JANE AUSTEN'S OPEN SECRET: SAME-SEX LOVE IN PRIDE AND PREJUDICE, EMMA, AND PERSUASION

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Abstract

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I argue that Austen’s famously heteronormative novels do not actually begin with compulsory heterosexuality: they arrive there gradually, contingently, and only by first carving out an authorized space in which queer relations may, or indeed must, take hold. Engaging intimacies between both men and women within Pride and Prejudice, Persuasion, and Emma, I explore how Austen constructs a heteronormativity that is itself premised upon queer desire and the progressive implications this casts upon Austen as a female writer within Regency England. In each of my three chapters, I look at how same-sex intimacies are cultivated in the following social spheres: the realm of illness within Persuasion, the realm of Regency courtship within Pride and Prejudice, and the realm of domesticity within Emma. I argue that Austen conforms to patriarchal sanctions for female authorship while simultaneously undermining this sanction by depicting same-sex desire. Through depicting a same-sex desire that lays the very foundation of each novel’s culminated heteronormativity, Austen redefines desire and, in the process, redefines herself as a progressive author. I suggest that Austen follows the lead of famous romantics such as Percy Shelley and Lord Byron, and promotes the progressive notion of
homosexuality as a universal state through her subtle depictions of same-sex intimacies in her famously heteronormative novels. I engage D.A. Miller’s theory of open secrets, Steven Cohan’s analysis of helper figures, Eve Sedgwick’s logic of closeted homosexuality, Freud’s theory of jealousy, Michael Warner and Lauren Berlant’s engagement of public and private, and Judith Butler’s theory of gender performativity.
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CHAPTER ONE
INTRODUCTION

Emma Woodhouse reflects upon the notions of truth and secrecy, stating, “Seldom, very seldom does complete truth belong to any human disclosure; seldom can it happen that something is not a little disguised, or a little mistaken.”¹ To be sure, in the context of *Emma*, this moment invites readers to agree with the majority of scholars who contend that Emma’s reflection serves to exonerate her betrayal of Harriet Smith, but, more importantly, I believe it reveals Austen’s complexities as a female writer in Regency England. Claudia L. Johnson notes that “fiction by women must be fiction by young women—modest, delicate, wispy, delightful… and as soon as a woman has anything significant to say, she is… past her career as a novelist and a woman.”² In this way, Austen conforms to the patriarchal sanction for female authorship—that is, she crafts novels that focus upon already established themes of love, exploration, and domesticity. However, at the same time, she echoes Emma Woodhouse’s reflection that “complete truth” cannot belong to any human disclosure, and then undermines this sanction by depicting same-sex desire.

Eve Kosofsky Sedgwick’s claim that “heterosexuality has been permitted to masquerade… as history itself” suggests that Austen’s culture sustains itself through “institutionalized pseudonyms such as Inheritance, Marriage, Dynasty, Domesticity, and

However, as scholars such as Clara Tuite have noted, some of Austen’s courtship plots are “self-consciously artificial” paired with “merciless” depictions of the marriage market. Nonetheless, Austen’s novels have been a crucial part of a British literary canon, which uses Austen’s marriage plots and heterosexual romances to naturalize national cultural formations. Tuite argues, “it is a truism to say that the canonical functioning of Austen within national cultural formations and institutions depends to a large extent upon an investment in a heterosexual Austen… To de-naturalize these [marriage-plots] is to de-naturalize Austen’s canonical positioning.” Not only does my study of Austen’s work question the naturalness of these plots, but it also reconsiders the complexities of Austen as a female writer in Regency England. I argue that Austen’s famously heteronormative novels do not actually begin with compulsory heterosexuality: they arrive there gradually, contingently, and only by first carving out an authorized space in which queer relations may, or indeed must, take hold. Engaging intimacies between both men and women within Austen’s texts, I explore how Austen constructs a heteronormativity that is itself premised upon queer desire and what this implies about her authorship.

Starting in the 19th century, when Mrs. Oliphant praised the “feminine cynicism” and “quiet jeering” of Austen’s work, readers of Austen have been split into two factions:

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5 I rely upon Michael Warner definition of heteronormativity, found within his book, Fear of a Queer Planet, throughout the entirety of my thesis. He defines heteronormativity as “the institutions, structures of understanding, and practical orientations that make heterosexuality seem not only coherent—that is, organized as a sexuality—but also privileged.”
those who read Austen as a modest and normative author who eradicates progressive thought and writes about domesticity due to her own simplicity and those who read her as a progressive writer that is not committed to dominant moral and political norms dictated by the patriarchal necessities of heterosexuality and marriage. When Austen began writing in the 1790s, her contemporaries noticed a difference between her work and other novels because of her apparent detachment from the erotic. However, she was still labeled as a writer whose identity was deeply engrained in propriety; Charlotte Bronte wrote in a letter to W.S. Williams that Austen paid attention to “the surface of the lives of genteel English people” while remaining indifferent to “what throbs fast and full, though hidden, what the blood rushes through.” D.H. Lawrence criticized “this old maid” for emphasizing “the sharp knowing in apartness” instead of the “blood connection” between men and women and George Sampson asserted, “in her world there is neither marrying nor giving in marriage, but just the make-believe mating of dolls… Jane Austen is abnormal… because [her characters] have no sex at all.” In this way, although differences between Austen’s work and normative novels have been recognized, these inconsistencies of the treatment of sex and eroticism have been pointedly undermined in an effort to maintain the projected identity of a normative, naturalized, Jane Austen.

More currently, critics such as Roger Rosenblatt and Roger Kimball maintain the arguments of Austen’s contemporaries by asserting it is “common sense” that Austen is

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heterosexual and writes moralizing novels, and her work would have been untouchable by sex and gender analysis had tenured radicals not disrupted “the natural order”. Claudia L. Johnson notes, “Rosenblatt place[s] Austen before the advent of such ills as industrialization… feminism, homosexuality, masturbation, the unconscious. In her novels, men are gentlemen, women are ladies, and the desires of gentlemen and ladies for each other are intelligible, complementary, mutually fulfilling, and, above all, inevitable.”

In line with these assumptions, Rosenblatt references Sedgwick’s paper on Sense and Sensibility and the masturbating girl as one of many “horror stories” propagated by the tenured radicals.

The inevitability of heterosexual desire argued by critics like Rosenblatt was questioned with critiques by D.W. Harding and F. R. Leavis who not only argue for a depiction of Austen as subversive, but also assert that this depiction is valuable to feminist academics. While the criticism of Harding and Leavis was conducive to the rise of studying Austen with a progressive lens, the field of “Queer Austen” was not yet recognized and could not be until scholars developed another method to understand the value-coded marriage plot as the most important structural element of Austen’s work instead of simply attributing the structure of her novels to Austen’s normative values. Edmund Wilson’s article, “A Long Talk about Jane Austen,” analyzes the erotic dynamics within Sense and Sensibility and suggests that the homoerotic bond between the

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11 D.W. Harding wrote “Regulated Hatred: An Aspect of the Work of Jane Austen,” which was published in Jane Austen: A Collection of Critical Essays, ed. Ian Watt (Englewood Cliffs, N.J: Prentice Hall, 1963), 166. In addition to portraying a subversive Austen, Harding argued that Austen’s “books are… read and enjoyed by precisely the sort of people whom she disliked.” F.R. Leavis continues Harding’s subversive attempt within The Great Tradition, where he insists upon Austen’s moral seriousness.
Dashwood sisters is stronger than the heterosexual bond between each sister and their male lover. Wilson also engages Emma Woodhouse’s “offstage lesbianism,” which he asserts is “something outside the picture which is never made explicit in the story but which has to be recognized by the reader before it is possible for him to appreciate the book.” Inspired by Wilson’s article, Marvin Mudrick’s book, *Jane Austen: Irony as Defense and Discovery*, explores earlier suspicions of Austen’s abnormal treatment of eroticism by alluding to same-sex love directly within his analysis of *Emma*. However, emphasizing, again, the two factions within Austen studies, Wayne Booth’s article, “Control of Distance in Jane Austen’s *Emma*” quickly responded to Mudrick, defending Emma Woodhouse’s heterosexuality while simultaneously defending marital felicity in Austen’s novels and outside of them. In the process of declaring Emma heterosexual, Booth equates the perversity of women who have same-sex intimacies with the perversity of readers who fail to note a happy ending when they read one.

Terry Castle’s review of Deidre Le Faye’s *Letters*, titled “Was Jane Austen Gay?”, argues that Austen’s attachment to her sister Cassandra is reflected throughout her work with depictions of sister-sister relationships that are just as important as the culminated marriages in the novels, if not more so, using *Sense and Sensibility* as an example. While the queer reading of Austen to which I wish to contribute is not the project of determining Austen’s sexual preference, nor does it analyze relationships

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between sisters, it is an extension of Castle’s work in the sense that it questions the notion of a strictly heterosexual romance. Similar to Castle, I contend that the culminated marriages of Austen’s novels depend upon same-sex intimacies. My argument is significant in the field of Austen studies because it refuses to read Austen’s novels as what Michael Warner calls a “heterosexist” and instead focuses upon engaging texts or themes that have been seemingly ignored in terms of homosexual desire while simultaneously offering new theories regarding the way in which Austen constructs desire.

The opening chapter of my thesis—A Truth Universally Unacknowledged: Male-Male Intimacy In *Pride and Prejudice*—argues that *Pride and Prejudice* must be recognized as a novel that arrives at a state of compulsory heterosexuality rather than one that begins there. I have chosen to begin with an analysis of *Pride and Prejudice* not only because it has been mostly ignored in terms of homosexual desire, but also because it is known as Austen’s most famous heteronormative love story. This chapter serves to demonstrate my argument at its most simple; the other texts that I have chosen to work with support my argument in more complex ways. In this chapter, I examine Mr. Darcy’s same-sex intimacies with Mr. Bingley and Mr. Wickham and how each results in a culminated heteronormativity that is contingent upon being premised by queer desire. After all, there is a heteronormative ending for Mr. Darcy, Mr. Bingley, and the reluctant Mr. Wickham. I begin by analyzing the crucial ballroom scene in which Mr. Darcy insults Elizabeth; however, I focus more upon the way in which Mr. Bingley and Mr. Darcy interact, which, I assert, leads Mr. Darcy to snub Elizabeth. I then engage how

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Austen uses jealousy as a plot-furthering device, relying upon Eve Sedgwick’s logic of closeted homosexuality and Freud’s theory of jealousy to examine Mr. Darcy’s relationship with Mr. Wickham. I continue by examining how *Pride and Prejudice* encourages its readers to think in terms of secrets through defining behavior in terms of public and private. Through redefining desire by making heteronormativity contingent upon being premised by queer desire, Austen redefines herself as a writer. The discovery of plot-driving homosexual desire encourages the idea that Austen belongs to a category within Romanticism while simultaneously suggesting that homosexuality is a natural state.

The following chapter—Queer Eye for the Austenite: *Persuasion* and Illness—builds upon this exploration of a heteronormativity premised upon queer desire by analyzing illness within *Persuasion*. I continue the argument presented in the opening chapter, that Austen maintains the notion that the culminated heteronormativity of her work depends upon same-sex intimacies; however, instead of showing how these relationships are cultivated in social environments, such as the crucial ballroom scene in *Pride and Prejudice*, *Persuasion* pairs illness with sexuality and asks readers to reconsider what it means to nurse and be nursed. Rather than follow traditional modes of divorcing desire from the nursing figure, I argue that homosexual desire is cultivated in the private realm of illness between the nurse and the patient, or helper figure. I use Steven Cohan’s analysis of helper figures, figures that “use male-male tutelage [to]… perpetuate the protocols of civil masculinity” while maintaining a subordinate role within the narrative, to examine Captain Wentworth’s same-sex intimacies with men that he has
nursed.\textsuperscript{17} Figures such as Dick Musgrove and Captain Benwick therefore propel

\textit{Persuasion}'s plot forward by way of their erotic intimacies with Wentworth. I also argue
that Austen simultaneously maps Anne Eliot's evolution from being incapable of action
to a female figure that is comfortable with power and masculine attributes through her
experiences within the realm of illness. In this way, while it targets men and women
differently, Austen's social commentary regarding illness remains the same. While for
Wentworth, the realm of illness, equipped with helper figures, first disrupts
heteronormativity by way of same-sex intimacies and then restores and cultivates it, it is
Anne's role as a nurse that allows her to learn the masculine behavior that Wentworth
admires, emphasizing the notion that the success of heteronormative erotic relationships
depends upon same-sex intimacies. Therefore, the realm of illness provides Austen’s
characters a space to form deviant homosexual intimacies between male characters while
also propagating subversive female gender roles. D.A. Miller’s theory of open secrets has
been foundational to the formation of this chapter and can be applied to the entirety of my
thesis. This chapter furthers my overall argument by delving deeper into the notion that
Austen supported the idea of homosexuality as a universal state, which was briefly
touched upon in the first chapter. I argue that although she does not engage issues of
deviant sexual acts as directly as Percy Shelley, who “aligned same-sex desire with a
natural rite of passage… and helped universalize homosexual desire,” \textit{Persuasion}'s
portrayals of deviant, subversive acts within the realm of illness suggest that Austen

\textsuperscript{17} Cohan, Steven. “Queer Eye for the Straight Guise.” \textit{Interrogating Post Feminism}. Eds.
agreed with Shelley and, however subtly, supported and furthered the progressive idea of homosexuality as a universal state.\(^{18}\)

My final chapter, entitled Eroticized Collection within *Emma*, analyzes *Emma*, the only of Austen’s novels to receive copious amounts of attention in terms of sex and gender analysis. I argue not simply that Emma Woodhouse may be a lesbian, for that has already been established by scholars such as Mudrick, but that Austen conforms to patriarchal sanctions for female authorship while simultaneously undermining this sanction by depicting same-sex desire, and she does this through the familiar trope of collecting. By looking at the way in which Emma seemingly situates herself as a collector and those around her, and Hartfield, as her collected objects, I contend that Austen uses the act of collecting to express homosexual desire and the heteronormativity that stems from it. I explore the normative trope of collecting through looking at Joseph Banks, a famous collector, and comparing his collection and acquisition practices to those of Emma Woodhouse. This chapter moves my argument forward because it not only shows another social sphere, such as ballrooms and the realm of illness, in which homosexual relationships form, but it emphasizes Austen’s methodologically coded eroticism in greater detail while also historicizing her need for it within Regency England.

