context although the novel characterizes her as plagued by perpetual little jealousies and insecurities. She must know that her husband once proposed to her sister—since his entire family knows, as Louisa Musgrove confides to Wentworth—but presumably the Elliots' under-appreciation of Anne has influenced Mary. Intercourse between the Elliot and Musgrove families has its tensions, but not because Anne's rejected suitor married Anne's younger sister.

To the contrary, Louisa's confidence enlightens Wentworth: since Charles Musgrove is prosperous, Wentworth can be reassured that Anne did not reject him from mere materialism. The narrative in polite revenge makes Anne's putative rival, Louisa, a means of bringing Anne and Wentworth together (partly by falling on her head), like Wentworth's putative rival, William Elliot. Generously, Captain Benwick and Louisa are also bestowed on each other, and the captains' families all remain a closely knit community, one that maintains communal bonds without landlocked coercion. As when the grieving Captain Harville supports Benwick's courtship of Louisa, showing naval families surmount and rise above tensions is part of the author's tribute to the navy here. *Persuasion* has less of the jaundiced tone toward Rears and Vices than *Mansfield Park*, largely related to Admiral Crawford.

Outrageous comic wrap-ups are not new with Austen's novels. Romping endings with a cavalier disregard for painful realism date back to Euripides—the *Ion* and the *Helen*—to say nothing of Aristophanes, Plautus, and Shakespeare. What is new in Austen is that the outrageous unrealism does not feel unrealistic. For one thing, the rabbit-out-of-a-hat anomalies in Austen's endings are part of the warp and woof of the plots. For another, Austen's swift endings bear some resemblance to the mix of teeth-gritting and affection in extended family gatherings in real life. But mainly, the potential awkwardnesses in these endings are firmly subordinated by authorial control, hidden in plain sight by subtleties of tone. This, it may be added, is a consistent feature of the novels from first to last. There is no grand finale in this authorial pattern: Austen was not planning for her career to end.

#### WORKS CITED

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