The notion that Austen’s famously heteronormative novels end only in successful marriages due to same-sex erotic intimacies asks readers to reconsider the normative perceptions of Austen and her seemingly normative place within the British literary canon. Because Austen is very much engrained within popular culture, looking at how same-sex intimacies allow heterosexuality to burgeon allows us to shatter stereotypes of

homophobia and promote a more progressive agenda while redefining Austen as a Romantic writer.
Known as one of the Western canon’s greatest heterosexual love stories, Jane Austen’s *Pride and Prejudice* concerns marriage, and the pursuit of marriage, between men and women. The famous first sentence of the novel crystallizes these concerns quite memorably: “It is a truth universally acknowledged, that a single man in possession of a good fortune, must be in want of a wife” (Austen 5). This sentence shows how heterosexuality is framed by Austen’s society as compulsory and universal: a wife for each man. Moreover, although the novel presents Mrs. Bennet’s efforts to marry off her daughters as comic, we are also told from the beginning how necessary marriage is to women’s economic survival; Mrs. Bennet is not presented as wrong or illogical in viewing a man’s reluctance to marry as an affront to women. Given this situation, *Pride and Prejudice* may not, at first glance, provide space for homosexuality. The situation, however, is more complex: the heterosexual relationships in Jane Austen’s novel are based upon a heteronormativity that is itself hatched from homosexual desire. Not only does Austen subtly stretch the concepts of love and desire to include homosexuality as a possibility, but homosexual passion lays the very foundations for the novel’s heterosexual attachments.

This feature of the text, however subtle, is pivotal in the context of a Regency England that combined “sensibility, effeminacy, and ambiguity…in a powerfully defensive, reactive mix that catalogue[d] virtually every descriptor in the Regency arsenal
of homophobic discourse” (Nagle 90). While homosexuality was a sensitive topic for any writer in Regency England, it was especially so for a potentially conservative woman writer such as Austen. Despite and perhaps because of these contexts and limitations, Austen describes an implicit homosexual desire that reinforced, even produced, Regency society’s heteronormative expectations. Far from broaching any taboo, Austen creates a model of desire that reinforces heteronormativity and indeed heterosexuality. However, as I will also demonstrate in Chapter Three, Austen participates in patriarchal sanctions regarding female authorship, for she writes about a heterosexual economy within her novels, while simultaneously undermining this sanction through portraying homosexual desire. After all, the heterosexual economy that she takes part in, as well as writes about in her novels, is built upon the ideals of queer attachment. I see this as a significantly progressive view of sexuality, even in the wild context of second-generation Romantics like the Shelleys and Byron, in that Austen not only insists that homosexuality should be accepted, but also redefines what should be considered “normal” within Regency society.

In his book, *Sexuality and the Culture of Sensibility in British Romanticism*, Christopher C. Nagle studies the expression of heterosexual desire through an analysis of Jane Austen’s *Persuasion*. Through this study, Nagle scrutinizes Anne and Wentworth’s relationship, noting every “rare socially appropriate means of touching” (Nagle 107). It is through the idea of proscribed behavior that Austen defines desire; because Anne and Wentworth are of opposite genders, they can never speak completely honestly with one another due to always being in the company of others and must rely upon body language to convey their mutual desire. Nagle’s analysis of *Persuasion*, in which Austen reshapes a queer history of sensibility into a fiercely homophobic and therefore properly
“Romantic” paradigm, propagates insights into heterosexuality that are quite inapplicable to *Pride and Prejudice*. Unlike Anne and Wentworth, Mr. Darcy and Mr. Bingley can converse freely in *Pride and Prejudice*: social situations produce an intimacy of language even while the two, by virtue of their mutual masculinity, cannot physically touch one another. Because they cannot find “socially appropriate means of touching,” Mr. Darcy and Mr. Bingley must express their reciprocal desire through deeply coded speech and actions, as well as their views, and choices, regarding the courting of the opposite, and socially acceptable, gender. As I will show in the analysis to follow, this model of homosociality propels the plot of *Pride and Prejudice*, as well as implying that heteronormative relationships are built and premised upon same-sex intimacies. This changes the novel’s meaning, and message, completely: whatever the famous first sentence would suggest, the novel does not *begin* with compulsory heterosexuality: it arrives at it gradually, contingently, and only by first carving out an authorized space in which queer relations may, and indeed must, take hold. Austen essentially implies that without queer attachments, heterosexual attachments would cease to exist.

Infamous for containing the moment in which Mr. Darcy and Elizabeth first meet, the Hertfordshire ballroom scene has usually been analyzed with a heteronormative lens and read as flush with eroticism and plot furthering devices; after all, it is within this scene where Mr. Darcy and Mr. Bingley meet the women each man will marry. However, the way in which Mr. Bingley and Mr. Darcy interact with one another in this scene of Regency courtship has been seemingly overlooked. I choose this scene because, in many ways, it establishes the paradigm for enforced heterosexuality that the rest of the plot will inherit: it is precisely a scene of compulsory courtship, and its frustrations are focused on
Mr. Darcy’s unwillingness to play by the proscribed rules of Regency courtship. Gary Kelly notes that within Regency society, “dancing, singing, and playing music [serve to] display the young woman’s body and bearing at social occasions [in order to] attract a suitor” (Kelly 257). Therefore, by refusing to participate in an opportunity to interact with women and their displayed bodies, Austen suggests that Mr. Darcy refuses to participate in Regency courtship. Although Mr. Bingley is described as being “lively and unreserved, danc[ing] every dance, [and] was angry that the ball closed so early,” Mr. Darcy is described as “the proudest, most disagreeable man in the world” because he “danced only once with Mrs. Hurst and once with Miss Bingley, [and] declined being introduced to any other lady” (Austen 14). If we read Mr. Darcy and Mr. Bingley’s attachment with one another as more important to them—at least at this point in the narrative—than their relations with women, as I will go on to show there is much evidence to do, then we must see this as compulsory heterosexuality. Mr. Darcy must watch Mr. Bingley dance with women, knowing that there is not a possibility for his own relationship with Mr. Bingley ever to be that public. Austen stresses the fact that Mr. Darcy dances with both of Mr. Bingley’s sisters but only because it would not be acceptable in society to ignore them; because Mr. Darcy is heavily scrutinized by the public, he must conform to perfunctory rules publicly in order to break them privately. However, he dances only once with each of them, eliminating any chance that he may be sexually interested in Mr. Bingley’s unmarried sister. In my view, the fact that Mr. Darcy refuses to be introduced to other women implies a pivotal moment in which his primary focus remains always on Mr. Bingley, and his surliness is a product of his jealousy regarding Mr. Bingley and envy of his dance partners.
Although Mr. Bingley participates in heteronormative society by way of dancing with women, he cannot remain unaffected by Mr. Darcy’s jealousy. Mr. Bingley “came from the dance,” trying to persuade Mr. Darcy to adjust his behavior (Austen 15). This moment serves to suggest their queer attachment. Mr. Bingley leaves a situation as rare and valuable as the scenes of touching between Anne and Wentworth in *Persuasion*, one in which Regency society deems it appropriate for men to touch women for the purpose of eventually seducing them. He withdraws from that scene in order to conduct a conversation with Mr. Darcy, a man. But, I read this scene not as Mr. Bingley’s withdrawal from erotic enjoyment, but as his immersion within it. Although it is not directly stated that it is more erotic for Mr. Bingley to converse with Mr. Darcy than to engage in socially accepted means of touching with a woman, we must view it as possible. After all, Mr. Bingley has not been nearly as interested in dancing with women as the public gaze might believe; Mr. Bingley is able, for instance, to note that Mr. Darcy was standing alone for extended periods of time, which implies that though Mr. Bingley participated in the act of dancing with women, his mind and attention were consistently elsewhere. Mr. Bingley states, “I must have you dance. I hate to see you standing about by yourself in this stupid manner. You had better dance” (Austen 15). In stating, “I hate to see you standing about by yourself,” Mr. Bingley is offering not disapproval but reassurance to Mr. Darcy: the statement implies that he wishes that he could be standing with him, conversing, instead of touching women in a socially prescribed manner. The fact that Mr. Bingley is driven to use the word “hate,” despite his “easiness, openness [and] ductility of…temper,” implies that seeing Mr. Darcy standing alone in a social setting upsets Mr. Bingley more than his actions could convey in a public setting (Austen...
21). It is the only place within the novel where Mr. Bingley asserts his opinion so strongly. Standing with Mr. Darcy at the very forge of heterosexual attachment, Mr. Bingley here bridges the gap between what is acceptable in private and in public. The repeated requests for Mr. Darcy to dance stem from Mr. Bingley’s guilt, as he is participating in the “uniquely socially sanctioned erotic activity,” i.e. dancing, while the man he wishes he could be dancing with is simply watching (Nagle 113). By dancing with women, Mr. Bingley is publically conforming to Regency society’s erotic demands, essentially attempting to sever his queer attachment to Mr. Darcy. However, Mr. Bingley “came from the dance,” which implies that although he realizes he cannot maintain his queer attachment to Mr. Darcy, it will not be an easy task for him to end their connection. This internal struggle is depicted through the passionate idea of “hate” contrasted with the statement of compulsory heterosexuality, “You had better dance.” The very statement resonates with coercion, even as it claims for itself the very intimacy of the advisor’s position. The positioning of Mr. Darcy near the couples dancing marks his refusal to dance as even more abnormal. Penny Gay historicizes the role of dancing within Regency England, stating, “those not dancing would while away the evening at cards” (Gay 340). Because Austen depicts people of all conditions playing cards, as the De Bourghs, the Bingleys and the Philipses all sit down to cards after dinner at various points within *Pride and Prejudice*, the fact that Mr. Darcy loiters around those who are dancing suggests that he is doing more than simply refusing to dance. Through the repetition of asking Mr. Darcy to dance, Mr. Bingley subtly reminds him of men’s heterosexual obligations to their families, as well as that they are in public and therefore are being heavily scrutinized. The juxtaposition of the emotion that motivates Mr. Bingley to use the word
“hate” and the compulsory heterosexuality of the last sentence—“You had better
dance”—implies that although it may be Mr. Bingley’s first impulse to act passionately
with Mr. Darcy, he realizes that society deems it impossible and that he must erotically
conform to a heterosexual relationship.

Mr. Darcy disregards Mr. Bingley’s request for him to participate in Regency
courtship by way of dancing with women without a momentary consideration. He quickly
responds to Mr. Bingley, stating, “You know how I detest it, unless I am particularly
acquainted with my partner... your sisters are engaged, and there is not another woman in
the room, whom it would not be a punishment to me to stand up with” (Austen 15). By
saying, “You know how I detest it,” Mr. Darcy immediately establishes a form of
intimate conversation with Mr. Bingley, implying that they may have already argued
several times about the fact that Mr. Darcy dislikes dancing with women, and that he
dislikes it even more when Mr. Bingley participates. This suggests that something similar
may have occurred before; perhaps we are supposed to believe that the two have
accompanied each other to other balls. The only dancing partner that would satisfy Mr.
Darcy, he claims, would be someone he is already “particularly acquainted with,” a claim
for intimacy that very possibly refers to Mr. Bingley. In this way, the intimacy of male
friendship becomes the precondition for, even the wished alternative to, heterosexual
courtship. In this economy of intimacies, Mr. Bingley’s sisters received preferential
treatment by Mr. Darcy because they are related to Mr. Bingley. In an attempt to not
offend Mr. Bingley as he insults the rest of the females in the room, Mr. Darcy makes a
point to say that both of the Bingley sisters are busy. Tellingly, Mr. Darcy insists that
“There is not another woman in the room whom it would not be a punishment to me to
stand up with.” With this, Austen does not merely suggest Mr. Darcy’s self-absorption and misogyny, which is the standard critical reading of the scene: indeed, he directly specifies here that heterosexual courtship with women is the very form of social “punishment” that one might expect from someone in his situation. He is explicitly rejecting the women in the room while he leaves his feelings for men directly unmentioned. As he rejects the women in the room, Mr. Darcy essentially forces Mr. Bingley to make an erotic commitment. He states, “Return to your partner and enjoy her smiles, for you are wasting your time with me” (Austen 15). There appears to be no chance to completely withdraw from erotic possibilities, as Mr. Bingley is given the choice of dancing with women, or further conversing with a man. Mr. Bingley must choose an erotic commitment, for he does not have the option of leaving or participating in a nonsexual activity. Both of his choices have sexual connotations, which force Mr. Bingley to choose a sexual identity in public. Mr. Bingley returns to his female dance partner, essentially conforming to his society’s prescribed heterosexuality.

Homosociality is not the universal condition in *Pride and Prejudice*, but it does seem to signal that characters are significant and will enter into a heteronormative marriage by the novel’s completion. Even before Mr. Darcy is given a name, Austen seeks to differentiate him from other men through his intimate connection with Mr. Bingley. She notes that he and Mr. Bingley are the only unmarried men in their party of five, and take note that they are five instead of the party of twelve that had originally been intended (Austen 14). Through noting this, Austen suggests that each member of their party must have a significant role, or attachment, to one another; they are five, instead of twelve, indicating that their party was organized of the few people that Mr.
Bingley cared for more than the seven people they had left behind. Because the remaining members of the party consist of “Mr. Bingley, his two sisters, [and] the husband of the eldest,” Austen sets Mr. Darcy apart as the only one without a blood or marriage relation (Austen 14). Alienating Mr. Darcy from his traveling party suggests that Darcy may have a private attachment to a member of his party, specifically Mr. Bingley. We are encouraged to think of Mr. Darcy and Mr. Bingley as together since Mr. Darcy talks of intimacy and Mr. Bingley is the only one whom he is intimate with.

Stressing that both men are “handsome and gentlemanlike,” Austen emphasizes that they are considered to be desirable (Austen 14). Austen gives both men the status of “gentleman,” which not only shows the reader that they are also restrained by their ideas of duty and responsibility, but also seems to hint at their queer attachment. It is important to note that gentlemen such as William Beckford and Horace Walpole made the term “gentleman” notoriously queer in the late eighteenth century; these gentlemen made Lord Byron’s scandalously homosexual activities more acceptable during the time in which Austen lived. In my view, when Austen describes Mr. Darcy and Mr. Bingley as “gentlemen,” she is not simply making a reference to the privileged class. Instead, she references a figure for the open secret of aristocratic homosexuality, a term that could not, by Austen’s time, be divorced from queer desire in a literary context. However, unlike William Beckford and the “gentlemen” of his ilk, the male protagonists within Austen’s novels would have too much of a sense of responsibility and obligation to indulge themselves in what would be considered as selfishness. Mr. Darcy and Mr. Bingley are represented in ways that would suggest to an audience in their times that they experience reciprocal desire. However, in the world that Austen creates, they must also
find a heterosexual relationship to partake in due to the familial obligations that come with being the head of each household. Horace Walpole never married, therefore ignoring his familial obligations to procreate, whereas William Beckford appeared to succumb to society’s prescribed procreation after fleeing to Europe due to a homosexual scandal. However, Rictor Norton noted that Beckford collected “newspaper cuttings about homosexual scandals until the very year of his death… about notable gentlemen, usually by means of innuendo” (Norton). *Pride and Prejudice* seems to follow this tradition of innuendo and open secrets, as the novel acknowledges queer attachments by way of actions and implications without ever naming them. Elfenbein notes “the keys to the good man’s virtue were moderation, self-discipline, and restraint” (Elfenbein 20). Austen has written Mr. Darcy and Mr. Bingley as “good men”—they do not have the capacity to be like Horace Walpole and negate their familial obligations. Due to their “good men” virtues, Mr. Darcy and Mr. Bingley realize that their queer attachment is temporary and must be hidden, as they will participate in society’s prescribed heteronormativity; both men will eventually marry and eventually procreate.

In her book, *Between Men: English Literature and Male Homosocial Desire*, Eve Kosofsky Sedgwick acknowledges the logic of this kind of closeted homosexuality, as well as links it to homosocial bonds. She explains that these bonds concentrate “the fantasy energies of compulsion, prohibition, and explosive violence,” stating that homosocial bonds are “structured by the logic of paranoia… [and] mapped along the axes of social and political power” (Sedgwick 162). In his letter to Elizabeth, Mr. Darcy inadvertently reveals his queer past and subsequent closeted homosexuality through his description of his friendship with Mr. Wickham by writing that he had “the opportunity
of seeing him in unguarded moments” (Austen 173). This serves to not only underline that Mr. Wickham feels as though he must be emotionally guarded, but also to reiterate the separatism between the public and private realms. It is significant that these words occur in a letter that Mr. Darcy has written rather than spoken aloud; through the use of the word “opportunity,” Mr. Darcy implies that he took pleasure in seeing Mr. Wickham during these moments of intimate vulnerability that were exiled into the private realm of secrecy and domesticity. While Austen does not directly define what it means to be “unguarded,” she certainly implies that it entails seeing another, more intimate side of another person. Significantly, this is the only point in the novel where Mr. Darcy seems to disregard the logic of closeted homosexuality, as he hints at his queer past to a woman. This pivotal moment also signifies Mr. Darcy’s gradual identification as a heterosexual, one who doesn’t necessarily have to abide by Regency society’s strict rules of private and public realms while simultaneously making sure his emotions are not left “unguarded”.

Sigmund Freud unintentionally engages the notion of unguarded emotions while linking the private and public realms with the concept of jealousy. Essentially, as Sedgwick explains, Freud noted that jealousy is the purest hint of homosexuality that can exist in the public realm, as he believed that jealousy is the projection of denied homosexuality (Sedgwick 20). It is therefore suggested that Mr. Darcy must publicly deny his queer attachments in order to participate as a member of the nineteenth century society in which he lived. However, although Mr. Darcy cannot act upon his queer attachments in public, his suggested jealousy remains apparent.

Darcy’s jealousy represents the hinge between homosexuality, homosociality, and heterosexuality in this novel. Playing upon the idea of familial obligations, Austen uses
Mr. Darcy’s jealousy to propel the plot of her novel into its fully heterosexual regime that will be familiar to most of its readers. Mr. Darcy is provoked into insulting Elizabeth by Mr. Bingley’s declaration of Jane being “the most beautiful creature [he] ever beheld” (Austen 15). Because Mr. Bingley uses the word “creature,” a term that includes Mr. Darcy, instead of “woman,” we can surmise that Mr. Darcy feels as if his position as Mr. Bingley’s object of affection is threatened. Had Mr. Bingley used the word “woman,” instead of “creature,” Mr. Darcy would probably not have felt threatened: in his view, women are obviously inferior to men. Elfenbein notes this link between homosexuality and misogyny in this period stating, “Although masculine women are abnormal, only they can achieve anything valuable because merely feminine women are worthless” (Elfenbein 5). Mr. Darcy not only feels that his attachment to Mr. Bingley is threatened, but he is also offended that the woman Mr. Bingley has chosen as his partner in a heterosexual relationship is so feminine. Mr. Bingley uses the word “creature,” which causes Mr. Darcy to feel as if he is in competition with Jane for Mr. Bingley’s affection, and will automatically dislike anything that may be associated with her. Mr. Bingley states, “One of [Jane’s] sisters [is] sitting down just behind you… Do let me ask my partner to introduce you,” encouraging Mr. Darcy to dislike Elizabeth before even laying eyes on her (Austen 15). Motivated by his jealousy, Mr. Darcy looks “for a moment at Elizabeth, till catching her eye, [and] he withdrew his own and coldly,” insulting her (Austen 15). Austen uses the word “coldly” to articulate that Mr. Darcy is experiencing more emotion, specifically jealousy and anger, than simply the distaste at looking at an unattractive, inferior, woman. The fact that he must snub her, by both refusing to be introduced to her, as well as catching her eye and then looking away, suggests that he
feels some sort of malice towards her; I think this malice stems from Mr. Darcy’s homoerotic jealousy and paranoia pertaining to the possibility of Mr. Bingley forming a heterosexual attachment to her sister.

Sedgwick notes that “Freud’s study of Dr. Schreber shows clearly that the repression of homosexual desire in a man who by any commonsense standard was heterosexual, occasioned paranoid psychosis” and irrational malice (Sedgwick 20). This irrationally stems from negating the unacceptable idea of homosexuality through masking, and replacing, the object of the subject’s affection. Freud’s analysis states that the subject moves from homosexuality, “I am a man and I love him,” to projected heterosexuality, “I don’t love him, she loves him,” to self-heterosexuality, “I am a man and I love her;” and, finally, to irrational rage, “I am a man and I hate him, a man.” Even though Freud was writing much later than Austen, his analyses illuminate the intricacies of *Pride and Prejudice*: the subject of Freud’s analysis already had a heterosexual sexual identity, whereas Mr. Darcy and Mr. Bingley ultimately sacrifice their queer attachment in order to gain heterosexual sexual identities. Because Mr. Darcy does not, yet, identify heterosexually, he progress immediately from “I am a man and I love him,” to irrational rage towards the woman, not the man that he desires, “I am a man and I hate her.” Following this example, Mr. Darcy relays his irrational rage toward Jane through insulting her sister, Elizabeth; he states, “she is tolerable; but not handsome enough to tempt *me*; and I am in no humour…to give consequence to young ladies who are slighted by other men” (Austen 15). It is significant that he insults her appearance, calling her “tolerable,” as beauty seems to be the only commodity that the Bennet women can offer in this society. Using the word “handsome,” a term that applies to men and women alike,
serves to suggest that Mr. Darcy is not attracted to females exclusively. Through recognizing the opinions of other men, Mr. Darcy emphasizes his views pertaining to women, as well as juxtaposes his disinterest with women and his interest, and respect, for men. It is important to note that Mr. Darcy does not, yet, identify as a heterosexual, which underlines that Mr. Bingley is not the first man with whom he has experienced reciprocal homosexual desire.

Through his complicated history with Mr. Darcy, Mr. Wickham serves as a second example of Mr. Darcy’s queer attachments that pave the way to the obligatory heterosexuality of both characters as the novel progresses. Mr. Wickham essentially becomes Mr. Darcy’s nemesis; they appear to be fundamentally different, as “one has got all the goodness, and the other all the appearance of it” (Austen 194). However, they are mirror images of one another, containing similarities that revolve around the paranoia and jealousy that stem from their queer attachments. Describing his initial relationship with Mr. Darcy, Mr. Wickham states, “The greatest part of our youth was passed together; inmates of the same house, sharing the same amusements” (Austen 78). This direct statement of male-male intimacy provides a basis for their intimate relationship. Mr. Wickham signals his attachment to Mr. Darcy through the phrase “sharing the same amusements.” The word “sharing” emphasizes a bond, a certain intimacy of shared resources, a certain affinity and understanding for the other’s perspective. Their activities are presented as those that were shared, that they could not, or had rather not, do alone. Through describing these activities shared with Mr. Darcy ambiguously, using the term “amusements,” Mr. Wickham refuses to define them. The very term “amusements” implies leisure, a strain of activity that cannot be rendered useful or necessary, and as
such, the very queering of the social relation. These amusements may or may not have been sexual; they most certainly were “shared” queer acts of pleasure. As we will see in Chapter Three, Austen’s subtle reference to homosexuality within the realm of domesticity would not have been uncommon, for young men in Regency England often formed erotic attachments to one another in the realm of domesticity, away from the pressures of the marriage market. Mr. Wickham’s description of childhood hints at oppression as he describes them as “inmates,” and although this was a common term used in the early nineteenth-century to refer to domestic settings—think of Coleridge’s “Frost at Midnight”—it may also imply that they were prisoners of a compulsory heteronormative society that demanded such intimacies to be kept in the private, domestic, realm. Lauren Berlant and Michael Warner’s article “Sex in Public” argues that “[heteronormative culture’s] conventional spaces presuppose a structural differentiation of ‘personal life’ from work, politics, and the public sphere” (Berlant and Warner 553). Mr. Wickham seems to recognize this, as his description of “inmates of the same house,” appears to insist on a realm of intimate domesticity that cannot venture into the public sphere. It is due to this rift between the public and private realms that concealment becomes necessary. In order for both men to actively participate in public society, they must conceal their queer attachment from scrutiny. However, Mr. Darcy and Mr. Wickham’s queer attachment was only strengthened by the feelings of necessary concealment; by using the language of secrecy, Austen suggests that both men felt as if they had to conceal their true identity and sexual nature. In essence, the camaraderie and intimacy between Mr. Darcy and Mr. Wickham was built upon the idea of concealing an attachment that society deemed unacceptable.
Berlant and Warner delve into the question as to why homosexuality seems to be exiled into the private realm, stating, “national heterosexuality is the mechanism by which a core national culture can be imagined as a sanitized space of sentimental feeling and immaculate behavior, a space of pure citizenship” (Berlant and Warner 549). In view of this fact, it makes sense that *Pride and Prejudice* was written during a century obsessed with purity and sanitization. In her book, *Imperial Leather: Race, Gender, and Sexuality in the Colonial Contest*, Anne McClintock analyzes the motivation behind the nineteenth century fetishism of cleanliness. She is interested in the way that soap and soap ads represent and analyze issues of nineteenth century race and imperial progress. However, it is necessary to extend McClintock’s analysis to other aspects of the nineteenth century that were considered vulgar and unclean. McClintock’s analysis seems to forget sexuality, something that I believe cannot be divorced from race or social politics. McClintock mentions an ad where a “black boy sits in the bath” and “a white boy bends over his ‘lesser’ brother, bestowing upon him” soap, describing the soap as “the commodity [that] can wash from the skin the very stigma of racial and class degeneration” (McClintock 214). Again, I believe that this can be applied to the idea of sexuality, specifically homosexuality. Similar to having colored skin, homosexuality was seen as unclean, vulgar, and unacceptable. *Pride and Prejudice* acknowledges this through Elizabeth, who states, “Mr. Darcy may perhaps have heard of such a place as Gracechurch Street, but he would hardly think a month’s ablution enough to cleanse him from its impurities, were he once to enter it; and depend upon it, Mr. Bingley never stirs without him” (Austen 126). Elizabeth inadvertently juxtaposes Mr. Darcy’s conformity to society’s public demands of cleanliness to his private, queer attachment to Mr. Bingley.
Through saying “and depend upon it, Mr. Bingley never stirs without him,” Elizabeth is not only noting that the men are friends, but through her use of humor, she is also implying that there is something unnatural about their friendship; she highlights that they may be too attached. It seems as though Mr. Darcy conforms to society’s public demands of cleanliness almost excessively, asking us to consider the notion that he is compensating for privately participating in what his society deems vulgar and unclean.

Andrew Elfenbein notes that “arrests for sodomy rose dramatically at the end of the eighteenth century and the beginning of the nineteenth,” inferring that homosexuality pollutes what Berlant and Warner describe as “a space of pure citizenship.” Elfenbein states that “the admired behavior of the man of feeling … was only a hair’s breadth away from the most despised behavior of the sodomite” (Elfenbein 27). The heteronormative society in which Mr. Darcy participates dictates that homosexuality must be kept away and excluded from the public society. Berlant and Warner’s idea of national heterosexuality dictates that homosexuality is fundamentally wrong and must be kept in the private realm; this societal attitude propagates not only shame, but also the logic of closed homosexuality.

*Pride and Prejudice* encourages its readers to think in terms of secrets, as both Mr. Darcy and Mr. Wickham exemplify the logic of closed homosexuality. This logic is made clear when Elizabeth states that Mr. Darcy should be “publically disgraced” due to his malice toward Mr. Wickham, who replies, “Some time or other he will be –but it shall not be by me… I can never defy or expose him” (Austen 77). Although in this moment Elizabeth believes that they are discussing Mr. Darcy’s attitude, it becomes obvious that Mr. Wickham is discussing an entirely different subject, one that would be more
damaging to one’s participation in society if it was “exposed.” Through using the word “expose,” Mr. Wickham implies that Mr. Darcy is vulnerable, that he has a dirty secret. However, it can also be inferred that Mr. Darcy’s secret includes Mr. Wickham, who refuses to expose Mr. Darcy, even though it appears as though he has nothing to gain by keeping Mr. Darcy’s secret. This moment serves to not only stress the vulnerability of bonds built upon secrecy, but also to reiterate the idea that homosexuality could not be brought into the public realm; it must always stay in the realm of domesticity and secrets.

Again, the idea of secrecy propels the plot of *Pride and Prejudice*. Mr. Darcy and Mr. Bingley must keep their reciprocal desire hidden in order to participate within their society. Thus, at the ball, Mr. Bingley essentially denies his homosexuality, which inspires Mr. Darcy’s irrational jealousy. Without this irrational jealousy pertaining to Mr. Bingley’s attention towards Jane, Mr. Darcy probably would not have been provoked to insulting Jane’s sister, Elizabeth. This insult later issues Elizabeth the ability to ignore Mr. Darcy, which in turn, sparks his romantic interest. Elizabeth is not actively pursuing him and his ten thousand dollars a year, as the stereotypical female would, which allows Mr. Darcy to see the potential of finding a proverbial man within a woman. In fact, Elizabeth “felt that she had no business at Pemberley, and was obliged to assume a disinclination for seeing it…. [and] must own that she was tired of great houses” (Austen 207). In this way, Elizabeth rejects traditional Regency courtship, as she refuses to chase an economy of intimacies and replaces a feminine desire for money with a masculine discomfort. Elizabeth’s masculinity, prompted by Mr. Darcy’s rudeness at the ball, gives Mr. Darcy the ability to see himself in a potentially successful heteronormative relationship. Mr. Darcy realizes that through pursuing a relationship with Elizabeth, a
masculine woman, he is not altogether conforming to Regency society’s rules; after all, Austen routinely emphasizes that Elizabeth’s masculinity and the fact that Mr. Darcy appreciates it. For instance, Elizabeth disregards prescribed normative behavior by walking alone “with weary ankles, dirty stockings, and a face glowing with the warmth of exercise” to visit Jane at Mr. Bingley’s residence (Austen 35). Mr. Darcy, “divided between admiration of the brilliancy which exercise had given to [Elizabeth’s] complexion and doubt as to the occasion’s justifying her coming so far alone,” demonstrates that at this point in the novel he is just discovering that Elizabeth challenges strict female proprieties as well as the fact that he values her doing so (Austen 36). However, their heterosexual relationship is still abnormal, as Elfenbein notes that “even as [novels of this time period] made mental energy a heroine’s most attractive quality, they forced her to lose it in order to become a suitable wife” (Elfenbein 26). Within *Pride and Prejudice*, Mr. Darcy encourages Elizabeth’s “mental energy,” because it is what allows their relationship to succeed.

Elvira Casal also analyzes the dynamics of Mr. Darcy and Elizabeth’s heterosexual relationship. Her article, “Laughing at Mr. Darcy: Wit and Sexuality in *Pride and Prejudice,*” follows Mr. Darcy’s transition from conforming to societal rules to rejecting them through close attention to his expressions of humor. Casal argues that this change in character is spurred on by Darcy’s gradual attraction to Elizabeth. She notes, “We never see Darcy laugh, but his smiles—which usually take place in the course of his exchanges with Elizabeth—suggest…a growing receptivity to Elizabeth’s love of laughter” (Casal 4). Although Casal’s article shows how Elizabeth’s laughter pervades societal stereotypes and expectations, as laughter “in either men or woman [was] vulgar,”
it fails to make the extra step of considering that the reason for Mr. Darcy’s change in personality may be due to his rejection of queer attachments as he gradually engages in a heteronormative relationship (Casal 2). Through conforming to Regency society’s expectations, Mr. Darcy must reject the idea of laughter and link it to “irreverence towards authority and lack of proper self-control” (Casal 2). This, argues Casal, is the source of Mr. Darcy’s famously stoic, almost humorless character throughout the majority of *Pride and Prejudice*. It is significant, however, that he proves his tenderness precisely through private acts that fashion sex publicly, especially in arranging for the legitimate marriage of Lydia and Mr. Wickham. However, as he gradually becomes more intimate with Elizabeth, and participates in a heterosexual and a socially sanctioned relationship, Mr. Darcy gains the ability to reject some of society’s conventions in public. Mr. Darcy’s smiles, which Casal notes happen mostly in the proximity of Elizabeth, serve to demonstrate his rebellion against normative, prescribed behavior. It is important to note that Mr. Darcy rebels against society mostly when he is with Elizabeth. She personifies his heteronormative relationship and therefore his ability to break conventions in public because he is erotically conforming to them. In this way, Mr. Darcy allows himself more “unguarded moments” as he begins to identify as a heterosexual—that is, he no longer must actively attempt to hide his emotions so thoroughly. By no longer needing to rely upon the logic of closeted homosexuality and language of secrecy, Mr. Darcy welcomes more public scrutiny through participating in the subversive behavior of smiling and laughing with Elizabeth.

If Mr. Darcy and Mr. Bingley had not felt homoerotic feelings for one another, Mr. Darcy would not have been upset at the ball, and Elizabeth may have found him
pleasant to be around and allowed herself to smile and flirt; if Elizabeth had smiled and flirted, Mr. Darcy would have despised her for it and would have never thought of her again. He would have remained stoic and unsmiling in public, as he would find it necessary to conform to societal rules publically in order to break them privately. Instead, as a result of queer attachment, both Mr. Darcy and Mr. Bingley are happily married by the end of *Pride and Prejudice*. Underlining the idea that homosexual attachments lay the very foundations for heteronormative relationships, Austen redefines what should be accepted, and considered normal, within Regency society.

Through the redefinition of desire, Austen also redefines herself. Known as a writer of distinctly heteronormative novels, the discovery of plot-driving homosexual desire encourages the idea that Austen belongs to a category within Romanticism. It also promotes the progressive idea that society should accept homosexuality. Austen questions the idea that heterosexuality is normal, as well as reinvents the idea of attraction. Although each couple in her novel ends up in a successful heteronormative relationship, she suggests that the only reason these marriages occurred was because of the homoerotic attachments that also took place. Through Mr. Bingley and Mr. Darcy, Austen essentially carves a space for homosexual desire within the heteronormative world, perhaps making a statement that homosexuality is more common than her society would believe. The pre-requisite for a successful heteronormative relationship is a homoerotic attachment; because of this, the supposedly heteronormative novel *Pride and Prejudice* is also fundamentally queer.
CHAPTER THREE

QUEER EYE FOR THE AUSTENITE: PERSUASION AND ILLNESS

Jane Austen had been writing *Persuasion* for eight months when she became scared that her novel would fail to earn money. She wrote to a friend, stating, “I may never succeed again” (Fergus 26). Through this expression of fear, Austen reveals a traditional feminine sense of inadequacy paired with an untraditional product, as she chooses to actively undermine normative patriarchal ideologies through her writing. Famous for being Jane Austen’s last completed novel, *Persuasion* revolves around an issue that Austen was deeply concerned with during the time in which it was written: illness. Ill health not only prevented Austen from publishing *Persuasion* before her death in 1817, but it also kept her from finishing *Sandition*. Nevertheless, Austen’s final completed novel reflects her thoughts regarding nursing and the formation of successful heteronormative relationships, as *Persuasion*’s plot relies upon the intimate same-sex relationships between nurse and patient forged within the realm of illness. In doing so, Austen constructs a new model of eroticism, pairing illness and sexuality, and asks her readers to reconsider what it means to nurse and be nursed.

Although the relation of helper figures such as Captain Benwick and Dick Musgrove to erotic themes has often been overlooked by scholars and although these figures maintain a subordinate role within the narrative of Austen’s novel, *Persuasion*’s plot is furthered by the familial connections and knowledge that each helper figure provides. Steven Cohan contextualizes and defines the helper figure within his article, “Queer Eye For The Straight Guise,” as he showcases how helper figure operates using
“male-male tutelage [to]… perpetuate the protocols of civil masculinity” (Cohan 180). Cohan’s helper figures therefore serve “the needs of a domesticated heteronormativity” while maintaining a subordinate role within the narrative. Within *Persuasion*, Austen’s male romantic interest, Wentworth, must draw upon his same-sex intimacies with helper figures to learn how to adapt to heteronormative relationships as he studies how to love and care for others. Simultaneously, while Anne is accustomed to caring for others, she remains uncomfortable deviating from normative, socially sanctioned feminine behavior. *Persuasion* maps Anne’s evolution from being incapable of action to a female figure that is comfortable with power and masculine attributes through her experiences within the realm of illness. In this way, while it targets men and women differently, Austen’s social commentary regarding illness remains the same. While for Wentworth, the realm of illness, equipped with helper figures, first disrupts heteronormativity by way of same-sex intimacies and then restores and cultivates it, it is Anne’s role as a nurse which allows her to learn the masculine behavior that Wentworth admires, emphasizing the notion I previously mentioned in Chapter One, that the success of heteronormative erotic relationships is built and premised upon a heteronormativity that is itself hatched from homosexual desire. Therefore, despite the fact that Cohan analyzes the dynamics of Bravo’s hit television show, *Queer Eye For The Straight Guy*, where the helper figures are, in fact, five gay men whose primary objective “is to teach the straight guy how to satisfy the emotional and domestic needs of a present or potential female partner,” helper figures within *Persuasion* maintain a similar goal: preparing members of the same sex for heterosexual relationships (Cohan 176).
Written in 1817, *Persuasion* doesn’t seem to be a likely contender to be linked with *Queer Eye For The Straight Guy*. However, the progressive hit television show and Austen’s famous novel share concerns regarding how to navigate the expectations and requirements needed to participate in a relationship with a member of the opposite sex. *Queer Eye For The Straight Guy* relegates its study strictly to the male gender as these men learn to adapt to and domesticate themselves for their present or future female partners. In his analysis of the helper figure, Cohan asserts that “*Queer Eye* concentrates on ‘the pleasures of companionship’ between straight guys and their gay cohorts, relegating women to “a shadow presence on the show” (Cohan 181). Though *Persuasion* does not seemingly differentiate between “straight guys and their gay cohorts,” it maintains the same structure as Bravo’s hit television series. Wentworth, with the aid of same-sex helper figures, must learn to adapt to heteronormative relationships that culminate in marriage by spending time alone with other men without the presence of women. In each instance, helper figures assist in the process of negotiating what it means to love and what one must sacrifice and learn to be capable of loving in the realm of heteronormativity. However, while *Queer Eye For The Straight Guy* uses gay helper figures to tame the hygiene and fashion choices of heterosexual men in an effort to support heteronormativity, rendering helper figures asexual, *Persuasion*’s helper figures are eroticized by way of their relationship with Wentworth, as they first have an intimacy with him and only later facilitate, either inadvertently or directly, his heteronormative success.

Consider, for instance, the way in which Admiral Croft responds to Wentworth’s claim that he will never allow a woman to live on one of his naval vessels. The Admiral,
spending time away from the sea due to his battle with gout, states, “When he has got a wife, he will sing a different tune. When he is married, … we shall see him do as you and I, and a great many others have done. We shall have him very thankful to anybody that will bring him his wife” (Austen 66). Using the phrase “when he has got a wife,” Admiral Croft first speaks in terms of possession and quickly rephrases, saying, “when he is married.” In this way, Admiral Croft highlights a dichotomy of consciousness between unmarried and married men, emphasizing a distinct shift in paradigms and an opportunity for helper figures to operate. Admiral Croft claims that while unmarried men remain uncomfortable with women onboard their naval vessels, as they disrupt a distinctly masculine sphere, there is a certain kind of urgency that married men feel when their wives are not present and they would be “very thankful” to anyone who would bring their wives to them. Through this admission of gratitude, Admiral Croft implies a level of discomfort at the thought of participating within a liminal space outside the realm of heteronormativity. This is a space in which women are generally excluded, which Admiral Croft voices to Anne later in the novel, telling her, “Take my arm; that’s right; I do not feel comfortable if I have not a woman there” (Austen 160).

The Admiral’s admission of discomfort suggests a progressive notion that homophobia and the need to protect heterosexual identities are learned behaviors that accompany those participating in heteronormative acts of marriage. Cohan’s analysis of *Queer Eye For The Straight Guy* engages this notion of women serving as mediators between men as well as protectors of male heterosexuality, as he argues, “A female’s main function is to nod approval at what [the helper figures]… have achieved for her” (Cohan 181). Women are responsible for promoting male interactions within the private,
domestic sphere in a way that makes them socially appropriate and not inherently queer. However, as Admiral Croft points out, men within *Persuasion* do not know that they need women as mediators to protect their sexual identities until they enter into matrimony. It is helpful here to consider Gayle Rubin's description of marriage as a patriarchal kinship system established to propagate relationships between men. Rubin argues, “if it is women who are being transacted, then it is the men who give and take them who are linked, the women being a conduit of a relationship rather than a partner to it” (Rubin 92). Despite a dichotomy of thought, one notion is distinctly solidified: within the practice of marriage, patriarchal society is furthered by males maintaining relationships with other men. Therefore, while Admiral Croft situates himself and Wentworth as men with opposing viewpoints regarding women, he simultaneously characterizes what it means to be married within Regency England.

Within the nineteenth century, the notion of love was often excluded from marriage and was replaced with the idea of gain; for women, marriage entailed independence from a father figure, whereas men gained a dowry and the ability to extend their familial legacy and fulfill heteronormative society’s expectations regarding procreation. Within their article, “Hierarchies of Choice: The Social Construction of Rank in Jane Austen,” Richard Handler and Daniel A. Segal explain that, for women, “the relative independence of [being] a wife, as ‘mistress of a family,’ is the highest situation that a woman can aspire to, for …women have no means, other than marriage, to establish themselves” (Handler and Segal 694). Marriage was therefore a social transaction rather than an emotional act that prescribed “relative independence” for women and ownership for men, emphasizing patriarchal heteronormative society’s need
to undermine and neutralize women by situating them within the private realm of domesticity. Thus, while Regency society pressured women into matrimony with promises of independence and social mobility, men entered into marriage as a means to procreate and fulfill their familial obligations and responsibilities.

Richard Sha’s book, *Perverse Romanticism*, situates and historicizes the Romantic ideology regarding procreation, explaining a shift in a perceived eroticism that wedded “functionlessness to pathology,” an eroticism which stressed that heteronormative sex was only sex for the means of procreating, to an eroticism linked with liberation and subversive ideals (Sha 52). Romantics like Byron, Blake, the Shelleys, and Wollstonecraft organized “their emancipatory politics around the axis of sexuality,” encouraging their peers to view sex without regard to function as a form of liberated equality (Sha 17). In this way, while labels of homosexual and heterosexual were not yet in place, Regency England recognized normative and non-normative sexual practices. Although Austen does not engage issues of deviant sexual acts as directly as Percy Shelley, who—as I pointed out in my introduction—“aligned same-sex desire with a natural rite of passage... [and] helped universalize homosexual desire,” *Persuasion*’s portrayals of deviant, subversive acts within the realm of illness suggest that Austen agreed with Shelley and, however subtly, supported and furthered the progressive idea of homosexuality as a universal state (Sha 140).

Using helper figures such as Captain Benwick and Dick Musgrove, Austen propagates notions of deviant intimacies by carving space within the realm of illness for desire. While scholars, such as John Wiltshire, argue that nurse figures are divorced from desire, despite their intimate knowledge of the body, I contend that Austen’s portrayals of
nursing with same-sex patient helper figures are not only depicted as erotic, but also as sexually deviant. Wiltshire notes that within the literature of Austen’s era, “it is as if there were a necessary relationship between femaleness and nursing, as if true womanliness were expressed in devotion to the well being of others, whether children or ailing adults” (Wiltshire 167). While this normative definition of the nursing figure is certainly applicable to Anne, it becomes problematic when applied to Wentworth. Though Wiltshire acknowledges Wentworth’s role as a nurse and implies that it is through the act of nursing that Wentworth learns to be compassionate and how to love, he overlooks the possibility of deviant intimacies between the helper figures and those who nurse them. Wentworth’s role as a nurse is particularly significant because, as Anne remarks to her sister, “Nursing does not belong to a man, it is not his province” (Austen 54). Through separating men from the act of nursing, Anne and Austen both emphasize that it is unusual for men to act as nurses, especially as nurses to other men, and that it is a deviance from the normative figure of a nurse that resides in patriarchal ideologies regarding femininity. However, even more notable than the idea of male nursing as abnormal and yet distinctly present within *Persuasion* is the fact that Wentworth nurses two different men, and, in both cases, each instance of nursing culminates in a marriage.

Austen differentiates between the detailed account of Anne nursing her nephew after he dislocates his collarbone and Wentworth’s two acts of nursing by way of eroticized representation. Not only is Anne’s act of nursing public, for we are able to witness it as readers, but there is nothing erotic regarding her motivation for helping her nephew; Anne conforms to Wiltshire’s normative representation of the female nursing figure as she disengages and purposely avoids her erotic interest. After all, Anne uses her
role as her nephew’s nurse as a means to avoid seeing Wentworth for the first time since their broken engagement. However, Austen refuses to depict instances of male nursing with the detail she uses to describe other normative representations of female nurse figures, relying upon other, minor, characters to relay the information that such instances of intimacy actually occurred. Anne’s narration within a conversation with Louisa Musgrove reveals that Wentworth is to be welcomed into the vicinity of Uppercross by the Musgrove family, “in their warm gratitude, for the kindness he had shewn poor Dick, and very high respect for his character, stamped as it was by poor Dick’s having been six months under his care, and well mentioning him in strong… praise as a fine dashing fellow” (Austen 49-50). In this way, we are not only unable to view the letters from Dick Musgrove, but we are also unable to hear about them from a reliable source who had actually read them; the information that Anne, and subsequently Austen’s readers, receive is triangulated through Louisa. Austen uses this instance to underline that Wentworth nursed Dick Musgrove for six months, emphasizing that this was a long time by noting the respect garnered by Wentworth from Dick Musgrove’s family for taking care of him for six whole months. However, as we saw with the relationship between Mr. Darcy and Mr. Bingley in Chapter One, it is what Austen does not say that highlights the erotic intimacy between Dick Musgrove and Wentworth formed within this private realm of illness sequestered from heteronormativity.

Austen refuses to describe Wentworth’s role as another man’s nurse while simultaneously needing his relationship with a helper figure to propel the plot of *Persuasion*. Through depicting the necessity of Dick Musgrove’s familial connections to Wentworth’s heteronormative success, Austen emphasizes the importance of these
crucial six months in which Wentworth was a nursing figure, although she never reveals why. Within his book *The Novel and the Police*, D.A. Miller engages the notion of open secrets, arguing that even while one attempts to keep a secret, the secret is always revealed despite private intentions and personal shame or embarrassment. Using his own seduction by *David Copperfield* as an example, Miller analyzes the nature of the words and ideas that people mean but never say aloud, asserting, “though I conceal the details of this seduction, they would not be very difficult to surmise… for I have had to intimate my secret, if only *not to tell it*; and conversely, in theatrically continuing to keep my secret, I have already rather *given it away*” (Miller 194). Miller contextualizes his theory of open secrets by demonstrating how they function to mask homosexuality within *David Copperfield*. Describing David’s relationship with Steerforth, in “Steerforth’s bedroom, to which David belongs,” he states, “Here again a powerful affect is evoked, but evacuated of any substantial content… so eloquently here does the love that dare not speak its name speak its metonyms (the ‘whispering and listening half undressed,’ and so on)” (Miller 198). Therefore, through attempting to mask homosexual intimacies with coded metonyms, Dickens reveals his secret and instead emphasizes the well known but never vocally acknowledged fact that boys placed in boarding school together often had homosexual experiences. Just as Dickens’ readers must have been aware that boys often had homosexual intimacies at school, a realm of domestic privacy in which female erotic possibilities were excluded, Austen’s readers would have been aware that sailors often had homosexual relationships while at sea.

Though Austen, like Dickens, uses metonyms to represent “the love that dare not speak its name,” she supplements them with bawdy humor, blatantly revealing open
secrets. Austen’s third novel, *Mansfield Park*, uses Mary Crawford to comment upon the intimacies of naval officers; because *Mansfield Park* was written before *Persuasion*, Austen’s commentary regarding naval officers would have been directly applicable to Captain Wentworth’s experience. Describing how life at “home at my uncle’s [made me] acquainted with a circle of admirals,” Mary then jokes that, “of *Rears* and *Vices*, I saw enough. Now, do not be suspecting me of a pun, I entreat” (Austen *MP* 60). Within her book, *Austen’s Unbecoming Conjunctions: Subversive Laughter, Embodied History*, Jill Heydt-Stevenson analyzes this crucial scene, stating, “[Mary] refers to more than her boredom with the ‘bickerings and jealousies’ of naval politics and ambition; that would not involve a *double entendre*, and her pun, as her false demurral emphasizes, establishes her point. That pun points directly to sodomy in the navy” (Heydt-Stevenson 138).

Interestingly, Mary does not insinuate that specific characters have engaged in such behavior and rather comments upon homosexuality within the navy as a whole. It is through this broad commentary that Austen invites her contemporaries to think about deviant and taboo notions, undermining socially sanctioned material while simultaneously writing a normative love story that ends with marriage for every eligible woman. After all, homosexuality was still punishable as a criminal act, as it had been punishable by death since 1563 and only altered after 1885. Austen’s open secret of homosexuality within her portrayals of naval officers is revealed similarly to that of Dickens’ portrayal of David and Steerforth’s erotic intimacy and further contextualizes the portrayal of Wentworth’s relationships with other men. In *Persuasion*, we must note that Austen intimates her secret, that the realm of illness creates a space for deviance, in
the form of homosexual intimacies or subversive gender roles, without ever expressing it directly.

In this way, although it isn’t directly stated within *Persuasion* that Wentworth and Dick Musgrove had an intimate, homosexual relationship, we must view it as possible. Anne insinuates as much when she contemplates the unusual marriage of Captain Benwick to Louisa Musgrove near the end of the novel. She states:

Where could have been the attraction? The answer soon presented itself. It has been in situation. They had been thrown together several weeks; they had been living in the same small family party; since Henrietta’s coming away, they must have been depending almost entirely on each other, and Louisa, just recovering from illness, had been in an interesting state, and Captain Benwick was not inconsolable. (Austen 157)

Blaming the situation in which the nurse and patient were living, referencing the “same small family party” and the fact that they had to “depend almost entirely on each other,” Austen directly analyzes how attraction and intimacies form within the realm of illness. However, by heterosexualizing a model of eroticized illness, Austen allows herself to partially vocalize her open secret while implying the unwritten, simultaneously allowing this model of eroticism to be able to be applied to deviant same-sex intimacies. Therefore, because Dick Musgrove remained in Wentworth’s care for six months, living in close quarters on the Laconia and depending upon one another for care and mutual support, we can assume that his intimacy with Wentworth can be attributed to the same factor that drove Louisa and Captain Benwick together, a situation located within the erotic realm of illness and nursing.
However, while heteronormative and deviant intimacies are both included within Austen’s model of desire within the realm of illness, Austen continuously differentiates between normative representations of female nurses and Wentworth, as he is the only representation of male nursing within *Persuasion*. Similar to how Louisa recalls the way Wentworth nursed her brother, Dick Musgrove, it becomes Captain Harville’s responsibility to tell Anne and Austen’s readers how Wentworth saved his would-be brother-in-law, Captain Benwick, through an act of emotional nursing. This act of emotional nursing, juxtaposed with Wentworth’s nursing of Dick Musgrove’s physical sickness, is a more intimate act between nurse and patient, which, keeping in mind Austen’s open secret of deviant same-sex relationships, suggests a clear depiction of a homosexual relationship between Wentworth and Captain Benwick. Captain Harville, pointing to Wentworth, states, “Nobody could do it but that good fellow…[he] traveled night and day… and never left the poor fellow for a week… nobody else could have saved poor James. You may think, Miss Elliot, whether he is dear to us” (Austen 104). Operating in the same realm of familial gratitude as the Musgroves, Captain Harville, who has maintained the responsibility of Captain Benwick, describes the lengths Wentworth traveled in order to reach Captain Benwick and “save him” through the act of nursing him through his emotional grief regarding the loss of his fiancé. Emphasizing their close proximity, Captain Harville notes that Wentworth “never left the poor fellow for a week,” and implies their intimacy by claiming that “nobody else could have saved poor James”; this not only differentiates Wentworth from the other people in Captain Benwick’s life, but it also asks us to view them as a pair. In this way, Austen’s model of eroticized illness suggests a pattern pertaining to Wentworth’s same-sex intimacies with
men, where Wentworth’s nursing of both Captain Benwick and Dick Musgrove must be perceived as erotic opportunities. This moment also contextualizes Wentworth’s homosexual relationship with Captain Benwick, who, in his role as a helper figure, disrupts heteronormative society through his intimacy with Wentworth, and later restores and repairs it by not only returning to the public through his marriage to Louisa, but he also furthers *Persuasion*’s plot by assuming Wentworth’s place as Louisa’s husband, freeing him and allowing him to pursue the one woman who, as readers, we’re led to believe could make him happy and keep him engaged within a heteronormative relationship: Anne.

Interestingly, as Austen’s model of eroticism within the realm of illness carves a space for deviant intimacies between Wentworth and other men, it simultaneously allows Anne to transcend patriarchal notions of femininity, gaining what Regency society deems masculine attributes within her process of nursing. Juxtaposing Anne with characters such as Nurse Rooke, who is not only defined by her career, but has it as her only function and role within *Persuasion*, Austen uses Anne’s nursing as a means to differentiate her from other female figures within the novel and it continues to redefine what it means to nurse. Published in 1797, Thomas Gisborne’s *An Enquiry into the Duties of the Female Sex* proposes that the “unassuming and virtuous activity” of femininity is developed “in contributing daily and hourly to the comfort of husbands, of brothers, of sisters, and of other relations, connections and friends in the intercourse of domestic life, under every vicissitude of sickness and health” (Gisborne 11-12). Gisborne’s explanation of feminine expectations situates Austen’s portrayal of Anne as a nursing figure within Regency England, as Austen would have read *An Enquiry into the*
Duties of the Female Sex, but more importantly, it emphasizes how Anne continuously undermines patriarchal society’s nursing archetype.

While staying with her brother-in-law, Charles Musgrove, and her sister, Mary, Anne listens to each of them voice a direct complaint to her regarding illness; “I wish you could persuade Mary not to be always fancying herself ill, was Charles’ language” while Mary asserts, “I do believe if Charles were to see me dying, he would not think there was anything the matter with me. I am sure, Anne, if you would, you might persuade him that I am very ill—a great deal worse than I ever own” (Austen 42). Through the act of situating Anne as an authority on illness and portrayals of those that are ill, Charles and Mary both define Anne as a figure of power. Charles’ appeal to Anne is more interesting than that of Mary, as Mary is a woman within Regency England and is therefore expected to passively ask others to act for her. Instead of situating himself as an active figure, Charles maintains a more passive role as he applies to Anne for action. Emphasizing this shift in power, Austen includes the phrase “Charles’ language,” asking us to further analyze the dynamics of his proposal. Through stating, “I wish you could persuade Mary,” Charles essentially asks Anne to actively alter his wife’s identity and therefore his marriage to her. Certainly, Charles is frustrated with his wife who is always claiming to be ill, but more importantly, by asking Anne for help, he implies that she is the only person capable of helping. Within her narration, Anne both shows understanding of Charles’ frustration and recognizes that he views her as the only person who can help, as she was “known to have some influence with her sister [and] she was continually requested, or at least receiving hints to exert it, beyond what was practicable” (Austen 42). However, despite Regency society’s expectations regarding her role as a nursing
figure who is responsible for contributing hourly to the comfort of her brothers and sisters as well as responding to Mary and Charles’ appeals for help, Anne refuses to address either issue and references her new power as “one of the least agreeable circumstances of her residence [in Uppercross]” (Austen 42). It is Anne’s refusal to act that not only undermines Gisborne’s explanation of societal expectations of femininity, for Anne does nothing to help Charles and Mary, but it also highlights that Anne is not yet worthy of Wentworth’s affections. In this way, Austen emphasizes and gauges Anne’s growth as a character through her ability to be comfortable with becoming a more powerful and active figure through the realm of illness. At the same time, Austen implies that Anne will only be able to receive Wentworth’s affections after she becomes comfortable with power, and, within Regency England, the masculinity it implies.

Although *Persuasion* begins with Anne’s state of discomfort regarding taking a more active, and therefore masculine, role, for Anne remains passive despite the opportunity presented within Uppercross, Austen provides another opportunity for Anne to redeem herself through Louisa’s accident. Immediately before Louisa’s accident, Captain Harville teaches Anne what it means to be heroic and admired through his portrayal of Wentworth’s role as Captain Benwick’s nurse. This scene is particularly significant because the role of the nurse within *Persuasion* is constantly renegotiated; the nursing figure is not rooted to a gender nor a social class, as neither Anne nor Wentworth are career nurses like Nurse Rooke. It is through this renegotiation of what it means to nurse that Austen implies that Anne is inspired by Captain Harville’s description of Wentworth as a nurse. After all, Wentworth is described as masculine and heroic, inspiring the gratitude of both the Musgrove family and Captain Harville. Wiltshire
analyzes Captain Harville’s rendition of Wentworth’s nursing of Captain Benwick, stating, “Harville’s tribute has the narrative function of displaying Wentworth as a courageous and enterprising as well as sympathetic man just before the incident which is to present him as very nearly inadequate or impotent, as he faces a crisis of a more complicated sort” (Wiltshire 171). Austen therefore uses Captain Harville to portray Wentworth at his most masculine and heroic, as “nobody else could have saved poor James,” as a means to reflect Anne’s subversive role, for she takes on what Captain Harville has depicted as masculine and heroic attributes when she comes to Wentworth’s aid. In this way, illness within *Persuasion* operates as a means to promote homosexual desire and subversive gender roles, encouraging Anne’s progression from a feminine character that is uncomfortable with taking action to a character who is anatomically female but takes on masculine attributes.

Within her book, *Undoing Gender*, Judith Butler questions the traditional notions of male and female identity while arguing that gender is based upon performance rather than anatomy. She defines gender by stating that it is not “what one ‘is’ nor is it precisely what one ‘has.’ Gender is the apparatus by which the production… of masculine and feminine take place along with the interstitial forms of hormonal, chromosomal, psychic, and performative that gender assumes” (Butler 42). In light of Butler’s theory of performative gender, Louisa’s accident serves to not only depict a feminine weakness within Wentworth, who, despite his bravery and utility regarding his role as a nurse for other men, cannot act to save Louisa, but it also serves to emphasize a masculinity within Anne’s role as a nurse, a masculinity which Anne is finally comfortable accepting. The first words that “burst from Captain Wentworth in a tone of despair, … as if all his own
strength were gone” were, “is there no one to help me?” (Austen 105). Anne draws upon Captain Harville’s explanation of what it means to be courageous, enterprising, and sympathetic as a man, and presents herself as not only a nursing figure, but also a figure of masculine power. This moment not only exemplifies Anne’s growth as a character, but it proves that she has earned Wentworth’s affection. Wiltshire states that although it’s apparent that every character within Persuasion values Anne in her capacity as a nurse, Wentworth’s love is “awakened” for Anne in this specific instance of nursing Louisa (Wiltshire 173).

Similar to the discrepancies regarding the lack of first-hand portrayals of Wentworth’s nursing of other men, this instant with Louisa is the first time Wentworth physically sees Anne as a nurse. When deciding the members of their party that will stay in Lyme with Louisa, Wentworth, “speaking with a glow, and yet a gentleness, which seemed almost restoring the past,” addresses Anne, stating, “You will stay, I am sure; you will stay and nurse her” (Austen 109). Not only is this the first instance within Persuasion where it begins to appear possible that Anne and Wentworth could restore their relationship, but this moment occurs as a direct result of Anne’s subversive role as a masculine nursing figure.

The realm of illness within Persuasion provides Austen’s characters a space to not only form deviant homosexual intimacies between male characters and their same sex helper figures, but it also propagates subversive female gender roles. These subversive gender roles allow Anne to outwardly display masculine attributes that rekindle Wentworth’s affection. In this way, Austen comments upon Percy Shelley’s notion of homosexuality as a universal state and furthers it by demonstrating how heteronormative
desire is built and premised upon same-sex erotic intimacies. Renegotiating what it means to nurse allows Austen to renegotiate gender and sexuality within Regency England. After all, Anne continuously undermines patriarchal ideologies regarding femininity while learning affection and compassion from Wentworth's same-sex erotic intimacies. However, as Austen encourages us to pair sexuality with illness, we are asked to view the realm of illness as a place of deviant possibilities and sexual liberation.
CHAPTER FOUR
EROTICIZED COLLECTION WITHIN EMMA

James Gillray’s engraving, “The great South Sea Caterpillar, transform’d into a Bath Butterfly,” depicts famous late eighteenth and early nineteenth century collector Joseph Banks as it emphasizes an eroticism attached to the act of collection (see Figure 1). Gillray captures his illustration of Banks amid his transformation from a phallic caterpillar into a beautiful, albeit a dirty and grim, butterfly. Banks hovers above a stretch of land that is filled with caterpillars, noticeably lacking other creatures or vegetation despite the variety of leaves attached to his new form. Published in 1795, Gillray’s engraving “evoked the earlier pornographic satires stemming from Banks’ sexual exploits as a botanist in the South Seas” while it targeted the scientific community, articulating “conservative fears of the dangerous political implications of philosophical experimentation” (Fara 203). In this way, Banks represents the consequences of becoming erotically involved with collected objects or specimens, as he maintains some of the foreign attributes associated with the South Seas. Gillray’s citation of The Order of the Bath contextualizes this eroticism because he blatantly references Banks’ interest in the British order of chivalry while depicting Banks as a dirty and “native” butterfly; therefore, even as Banks transforms into a chivalric Bath Butterfly, he still retains the filth of his deviant sexual acts with foreign others. Jane Austen wrote Emma in 1814, during Joseph Banks’ Presidency of the Royal Society, a gentleman’s club whose membership required only social standing and an interest in science, which furthers connection between collecting and the expression of desire because Austen would have
known of Banks’ infamous behavior. Austen uses the trope of collecting, which was familiar to her audiences through the Romantic period’s interest in exploration and science, to mask same-sex erotic intimacies in her favorite of all novels, *Emma*. These same-sex erotic intimacies emblemized by Joseph Banks not only refused Regency England’s normative sexual ideologies regarding reproductive purposefulness, but they also engaged Percy Shelley’s idea that “love makes all things equal” (Sha 51). Employing such progressive notions of gender and sexuality could have been potentially devastating to Austen’s career as a female writer of drawing room romances as well as to her reputation, which emphasizes a need for Austen’s coded eroticism.

Austen famously declared that “I am going to take a heroine whom no one but myself will much like,” and crafted Emma Woodhouse, a character that vocalizes Austen’s use of masked eroticism through blatantly linking herself to the language of collection (Marcus xxiii). Referencing a dinner party that she assembles, Emma states that there is a group of people “whom [she] found herself very frequently able to collect” (Austen 19). By admitting that she collects “frequently,” Emma identifies herself as a collector and people, specifically women, as her collected objects. Within her role as a collector, Emma subverts gender roles and exerts masculine agency through her collection of other women, echoing the behavior of explorers like Banks, who “are chiefly present as a kind of collective moving eye on which the sights/sites register” and suggest “the fantasy of dominance and appropriation… [where] the eye ‘commands’ what falls within its gaze” (Pratt 59-60). In this way, Emma covets the appearances of other women in the same manner which the imperial eye views land; while explorers produce “subsistence habitats as ‘empty’ landscapes, meaningful only in terms of a
capitalist future and of their potential,” Emma views beautiful women as unhappy and undervalued until they are defined by their relationship with her, their collector (Pratt 61). By linking Emma with the language of collecting early within her novel, Austen recognizes a need for coded rhetoric while simultaneously describing her methodology to her readers in an effort to allow her social commentary to remain intact.

Emma’s reflection about withholding information from Harriet Smith further emphasizes Austen’s coded negotiation of erotic representation. Emma states, “Seldom, very seldom does complete truth belong to any human disclosure; seldom can it happen that something is not a little disguised, or a little mistaken” (Austen 391). To be sure, this moment certainly invites readers to agree with the majority of scholars who contend that Emma’s reflection serves to exonerate her betrayal of Harriet, but, more importantly, it reveals Austen’s complexities as a female writer in Regency England. Claudia L. Johnson notes that “fiction by women must be fiction by young women—modest, delicate, wispy, delightful… and as soon as a woman has anything significant to say, she is… past her career as a novelist and a woman” (Johnson xv). Austen conforms to this patriarchal sanction for female authorship—that is, she crafts a novel that focuses upon already established themes of love, exploration, and domesticity, but, at the same time, she undermines this sanction by depicting same-sex desire, and she does this through the trope of the familiar collecting. Austen therefore augments her role as a female writer by using patriarchal constructs of femininity and female authorship as a means to mask and disguise the importance of her progressive observations.

Austen may have been masking the “truth” in Emma, but most of her readers did not see beyond the mask. Her contemporaries depicted Austen as delicate, domesticated,
and feminine and this image was further propagated by her brother, Henry. Austen’s critics insisted that she was “always the lady’ [and] had the good sense to avoid getting out of her depth,” constructing what Johnson calls “the myth of limitation” (Johnson xvi). Her readers posited that Austen was without literary or philosophic culture and was “so destitute of ideas” that she had no choice but to write about affairs within the realm of domesticity (Johnson xvi). Henry Austen began his projection of an image of Austen as a “ladylike, unmercenary, unprofessional, private, delicate, and domestic author” in 1813 and repeated his statements within the Biographical Notice printed with Northanger Abbey and Persuasion in 1818 (Fergus 12). Jan Fergus, a scholar whose work has focused upon Austen’s public image, pointedly notes that Henry Austen reflects patriarchal ideologies regarding propriety through his depiction of Jane, as Regency England would have demanded modesty, domesticity, and privacy, making authorship that entailed publicity a loss of femininity. However, she also asserts that the image Henry Austen presents of Austen conflicts with evidence found within her letters and publishing decisions which ask us to view her as professional. In essence, Fergus contends that Henry Austen’s false portrayal of his sister has “prevented subsequent readers from understanding that, for Austen, being a professional writer was ... more important to her than anything else in life” (Fergus 13). This dichotomy between the projected image of Austen as “a perfect lady” and the professional and progressive female author asks us to reconsider our preconceived notions of Austen’s famously heteronormative love stories. Veiling her progressive ideas of same-sex intimacies behind the familiar Romantic trope of collection would have not only allowed Austen to maintain her pristine public image, but it also would have allowed her to voice her
significant opinions regarding the notion that heteronormativity depends upon same-sex intimacies. By looking at the way in which Emma seemingly situates herself as a collector and those around her, and Hartfield, as her collected objects, I contend that Austen uses the act of collecting to express homosexual desire and its culminated heteronormativity.

In the second half of the eighteenth century, “the status of natural history was in no sense secure: collecting was not self-evidently scientific, and science was not self-evidently deserving of public attention,” while “curiosity, collecting, … and licentiousness were uncomfortably connected, despite the best efforts of scientists to represent their interests in terms from which passion was evacuated” (Thomas 118). As scientists tried to evacuate desire from their findings, the books and illustrations published regarding the collection of specimens introduced curiosity, collecting, and licentiousness to the public. Because “much of Europe was inaccessible to the traveler and… even the routes between major cities were fraught with danger,” explorers such as Banks and Captain James Cook carried with them cultural assumptions that included “a belief in their own superiority” (Hetherington 1). This belief in English superiority is reflected within the published accounts of these voyages, whose readers began to expect tales of difference, tales that would emphasize the advancements of English society. In this way, world voyages became performative acts in which explorers were responsible for documenting English superiority by way of detailed accounts of foreign others.

Following this tradition of performative travel narratives, Captain Cook’s second Pacific voyage arrived back in England in 1774 and provided “more tales to add to those disclosed in the published account of Cook’s first voyage, and in addition, proof as to the
accuracy of those tales” (Hetherington 1). The proof that Captain Cook carried onboard his vessel was the first Pacific Islander to reach British shores: Tetuby Homey, who would become known as Omai. Referencing Omai as scientific proof emphasizes his role as a collected object while simultaneously representing a trend in scientific collection that revolved around collecting and classifying human specimens as representations of their culture. As Stewart Hall argues, “stable cultures require things to stay in their appointed place… [while] social groups impose meaning on their world by ordering and organizing things into their classificatory systems” (Hall 236). Therefore, the classification of foreign specimens, such as Omai, solidifies a pattern of normative collection with the purpose of supporting patriarchal society and English superiority.

Austen overturns this traditional mode of collection, in which explorers such as Banks and Captain Cook obtain and catalogue foreign objects and specimens, and, instead, reconstructs it as a model of erotic desire. Rather than using collecting as a means to learn about other cultures, Emma seeks to contain her intimacies, therefore maintaining her microcosm of English culture by situating them in heteronormative marriages within a very limited proximity: within walking distance from Hartfield. David Miller described Banks as constituting a “center of calculation” where “immutable mobiles”, or collected objects, could be accumulated and correlated. In this way, although Austen differentiates Emma from Banks by way of their motivations for collecting, she draws a distinct parallel between them as they share a methodology; Hartfield is Emma’s “center of calculation.” The act of situating the objects of her erotic desire within heteronormative relationships within walking distance from her home is a marker of permanence. After all, as Mr. Knightley remarks of Miss Taylor’s match, “she knows
how very acceptable it must be at Miss Taylor’s time of life to be settled in a home of her own, and how important to her to be secure of a comfortable provision” (Austen 9). Mr. Knightley’s comments serve to emphatically observe the temporality of Miss Taylor’s residence at Hartfield; it is no longer appropriate or necessary for Miss Taylor to stay as Emma’s governess because Emma is old enough to marry. Emma’s collection, therefore, is not driven by her acquisition of knowledge, but, rather, her acquisition of permanence as she strives to maintain her intimacies with women. Emma’s pursuit of permanence exhibits her discomfort with change as well as her need for control as a collector, clearly marking the areas within walking distance from Hartfield as the cabinet in which her collected objects reside.

While scholars such as Marvin Mudrick recognize “the fact is that Emma prefers the company of women…[and that] Emma is in love with [Harriet]: a love unphysical and inadmissible, even perhaps undefinable in such a society” and contend that she is disagreeable, sinister, and unable to commit to her emotions, I believe Austen’s heroine is more complex (Mudrick 193 and 203). Through recognizing the already established interpretation of Emma as a lesbian and extending these readings to view Emma’s homosexual desire through the reconfigured lens of eroticized collection, she becomes a more sympathetic character. As Claire Lamont notes, “although many of Austen’s houses give an air of permanence, the loss of the house, or the threat of it, hangs over all her heroines except Emma” (Lamont 233). However, by viewing Emma as a collector and those who are permanently situated within walking distance from Hartfield as her collected objects, it becomes clear that like the rest of Austen’s heroines, Emma is also concerned with displacement. She remarks to Mrs. Weston, “A young woman, if she fall
into bad hands, may be teased, and kept at a distance from those she wants to be with; but one cannot comprehend a young man’s being under such restraint” (Austen 110). In this moment, Emma vocalizes social commentary regarding patriarchal ideologies concerning gendered spheres of public and private while simultaneously revealing her motivation for collecting.

Consider, for instance, the way in which *Emma* begins. Austen introduces her novel with a scene that occurs directly after Mrs. Weston’s wedding, depicting Emma’s discomfort with change inside her realm of domesticity while simultaneously marking the culmination of Emma’s collection of Mrs. Weston. Austen writes, “Sorrow came—a gentle sorrow—but not at all in the shape of any disagreeable consciousness. Miss Taylor married. It was Miss Taylor’s loss which first brought grief” (Austen 4). This introductory “loss” allows Austen’s readers to witness Emma’s unhappiness, while also recognizing that her state is mild, and, as we find out later, self inflicted. Situating Emma as a collector and the married Mrs. Weston as the collected object emphasizes that the only way Emma could insure the permanence of Mrs. Weston’s presence was to sacrifice their erotic intimacy and place her within a heteronormative relationship. This sentiment is furthered through Emma’s confession that “she had always wished and promoted the match; but it was a black morning’s work for her. The want of Miss Taylor would be felt every hour of every day” (Austen 4). By specifying her emotional attachment to Miss Taylor, Emma constructs a dichotomy between the identities of Miss Taylor and Mrs. Weston as she relegates her desire for her erotic partner away from the newlywed. Through this action, Emma demonstrates her ability to disrupt heteronormative society by way of homosexual desire. However, she also exemplifies how she restores and cultivates
it as she refuses to eroticize Mrs. Weston’s newly established identity within a heterosexual relationship.

Although Emma demonstrates an assertive agency by actively divorcing her desire from Mrs. Weston’s heteronormative sexual identity, Mrs. Weston remains passively confused as she struggles to negotiate her erotic loyalties. At this point in the novel, Mrs. Weston is much like Gillray’s depiction of Joseph Banks as “The great South Sea Caterpillar, transform’d into a Bath Butterfly”; despite the fact that she is firmly situated within the realm of heteronormativity through her marriage to Mr. Weston, she still retains some of the filth and dissonance associated with her deviant erotic relationship with Emma. However, because Austen undermines traditional depictions of collecting, it is the collected object rather than the collector that preserves the mark of a deviant intimate relationship. In this way, although Mrs. Weston concedes, “she felt herself a most fortunate woman,” she also describes her marriage as “a partial separation from friends” (Austen 14). Through describing her marriage and elevation in social station as a partial separation from friends, Mrs. Weston defines her erotic situation and normative intimacy in terms of the time she is able to spend with other people, specifically Emma. Assessing her husband’s “disposition and circumstances,” Mrs. Weston concludes that “there was every such comfort in the very easy distance of Randalls from Hartfield, so convenient for even solitary female walking… which would make the approaching season no hindrance to [Emma and her] spending half the evenings in the week together” (Austen 15). Mrs. Weston therefore displays not only a willingness to be collected and situated within the realm of normative sexuality, as she recognizes that she is fortunate, but she also refuses to ignore her attachment to Emma through her
analysis of opportunities for them to be together. In this way, a newly married Mrs. Weston prioritizes Emma and reveals that she must learn to adjust to her new heteronormative lifestyle, emphasizing a distinct shift in paradigms that must occur in order to successfully assimilate.

Emma’s collecting methodology is a process. Rather than relying upon a scientific network to request and catalogue specimens as Joseph Banks did with the *Florilegium*, his collection of published, copperplate, engravings, Emma refuses to publicize her collection, marking it as intimate and erotic. Unlike collectors such as Banks, whose collections were “associated with the social power of private… ownership which dared to collect the heterogeneous meanings of the world within the enclosing and totalizing walls of the cabinet,” Emma collects for personal satisfaction, rather than as a performative act of social power (Leask 32). She collects intimacies by first establishing an erotic relationship and then permanently situates the object of her desire in a heteronormative marriage to a man who lives within walking distance from her home, Hartfield. In this way, the culminated finality of the collection of Mrs. Weston is an appropriate beginning for *Emma* because the novel identifies Emma as a successful collector before allowing Austen’s readers to witness her unusual methodology of eroticized collection.

Due to the belief that women were expected to be docile, domestic, and passive within Regency England, legitimate collecting was characterized as a masculine enterprise and female collectors, such as Emma, would have been trivialized. As Susan M. Pearce notes within her book, *On Collecting*, women “are faced with self-images which present them as whores, madonnas, little girls, or house-holding adults… [and] evidence suggests that women gather collected material in ways which support these
roles” (Pearce 201). Women’s collections of jewelry or of the transcribed riddles “into a thin quarto of hot-pressed paper… ornamented with ciphers and trophies” publicly displayed within Emma were trivialized in comparison to the scientifically masculine collections of skulls and specimens (Austen 61). Consequently, Emma undermines both normative, feminine representations as well as scientific methods of collection through her acquisition of same-sex erotic intimacies and her transformation of them into collected objects.

After establishing Emma as a successful collector through portraying the acquisition of Mrs. Weston, Austen reveals the process by which Emma collects, and in it, social commentary on how homosexual desire provides a foundation for heterosexual relationships. The “loss” of Miss Taylor drives Mr. Woodhouse to feel emptiness within Hartfield, which Austen describes using the language of collection. She writes, “There was no recovering Miss Taylor—nor much likelihood of ceasing to pity her; but a few weeks brought some alleviation to Mr. Woodhouse” (Austen 15). Though Austen clearly limits this mourning period to Mr. Woodhouse, he echoes Emma’s sentiments pertaining to a dramatic shift in Miss Taylor’s identity. Miss Taylor is associated with Mr. Woodhouse and Emma’s intimacy, while Mrs. Weston is seemingly beyond their eroticized reach. Notably, Mr. Woodhouse’s “alleviation” takes the form of a dinner party, held in Hartfield, where Emma begins the process of collecting a new object, Harriet Smith.

Referencing the women who live in the proximity of Hartfield, Emma claims that “these were the ladies whom [she] found herself very frequently able to collect; and happy was she, for her father’s sake, in the power” (Austen 19). As I mentioned earlier,
the phrase “to collect” contextualizes Emma’s activities through connecting the act of
collection with normative and scientifically cutting edge figures within English society.
After all, there is a vast difference between Joseph Banks’ collection of Omai from the
Pacific Islands and Emma’s collection of figures from a society in which she actively
participates. In 1769, Banks financed a naval vessel, the *Endeavour*, with the purpose of
finding a human specimen. Although this first expedition with the purpose of obtaining a
human specimen failed, as his choice, a priest named Tupia, contracted a disease and
died, Banks tried again, sending Cook back to Tahiti in 1773. Interestingly, Omai was not
just collected, but he *volunteered* to be collected after witnessing “first-hand the power of
the Europeans” and was “keen to obtain guns” in an effort to reclaim his land from the
Borabora (Hetherington 3). Thus, Omai was not only voluntarily collected, but he also
encouraged his collectability with the ulterior motive of personal gain. Similar to Banks’
differentiation between the voluntary object and the chosen object, Emma specifies that
she collects the Bates women as well as Mrs. Goddard in terms of company, “for her
father’s sake,” simultaneously casting her as active and masculine while implying that
these particular women would not normally be objects within her collection. Emma
differentiates the collection of her objects of desire and the forced, convenient collection
of other objects; using this model, Banks’ first choice of human specimen, Tupia, would
have been a chosen object versus Omai, who asked to be collected. Emma therefore
organizes this dinner party as a means to please her father and reveals that it is only the
prospect of meeting Harriet Smith that allows “the evening [to be] no longer dreaded by
the fair mistress of the mansion” (Austen 19).
The opportunity to meet Harriet Smith, “a girl of seventeen, whom Emma knew very well by sight, and had long felt an interest in, on account of her beauty,” represents a new purpose for Emma, the collector, and also serves to identify Emma’s deviant sexual identity (Austen 19). Emma has already taken note of Harriet due to her appearance, which implies that Emma’s collection desires and values beauty above substance. This valuation reflects patriarchal ideologies regarding the idea that women should be seen and not heard, domestic and not political, and delicate instead of muscular. Thus, this masculine reflection complicates Emma’s identity as a collector, as she is a woman other characters view as beautiful and who strives to collect other beautiful objects. Emma therefore represents a subversive portrayal of femininity because she actively refuses to enter into heteronormative matrimony, stating, “I am not only not going to be married at present, but [I] have very little intention of ever marrying at all,” while simultaneously pursuing erotic same-sex relationships (Austen 76).

While Emma subverts gender roles through the act of collecting, she simultaneously subverts normative culture. Pearce argues that collection, in itself, is an act of subversion, stating, “the theme which runs through [collecting] is the intention to overturn the world of accepted material values… of quality, fidelity to evidence, purity, and normality in which the social world is grounded” (Pearce 189). Austen actively differentiates Emma from the rest of her female characters as she is portrayed as a subversive figure on two accounts; through collecting, Emma ignores social sanctions regarding normative sexuality, and by collecting, she exudes a masculine agency that renders weaker male figures, such as her father, passive and feminine. On both accounts, she threatens patriarchal society. Although Emma’s interest in Harriet stems from her
appreciation of the girl’s appearance, as “she was not struck by anything remarkably
clever in Miss Smith’s conversation… [but] her beauty happened to be of a sort which
Emma particularly admired,” Emma projects a value upon Harriet’s company that
normative society refuses to acknowledge (Austen 20). This is further represented by Mr.
Knightley’s disapproval of Emma’s intimacy with Harriet as well as Mr. Elton’s refusal
to acknowledge Harriet as an erotic object. In this way, “the accepted order is subverted
when very ordinary, every day things, things which are worthless by ‘accepted’ moral or
aesthetic standards, are collected with the same obsessive care which others would lavish
upon ‘accepted material” (Pearce 189). Clearly, a woman whose lineage, and therefore
value within Regency England, is uncertain, should be deemed an unfit intimacy for a
woman in Emma Woodhouse’s social position. However, Emma, as collector, refuses to
recognize social order and projects value upon Harriet on the basis of her appearance and
Emma’s erotic attraction to her. Emma emphasizes this subverted value system, stating,
“Those soft blue eyes, and all those natural graces, should not be wasted on the inferior
society of Highbury… The acquaintances she had already formed were unworthy of her.
The friends from whom she had just parted… must be doing her harm” (Austen 20). By
claiming the friendships and intimacies Harriet has already forged are not only unworthy
of her, but are actually doing her harm, Emma insists upon a need to collect her. Juliet
McMaster notes that to Austen, “the quality of humanity is to be judged by moral and
humane standards…not by social status; but like her own temporary snobs, Darcy and
Emma, she pays full attention to their social status first” (McMaster 125). Referencing
Emma as a “temporary snob” contextualizes Emma’s intent to collect Harriet. Instead of
paying attention to her social status, Emma takes note of Harriet’s appearance, subverting social value systems and replacing them with her own.

Emma elaborates her intention to collect Harriet, stating, “She would notice her; she would improve her; she would detach her from her bad acquaintance and introduce her into good society; she would form her opinions and her manners” (Austen 20). In this way, Emma forms an intimate relationship with Harriet that will result in Harriet’s dependency upon her. Austen italicizes the word “she,” implying that what follows will be significant in terms of understanding her deeply coded novel. Emphasizing the word “she” in Emma’s narration suggests an emotionality regarding the idea that nobody has paid Harriet the attention that Emma feels that she deserves. Through the intent to notice, improve, and detach Harriet from her “bad” acquaintances, Emma seeks to isolate Harriet from the intimacies of others while forming a deviant, erotic, attachment to her.

Within her book *On Longing*, Susan Stewart analyzes the dynamics of collected objects as well as processes of collecting: in a collection, she states, “once the object is completely severed from its origin, it is possible… to start again within a context that is framed by the selectivity of the collector” (Stewart 152). After Emma realizes her intention to collect Harriet, she begins what Stewart references as severing her from her origin and redefining Harriet’s identity, both sexually and socially. “Harriet Smith’s intimacy at Hartfield was soon a settled thing,” Emma thinks. “Quick and decided in her ways, Emma lost no time in inviting, encouraging, and telling her to come very often; and as their acquaintance increased, so did their satisfaction in each other” (Austen 22). By removing Harriet as often as possible from Mrs. Goddard’s boarding house and into the intimate domesticity of Hartfield, Emma has the ability to control Harriet’s experience
and interactions as well as the way in which Harriet views her. Austen characterizes Emma as “quick and decided in her ways,” stating quite blatantly that this process of collection is familiar to Emma while describing the order in which Emma pervaded Harriet’s life; she first invited, then encouraged, and finally told her to visit Hartfield often. This progression reveals Emma and thus collecting itself as manipulative, as she pervades Harriet’s life.

However, Harriet’s former intimacies with the Martin family present an obstacle for Emma, especially when Robert Martin proposes marriage to Harriet, threatening to ruin the prospect of her becoming part of Emma’s collection. Emma relies upon Harriet’s severed and newly contextualized origin, which she has manipulated in an effort to convince Harriet to refuse him. Emma has “no doubt” that Harriet is a “gentleman’s daughter,” and instructs Harriet to “support your claim to that station by everything within your power” (Austen 26). Because Austen references Harriet earlier as “somebody’s daughter,” it is clear that Emma constructs a possible, but improbable, origin for Harriet as a means to manipulate her, an action Stewart identifies as part of the process of collecting. Stewart notes, “the collection is a form of art as play, a form involving the reframing of objects within a world of attention and manipulation of context” (Stewart 151). Emma’s advice to Harriet can therefore be viewed as a manipulation of context and the equivalent of Banks taking plant, animal, and human specimens from their contexts in Tahiti, Australia, and India for the purpose of placing them within his house-turned-museum in Soho Square. Emma cannot be certain as to Harriet being a gentleman’s daughter, despite her claim of having “no doubt,” extending Stewart’s analysis to include a manipulation of the object itself.
Austen implies that Emma’s manipulation of Harriet is self-serving through her narration of what follows. Austen writes, “Emma watched her… and saw no alarming symptoms of love. [Robert Martin] had been the first admirer, but she trusted there was no other hold, and that there would be no serious difficulty on Harriet’s side to oppose any friendly arrangement of her own” (Austen 26-7). Through this act of studying Harriet, Emma invokes what Laura Mulvey calls the male gaze. In her article, “Visual Pleasure and Narrative Cinema,” Mulvey analyzes the male gaze in terms of cinematic spectatorship. She asserts, “In a world ordered by sexual imbalance, pleasure in looking has been split between active/male and passive/female. The determining male gaze projects its phantasy on to the female figure which is styled accordingly” (Mulvey 2186). Essentially, through the act of watching Harriet, Emma projects herself as active, “the watcher,” and assigns Harriet the passive role of “being watched.” In this way, Emma identifies herself as a masculine collector in pursuit of a feminine collected object. She projects an ambiguous fantasy upon Harriet, which she references as “any friendly arrangement of her own,” implying that she is Robert Martin’s erotic rival, and without his heteronormative distraction, “there would be no serious difficulty on Harriet’s side” to oppose her. Through watching Harriet for “alarming symptoms of love,” Emma seemingly pathologizes Harriet’s love for anyone who is not an extension of her.

Similar to the gradual way in which Emma coaxes Harriet to spend time at Hartfield, first inviting, then encouraging, and finally demanding her company, Emma gradually achieves Harriet’s passive dependence. Seeking to replace Harriet’s heteronormative erotic interest with an extension of herself, Emma reviews available men who live within the proximity of Hartfield and decides upon Mr. Elton as “the very
person [she was] fixed on for driving the young farmer out of Harriet’s head” (Austen 29). Although Emma admits that she thinks Harriet and Mr. Elton would be an excellent match, her first reaction is to remove Robert Martin from Harriet’s thoughts, as he had known Harriet longer than Emma and could therefore, potentially, become prioritized over her. Robert Martin represents a tie to Harriet’s past, something that, as a collector, Emma has actively tried to destroy in an effort to redefine Harriet’s identity. Tellingly, Harriet’s desires are absent from Emma’s analysis of her potential erotic interests because the process revolves around Emma’s tolerances rather than what Harriet prefers. This demonstrates Harriet’s voluntary passivity while simultaneously underlining Emma’s pervasive control; she pursues Harriet as an eroticized object rather than a friend or companion.

Austen uses Emma’s collection of Harriet to emphasize a distinct difference between Emma’s collection and constructing a normative social circle. Emma’s collection is acquired with an eye toward permanence, control, inequalities, and boundaries instead of assembling a group of equals for mutually enjoyable company, which is underlined by Emma’s justification of Mr. Elton as a potential erotic interest to Harriet. Emma begins, stating, “This is an attachment which a woman will feel pride in creating. This is a connection which offers nothing but good. It will give you every thing you want—consideration, independence, a proper home” (Austen 66). Convincing Harriet that Mr. Elton will be an appropriate attachment, Emma chooses to stress the permanence of his situation rather than claims of love. This strategy echoes Mrs. Weston’s initial assessment of her husband, highlighting that Emma’s persuasive speech to Harriet is not impromptu. Instead, it is a rehearsed pattern within her eroticized method
of collecting that seemingly divorces affection from heteronormative marriage and replaces it with the idea of permanence. Emma deliberately uses ambiguous language, as she refuses to clarify which woman will feel pride in creating the match between Mr. Elton and Harriet; in Emma’s ambiguous rhetoric, Harriet could be the woman “creating,” as the word could be used to mean choosing, or it could suggest that Emma congratulates herself in coded language for encouraging such a match. In either case, Emma projects a list of wants upon Harriet – “consideration, independence, [and] a proper home”—which are all assets that Emma uses to define herself. Engaging the notion that collectors view their objects as extensions of themselves, that the collected objects are defined by the same wants and needs that drive the collector, Stewart argues, “when one wants to disparage the collected object, one says ‘it is not you’” (Stewart 159). By projecting the characteristics that seemingly define her upon Harriet as a means to endorse a potential intimacy with Mr. Elton, Emma not only further identifies Harriet as an erotic object, but she also redefines what it means to have a “proper” home.

Emma negotiates normative propriety in terms of her desired objects with the same manner in which she engages normative structure of class, where Harriet, “the daughter of somebody,” should have been viewed as an inappropriate companion, as she is Emma’s social inferior; she selectively ignores it and chooses only to invoke her snobbery when it doesn’t apply to eroticized objects. In this way, Emma’s version of a “proper” home for Harriet is one where she is permanently situated within Highbury and near Hartfield. After all, her selection of Mr. Elton stems from his property adjacent home, rather than any erotic chemistry he may have with Harriet. Emma redefines propriety for Harriet in terms of “a proper home,” stating, “[This attachment] will fix you
in the centre of all your real friends, close to Hartfield, and to me, and confirm our intimacy for ever. This, Harriet, is an alliance which can never raise a blush in either of us” (Austen 66). By calling Harriet’s potential marriage an “alliance,” Emma continues to strip the erotic connotations from the heteronormative union as she emphasizes the importance of friendship, and, more importantly, an intimacy with her. The use of words like “fix” and “confirm” implies an uncertainty regarding Harriet’s social position as well as an impairment focused upon her lack of permanence within the realm of Emma’s reach, which Emma cleverly contextualizes in terms of Harriet’s relationship with her. By doing so, Emma structures her speech to Harriet in such a manner that if Harriet were to reject Mr. Elton, she would also be rejecting Emma, solidifying Emma’s choice of Mr. Elton as an erotic extension of herself while simultaneously enforcing the boundaries of her collection.

From Emma’s introductory scene, Emma has a sole motivation: to permanently situate her desired objects in Highbury, rendering them collected. Emma establishes boundaries and a system of control for her collection which regulates not only who her objects will marry, but also with whom they will socialize. Reflecting upon her collection of Mrs. Weston, Emma states, “For Mrs. Weston there was nothing to be done; for Harriet every thing” (Austen 22). This statement underlines that everything Emma offers Harriet has already been offered to Mrs. Weston, clearly marking patterned behavior and Emma’s method of collection. Austen seemingly makes a spectacle of the fact that Mrs. Weston is situated “only a half mile” from Hartfield and later reiterates this sentiment from the point of view of multiple characters, suggesting that this fact is crucial to understanding the nuances of her social commentary. Stewart applies boundaries to the
collected object, noting, “The collection relies upon the box, the cabinet, the cupboard, the seriality of shelves. It is determined by these boundaries” (Stewart 157). *Emma* begins with the collection of Mrs. Weston and identifies Emma’s collection with the pursuit of Harriet, which marks its seriality. However, it is during the pursuit and failure of collecting Harriet in which Emma, herself, is transformed from a collector into a collected object, solidifying Austen’s use of collection as a means of expressing the notion that heterosexual relationships rely upon same-sex intimacies to insure the success of normative society.

Austen relays this social commentary by way of issuing heteronormative endings for each eligible female character, Emma included. In order to do so, Austen must deconstruct Emma’s role as a collector and transform her into a collected object. This necessity is emphasized through Austen’s constant reminder to her readers that Emma is an attractive, eligible woman, despite her masculine agency and stubborn independence. However, Emma’s transition from a collector to a collected object is gradual and begins with her thwarted collection of Harriet. This is made quite clear when Mr. Elton proposes to Emma instead of Harriet, reminding Austen’s readers that although Emma collects eroticized objects, she still must actively avoid those who wish to collect her. She rejects Mr. Elton’s advances, stating, “Nothing could be farther from my wishes—your attachment to my friend Harriet—your pursuit of her…gave me great pleasure” (Austen 117). In this moment, Emma implies that she is not a pursuable object, unlike Harriet, while suggesting a possessive intimacy over her. Mr. Elton’s rendering of Emma as an erotic, collectable, object marks a significant moment within Austen’s novel, for Emma’s role as a collector thus far has remained unthreatened, despite other characters remarks
about her beauty. The rejection of Harriet for Emma, despite her deviant behavior, underlines that Emma’s collection of Harriet has been irreparably damaged; Harriet no longer views Emma as infallible and therefore cannot be solely dependant upon her, forming her own thoughts and opinions while simultaneously refusing to become an extension of Emma. Therefore, upon the assumption that she cannot trust Emma to find her a suitable husband, Harriet begins to exert her own agency as she rejects the role of an eroticized object.

Harriet’s agency presents itself to Emma after another failed attempt to enter Harriet into a heteronormative relationship with man who is interested in another woman. When Emma delivers the news to Harriet that Frank Churchill is to be married to Jane Fairfax, Harriet doesn’t seem to mind. Emma states, “Harriet’s behavior was so extremely odd, that [she] did not know how to understand it. Her character appeared absolutely changed” (Austen 367). Juxtaposed with Emma’s understanding of Harriet’s behavior before her continuous erotic disappointments, it becomes clear that Harriet has actively decided to pursue a heteronormative relationship on her own terms. Harriet reveals to Emma that she has chosen Mr. Knightley, an eligible man who lives within the proximity of Hartfield, who would essentially meet the criteria of Emma’s collection, except for the fact that Emma’s control, as a collector, would have been removed entirely from this heteronormative match, causing Emma to cry, “Good God!” She continues, asserting, “This has been a most unfortunate—most deplorable mistake! What is to be done?” (Austen 369). In this moment, Emma recognizes that she no longer has control over Harriet and that Harriet has as much agency and independence as her, recontextualizing Harriet as a threatening figure. However, instead of threatening to
collect Emma and overthrow her status as a collector, Harriet seemingly challenges Emma’s control over the vicinity of Highbury through her interest in one of its inhabitants, thus, situating herself as Emma’s erotic rival instead of her collected object.

Consequently, when Harriet replies “modestly, but not fearfully” that she believes Mr. Knightley returns her affections, Emma realizes that “Mr. Knightley must marry no one but herself!” (Austen 370). Emma refuses to sacrifice her role as a collector until she must choose between her masculine agency and her control of Highbury; when these attributes are divorced from the role of the collector, Emma redefines herself in terms of her priorities. Emma maintains her methodology of collection even when she is not a collector, voluntarily becoming a collected object as a means to maintain her control of Highbury. Expressing concern regarding Harriet’s agency and her transformation into an erotic rival, Emma states, “How was it to be endured? … if [Mr. Knightley] were to be lost to them for Harriet’s sake; if he were to be thought of hereafter, as finding in Harriet’s society all that he wanted; if Harriet were to be the chosen, the first, the dearest, the friend, the wife to whom he looked for all the best blessings of existence” (Austen 382). Emma uses the language of collection previously applied to Miss Taylor to emphasize a cognitive shift. She is no longer actively pursuing new objects, or women, for her collection, and instead seeks to protect the society that she has already created by situating herself within a heteronormative marriage that will neutralize the presented threat. Emma therefore expresses her desire to become Mr. Knightley’s “chosen” object as a means to keep her microcosm of Highbury society intact. By doing so, she blatantly identifies Harriet as a threat that must be neutralized by way of her own marriage to Mr. Knightley.
After identifying Harriet as a threat to her collection and neutralizing her by way of encouraging the affections of Mr. Knightley, Emma exiles Harriet from Hartfield, the “heart” of the collection that she has threatened. Emma states, “She would have been too happy but for poor Harriet… who must now be… excluded from Hartfield… poor Harriet must, in mere charitable caution, be kept at a distance… she would be a loser in every way” (Austen 407). Austen repeats the word “must,” implying that it is an order issued to protect the isolated society that Emma has created. Through the exclusion of Harriet from Hartfield, Emma instills the social values she had earlier subverted. To be sure, Emma’s motivations for reinstating normative value systems are different from her reason for subverting them, but, nevertheless, she restores heteronormative society by removing Harriet from Hartfield, wordlessly encouraging her to go back the places of her past. Austen also repeats the word “poor” to describe Harriet, emphasizing Emma’s regret at having to displace an attractive woman. Emma is calculated and manipulative, underlining that her marriage to Mr. Knightley and her subsequent removal of Harriet are strategic actions to insure the safety of her collection. The exile of Harriet from Emma’s sphere of collection allows Harriet to restore her origin, something Emma insisted upon removing as a means to collect her. By doing so, Harriet reconnects with Robert Martin and establishes her a heteronormative relationship using her own agency, rather than that of Emma, concluding Austen’s famously heteronormative novel by way of situating all of Austen’s eligible female characters within heterosexual relationships, but only after they have first experienced a same-sex intimacy. Just as *Persuasion’s* Captain Wentworth and *Pride and Prejudice’s* Mr. Darcy form same-sex attachments that premise their
culminated marriages, *Emma* demonstrates the applicability of Austen’s social commentary to women.

*Emma*’s final pages depict Emma’s reflection upon her transformation into a collected object. Much like Gillray’s engraving of “The transform’d Bath butterfly,” Emma, as a collected object, retains some of the filth associated with her subversive acts as a collector. Responding to Mr. Knightley, who asserts that she is “materially changed,” Emma states, “at that time I was a fool” (Austen 429). Through calling her experience as a collector foolish, Emma submits entirely to her new identity as a collected object and as a participant within a heterosexual relationship. In this way, *Emma* relies upon the familiar Romantic trope of collection as a means to not only express same-sex erotic desire, but it also allows Austen to mask her progressive social commentary regarding the necessity of homosexual relationships in order to provide a foundation for heterosexual intimacies to succeed. Austen first situates Emma as a beautiful female collector through her successful acquisition of Mrs. Weston, then portrays Emma’s thwarted collection of Harriet, and finally deconstructs Emma’s role as a collector as she must assimilate to heteronormative society in order to protect the collection she has already cultivated. Austen’s portrayal of eroticized collection results in prescribed heteronormativity for every eligible woman within her novel, asking her readers to reconsider the way in which same-sex intimacies operate within normative society.
CHAPTER FIVE
AFTERWARD

Jane Austen’s niece, Caroline Austen-Leigh, famously questions the ability of representing a ‘life’ that seems too obscure to recover, stating, “I am sure you will do justice to what there is—but I feel that it must be a difficult task to dig up the materials, so carefully have they been buried out of our sight by the past generation” while she simultaneously dismisses the letters that Cassandra Austen left intact, arguing that within them, Austen “seldom committed herself even to an opinion—so that to strangers they could be no transcript of her mind—they would not feel that they knew her any the better for having reading them.”\(^1\)\(^9\)

Referencing Cassandra Austen’s destruction of the majority of Austen’s letters, Caroline Austen-Leigh implies that this act of destruction has kept her, and us, from the real Austen. She rejects what is in Austen’s surviving letters, not what is left out. As I have shown through my analysis of *Pride and Prejudice*, *Persuasion*, and *Emma*, we must follow Caroline Austen-Leigh’s example and reject the censored image of Austen as a normative writer that was propagated by Henry Austen’s “wish to project an image of a ladylike, unprofessional, private, delicate, and domestic author.”\(^2\)\(^0\) Austen constructs a heteronormativity dependent upon same-sex intimacies, asking us to reconsider her as an author of strictly heteronormative novels. Through looking at how these erotic relationships first disrupt heteronormativity and then facilitate

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its restoration, we are able to view Austen as a progressive author that, however subtly, supports the notoriously progressive Romantics—such as the Shelleys and Lord Byron—who promoted the notion of homosexuality as a universal and natural state. In this way, my study of the way in which Austen redefines desire explores the open secret alluded to by Caroline Austen-Leigh, that the normative and domestic letters that revolve around “small matters” and “momentous minutiae” are not a true representation of her aunt’s life.\textsuperscript{21}

The paradigm that I have established within my study of \textit{Pride and Prejudice}, \textit{Persuasion}, and \textit{Emma} is quite applicable to Austen’s other novels. For instance, \textit{Northanger Abbey} draws upon several examples of eroticism that I have already discussed. What might be the relationship between Catherine and Isabella? Is Isabella’s temporary direction of Catherine comparable to that of Emma’s momentary control of Harriet? How is Isabella’s reluctance to leave Catherine in order to dance with Catherine’s brother similar to \textit{Pride and Prejudice}’s infamous ballroom scene?

\textit{Northanger Abbey} is Austen’s only dalliance into the Gothic tradition, marking it as unique while posing the question: does Austen use the Gothic convention—which was often associated with the uncovering of homosexual desire—similarly to the way she uses the already established trope of collection within \textit{Emma} to mask her progressive ideas?

As Terry Castle’s study shows, \textit{Sense and Sensibility} has been traditionally viewed in terms of the dynamics between Marianne and Elinor. However, I read it more as an exploration of masculinity, for it extends the notion that Austen strategically uses

the term gentleman with queer implications, furthering an element that I explored within
my study of *Pride and Prejudice*. How does Austen differentiate between gentlemen?

Are Sir John Middleton and *Persuasion*’s Sir Walter Eliot different from other
gentlemen? Austen describes Sir John Middleton’s generous offer to have the Dashwoods
stay on his property, stating, “in settling a family of females in his cottage, [Sir John] had
all the satisfaction of a sportsman; for a sportsman, though he esteems only those of his
sex who are sportsmen likewise, it is not often desirous of encouraging their taste by
admitting them to a residence within his own manner.”22 Which other “sportsmen” does
Sir John Middleton esteem? In this way, does Austen rely upon the already established
trope of hunting linked with eroticism as a means to express her open secret?

*Mansfield Park*’s Henry Crawford expresses frustration regarding his inability to
invoke Fanny’s affections to his sister, Mary, asserting, “I do not quite know what to
make of Miss Fanny. I do not understand her…What is her character? Is she solemn? Is
she queer? Is she prudish? … I could hardly get her to speak. I never was so long in
company with a girl in my life, trying to entertain her, and succeed so ill!”23 Notably,
when Austen uses the word queer, it would have implied an eccentricity—as it was not
linked to homosexuality until 1994. However, Henry Crawford’s frustration stems from
erotic rejection, and, given Mary’s innuendo regarding rears and vices and the open
secret of sodomy in the navy,24 we must view it as possible that when he asks about
Fanny’s eccentricity, he refers to an erotic eccentricity. This poses the question: what sort

24 Mary Crawford references sodomy in the navy. Describing how life at “home at my
uncle’s [made me] acquainted with a circle of admirals,” Mary then jokes that, “of *Rears*
and *Vices*, I saw enough. Now, do not be suspecting me of a pun, I entreat.” From
*Mansfield Park*, page 60.
of a relationship exists between Mary and Fanny where Mary would know about Fanny’s sexual eccentricities? After all, Edmund, who has served as Fanny’s cousin, mentor, educator, protector, and erotic interest, forms an erotic intimacy with Mary, marking her as desirable. Might Eve Sedgwick’s theory of erotic triangulation be applicable to Mary and Fanny’s roles as erotic rivals? How is Austen’s open secret revealed by way of erotic rivalry?

Outing open secrets has, to some extent, been the project of the particular form of post-Romantic production of Austen occurring since the mid-1990s. Amy Heckerling’s *Clueless*, an adaptation of Austen’s *Emma* that does not reproduce any of Austen’s infamous novel’s lines, relies upon clues to emphasize its structural similarities to *Emma*. However, instead of introducing Cher as a lesbian, Heckerling includes a nod to homosexuality within Austen’s work by way of her Frank Churchill character, Christian. Although several characters allude to his homosexuality—Cher remarks, “He dresses better than I do, what would I bring to the relationship?”—while Murray says, “Your man Christian is a cake boy!...He’s a disco-dancing, Oscar Wilde-reading, Streisand ticket-holding friend of Dorothy, know what I’m saying?”—as viewers, we are not certain of his homosexuality until we see him dancing with and prioritizing men instead of driving Cher home from a party. Heckerling therefore abides by Regency England’s notion of dancing as an erotic activity as she dichotomizes the heterosexual love interest that Cher will end up with, Josh, with the homosexual male who is actively pursuing his own relationships.

Heckerling’s inclusion of homosexuality within her adaptation of Austen’s work is not an anomaly. Patricia Rozema’s adaptation of *Mansfield Park* outs the possibility of
lesbianism between Mary Crawford and Fanny Price by including a highly erotic scene where they almost kiss. Guy Andrews’ 2008 British television show, *Lost in Austen*, loosely follows the plot of *Pride and Prejudice* while introducing a new character, Amanda, who time travels from present day and switches places with Elizabeth Bennet. In the process of showing how a modern woman would fit into Regency society, Andrews includes Miss Bingley as a lesbian, as she vocalizes her lesbianism to Amanda and calls it her “true attraction.” Through their inclusion of homosexuality within film adaptations of Austen, Andrews, Heckerling, and Rozema have understood the open secret of same-sex desire written into Austen’s work and, by way of their medium, have expressed it aloud, giving my interpretation of Austen’s work as well as her progressive identity as a female writer within Regency England more context.


Figure 1: