

Rebelling Against the Regency: Jane Austen and Margaret Drabble

NORA FOSTER STOVEL

Department of English, University of Alberta, Edmonton, AB T6G 2E5

Contemporary British writer Margaret Drabble has expressed an ambivalent attitude to Jane Austen, vacillating between admiration and condemnation in her critical commentaries. As a novelist, Drabble has also enjoyed an ambiguous relationship with her literary predecessor, fluctuating between imitation of her rectory precursor and rebellion against the Regency writer. Her first novel, *A Summer Bird-Cage* (1963), is about Bennett sisters contemplating marriage, and her second novel, *The Garrick Year* (1964), is about a self-deceived heroine named Emma considering adultery. In *The Tradition of Women's Fiction* (1982), Drabble acknowledges:

When I began writing, in my innocence I called my characters after Jane Austen characters. In a *Summer Bird-Cage* the characters are called Bennett which is the Bennet from *Pride and Prejudice*. I did this completely unconsciously. Emma in *The Garrick Year* is also a Jane Austen character. (93)

Austen frames Drabble's career, for her latest fiction, "The Dower House at Kellynch," an original short story that she composed especially for the 1993 JASNA meeting at Lake Louise, is a sequel to Austen's novel *Persuasion*. In the question period following her reading, she acknowledged, "All my novels are a dialogue with Jane Austen."

As a critic, Drabble has expressed her admiration for Austen in enthusiastic introductions to Austen's works, beginning with the Penguin edition of *Jane Austen: Lady Susan, The Watsons, Sandition* in 1974, and concluding most recently with her introductions to the new Virago editions of Austen's novels. Drabble opens her 1974 introduction by asserting that "There would be more genuine rejoicing at the discovery of a complete new novel by Jane Austen than any other literary discovery, short of a new major play by Shakespeare, that one can imagine" (7)—a sentiment that all Janeites would doubtless share. Drabble's introductions to the Virago editions also illustrate that enthusiastic note, as they demonstrate how "The books rebound off one another, and offer contrasts that must have been in Austen's mind as she was writing" (*Persuasion* v). Drabble's attitude to Austen was not always so enthusiastic, however.

Early admirers of Drabble compared the fledgling novelist to Jane Austen, assuming that the young writer's imitation of her literary predecessor was the deliberate result of conscious admiration, but the contemporary author was not pleased by the comparison with the Regency writer. In a 1968 BBC interview with British critic Bernard Bergonzi, Drabble rebels vehemently:

I rather dislike Jane Austen, and I get upset when people say that I obviously admire her because I find her social attitudes deplorable. Also I'm deeply suspicious of the way every single one of her novels ends with a happy marriage, and none of them can describe one. Enjoyers of Austen, of course, delight in the Regency novelist's classically happy endings.

When Elizabeth Bennet laments in *Pride and Prejudice* that “no such happy marriage [between herself and Mr. Darcy] could now teach the admiring multitude what connubial felicity really was” (PP 312), do we not all feel perfect confidence that Austen will succeed in engineering that very outcome? As Drabble herself states, “The story ends with both their marriages, an indication of their subsequent happiness, and an eventual reconciliation with Lady Catherine” (OCEL 787).

Indeed, the Janeite’s delight in Austen’s comic genius lies precisely in the satisfaction of observing the skill with which the author succeeds in overcoming all obstacles to the joyful union of her hero and heroine. *Persuasion*, for example, concludes with the following question (248):

Who can be in doubt of what followed? When any two young people take it into their heads to marry, they are pretty sure by perseverance to carry their point, be they ever so poor, or ever so imprudent, or ever so little likely to be necessary to each other’s ultimate comfort. This may be bad morality to conclude with, but I believe it to be truth; and if such parties succeed, how should a Captain Wentworth and an Anne Elliot, with the advantage of maturity of mind, consciousness of right, and one independent fortune between them, fail of bearing down every opposition?

Author and reader are almost in collusion to achieve the comic conclusion of matrimony. Near the end of *Northanger Abbey*, for example, Austen considers the fate of Catherine Morland and Henry Tilney in this early parody of the Gothic romance:

The anxiety, which in this state of their attachment must be the portion of Henry and Catherine, and of all who loved either, as to its final event, can hardly extend, I fear, to the bosom of my readers, who will see in the tell-tale compression of the pages before them, that we are all hastening together to perfect felicity. (NA 250)

And Austen is as good as her word, for, just as Lady Catherine De Bourgh’s attempt to separate Elizabeth and Darcy merely succeeds in helping to bring them together in *Pride and Prejudice*, so every obstacle is turned to advantage at the end of *Northanger Abbey*, as Austen concludes:

Henry and Catherine were married, the bells rang and every body smiled; and, as this took place within a twelve-month from the first day of their meeting, it will not appear, after all the dreadful delays occasioned by the General’s cruelty, that they were essentially hurt by it. To begin perfect happiness at the respective ages of twenty-six and eighteen, is to do pretty well; and professing myself moreover convinced, that the General’s unjust interference, so far from being really injurious to their felicity, was perhaps rather conducive to it, by improving their knowledge of each other, and adding strength to their attachment, I leave it to be settled by whomsoever it may concern, whether the tendency of this work be altogether to recommend parental tyranny, or reward filial disobedience. (252)

Even when the obstacles, traditionally represented by patronizing patriarchs and grotesque guardians, are internalized in the form of pride and prejudice, for example, Austen’s psychological insight and narrative skill succeed in overcoming stubborn self-deception and proud perversity. In *Emma*, for example, Drabble notes that, “although Emma Woodhouse is

high spirited, she is also vain and self-deceiving" (*JA* 23); nevertheless, "Mr. Knightly in the end proposes to the humbled and repentant Emma" (*OCEL* 316), and *Emma* ends with this quintessentially comic conclusion:

Mr. Elton was called on, within a month from the marriage of Mr. and Mrs. Robert Martin, to join the hands of Mr. Knightley and Miss Woodhouse....the hopes, the confidence, the predictions of the small band of true friends who witnessed the ceremony, were fully answered in the perfect happiness of the union. (*Emma* 484)

But this perfect felicity is precisely what Drabble dislikes. As she explains to Bergonzi, she disapproves of Austen's "fairy-tale endings" where couples marry and live happily ever after:

I really feel that Jane Austen shouldn't have left her books on such a happy note, and that there's something really immoral in writing a novel in those terms. She might have just hinted delicately that perhaps these perfect matches might not have been so perfect. I can't understand how she can lead her heroines up to the altar in that way and then leave them there, when clearly they were all extremely difficult women and were not in for a happy life. I find this lack of realism rather distressing.

Austen's preference, however, was for comedy: at the end of *Mansfield Park*, she writes: "Let other pens dwell on guilt and misery. I quit such odious subjects as soon as I can, impatient to restore every body, not greatly in fault themselves, to tolerable comfort, and to have done with all the rest" (*MP* 461). Generations of Janeites have applauded her preference for comic closure.

Drabble prefers *Persuasion* because "it is much more open-ended" (v), as she observes in her introduction to the Virago edition of Austen's last completed novel, offering "the possibilities of another, freer world" (xi), and "welcoming the possibility of a new order" (xv)—in response, perhaps, to "the new spirit of the Romantic movement" (xii). Drabble notes that "Austen gives us a rare portrait of a mature and happy marriage" (ix) in the Crofts. Drabble also applauds Austen for rejecting her original ending as being "too 'tame and flat' (an objection levelled against the endings of several of her other works)" (xiii), and approves the "fuller, warmer and more natural *eclaircissement*" (xiv) of the revised version. She concludes, "I find [*Persuasion*] perhaps most remarkable for its unexpected generousities and for its welcoming of the possibility of a new order," in which Anne Elliot "is released from the 'quiet, confined' female existence" (xv).

Drabble seems happiest with *Sense and Sensibility* precisely because it presents a more problematic approach to the potential happiness of the protagonists, especially Marianne, because, of all Jane Austen's heroines, she observes, "she seems temperamentally most resolutely set for an unhappy ending, and the conventional denouement must disturb and disappoint" (xvii). She opens her Virago introduction by observing, "*Sense and Sensibility* is without doubt Jane Austen's most painful and disturbing novel. It is the fashion these days to look for the painful and disturbing side of every comedy and light romance" (v). Perhaps she does: she judges that "a dark interpretation seems unavoidable" because "it is an unhappy, almost tragic

book, full of raw emotions which her other works carefully control or distance" (v). Acknowledging that "the plot resolves happily for Edward and Elinor" (xvi), the *Sense* segment of the quotient, she insists, "we must question the happy ending" of Marianne's marriage to Colonel Brandon, the *Sensibility* element of the title: "Most readers and some critics have with reason found this resolution somewhat unsatisfactory" (xvii). She says, "Now, had Jane Austen's art permitted her to pursue Colonel and Mrs Brandon (eagerly watched from afar by Willoughby) through the middle years of their marriage, we would have had another novel altogether" (xviii). She concludes that *Sense and Sensibility* "lacks the near-perfect poise of its companion volumes, but offers insights into emotional depths unique in its author's oeuvre, and suggests powers that she perhaps deliberately chose not to pursue" (xviii).

These are the very powers that Drabble does choose to pursue, however, as her novels present the problems of marriage and motherhood. Drabble is one of the first novelists to take us behind the curtain of comedy, as she follows her heroines beyond the happy-ever-after ending. As Drabble notes, Austen's "life is notable for its lack of events; she did not marry [but] lived in the midst of a lively and affectionate family" (*OCEL* 52). Perhaps because, unlike Austen, Drabble was married and a mother herself when she wrote her novels, her attitude to conjugality is more relentlessly realistic in its depiction of domestic difficulties. Drabble's protagonists present a more problematic approach to matrimony than Austen's, representing variations on the theme of the contemporary novelist's rebellion against the Regency writer's conventional comic closure.

For all that her early heroines are named Emma and Bennett, Drabble initially questions the traditional conclusion of matrimony. *A Summer Bird-Cage* debates the question of marriage. The title comes from a quotation from John Webster's play *The White Devil* that provides the epigraph to Drabble's novel; Flamineo, the villain of the piece, declares: "'Tis just like a summer bird-cage in a garden: the birds that are without despair to get in, and the birds that are within despair and are in a consumption for fear they shall never get out" (II, ii, 44-48). The summer bird-cage, of course, is marriage. Elsewhere Drabble comments on her own Bennett sisters: "The novel was about two girls wondering whether to marry or not: one married, one unmarried, each envying the other what seemed to be her freedom" (*TWF* 91). As Sarah and Louise Bennett contemplate the feminist existential question *to marry or not to marry*, Sarah notes, "the charming convention of the scene — sisters idling away an odd evening in happy companionship. . . . was like something out of *Middlemarch* or even Jane Austen" (171).

Sarah Bennett, the narrator of the novel, who has just come down from Oxford with what she calls "a lovely, shiny, useless new degree" (7), is contemplating marriage during the hiatus provided by her fiance Francis's year abroad at Harvard, while she observes her elder sister Louise's marriage. Louise wants "to have my cake and eat it" (203), as she puts it, by celebrating a cynical marriage to rich and famous but nasty and neurotic novelist Stephen Halifax, author of *The Decline of Marriage*, while retaining

the handsome and virile actor John Connell as her lover. The novel ends, as one might expect, with the breakup of Louise's marriage, as Sarah anticipates her reunion with Francis. Sarah concludes her narrative on an anticipatory note: "As I sit here, typing this last page, Francis is on his way home. . . . to me, and I am waiting to see whether or not I have kept faith" (207). So Drabble concludes her first novel in an ambivalent balance, with one marriage about to break up and the other about to begin.

For Drabble herself, who had recently graduated from Cambridge with a double-starred first and the prospect of a brilliant career as an academic, but who had rejected research because, as Sarah Bennett observes, "You can't be a sexy don" (183), the conflict between marriage and career is particularly acute. Like the Bennett sisters, Maggie and her sister Susan Drabble—better known as A. S. Byatt, author of *Possession* (1989), a brilliantly postmodernist novel that won the prestigious Booker prize—overlapped as scholars at Cambridge. Like Byatt, Drabble married upon graduation. In an unpublished interview, she comments on the connections between her own life and her first novel and condemns the potential marriage that concludes the narrative (VGMI 12):

I got married in 1960, and everybody got married, you see; you just rushed from university to the wedding ring and then you huddled your babies in and out of the cradle, and ten years later people don't do that. . . . If that character in that first novel had been leaving university now, she certainly wouldn't have got married in that blind and foolish way. She doesn't get married, actually, in the novel, but you can tell she's going to, as soon as that man gets back.

Drabble is one of the first novelists to take us beyond the altar to show us the reality of matrimony through gritty domestic detail. Emma Evans, nee Lawrence, the very literary heroine of Drabble's second novel, *The Garrick Year* (1964), unlike Sarah Bennett, has already made the decision to marry, rather than to pursue a career. Indeed, Emma is already the mother of two children, tiny Flora and infant Joseph—like the author herself, who was married with a young son and daughter when she wrote the novel. And, like Drabble, Emma has married an actor. Drabble married fellow actor and student Clive Swift, and together with him joined the Royal Shakespeare Company, where she understudies Vanessa Redgrave and Judy Dench in their first starring season at Stratford-on-Avon. It was Maggie, not Clive, however, who became pregnant with their first child, Adam. No longer in a condition to carry, let alone shake, spears, Drabble was relegated to the wings. Clearly, there was nothing else for it but to write novels—fortunately for us. Drabble has acknowledged that "*The Garrick Year* is very much an account of my own experiences in the theatre" (TWF 78), because "It was about a year we spent in Stratford-on-Avon with the Royal Shakespeare Company" (NHI 291), where Margaret enjoyed "a brief and undistinguished career as a walk-on" (OCEL dust cover), admitting, "It was very much a novel of sour grapes" (BBI 7).

Just as Drabble, having forsaken spear-carrying, waited in the wings at Stratford for her husband to come off stage and her son to be born, Emma has forsaken a position as a television announcer in London to accompany her

husband David Evans to the Garrick Theatre Festival in Hereford, where he is, coincidentally, to enact the role of Flamineo in Webster's *The White Devil*, a character whom Emma describes as a "rotten bastard and a social climber and a pimp" (33). Although she is not an actress by profession, Emma is preoccupied with playing roles. The only character at the Garrick Festival with no part to play—like Fanny Price in *Mansfield Park*—Emma casts herself in the role of mistress of Wyndham Farrar, the famous festival director who holds her husband's career in the palm of his hand. But juggling the roles of mistress and mother is difficult.

Emma, like her Austen namesake, is self-deceived, and the crux of the novel occurs when she must come to terms with the sinister reality of her menage, after acknowledging David's liaison with the luscious Sophy Brent, his leading lady from *The Clandestine Marriage*, and her own half-hearted affair with Farrar. Although the marriage does not actually end, the conclusion of the novel is less than sanguine, symbolized by the image of the serpent in the garden during the couple's country picnic to celebrate the renewal of their marriage vows. Emma returns to her marriage with grim determination, citing David Hume as an authority on the subject of marriage: "'Whoever considers,' Hume says, 'the length and feebleness of human infancy, with the concern which both sexes naturally have for their offspring, will easily perceive that there must be a union of male and female for the education of the young, and that this union must be of considerable duration'" (171). Hume's is hardly love's young dream. Emma's fatalistic attitude is encapsulated in her concluding comment about the snake which she discovers has shared their family idyll: "'Oh well, so what,' is all that one can say, the Garden of Eden was crawling with them too, and David and I managed to lie amongst them for one whole pleasant afternoon. One just has to keep on and to pretend, for the sake of the children, not to notice. Otherwise one might just as well stay at home" (172). Although the marriage is reaffirmed for the time being, it seems doomed to dissolve. The potent concluding symbol of the serpent represents an ambiguous attitude to the mixed blessing of marriage in general and an ambivalence about the future of this union in particular.

Drabble's third novel, *The Millstone* (1965), celebrates matriarchy, rather than marriage. The heroine, Rosamund Stacey, is a doctoral candidate researching a dissertation on the courtly love sonnet of the Renaissance. Far from being a lover herself, courtly or otherwise, she is that contemporary anachronism, a virgin. A puritan in permissive clothing, she wears a scarlet letter on her bosom, but in her case the *A* stands not for *adultery* but for *abstinence*. Rosamund dates two men simultaneously: since each assumes she must be sleeping with the other, she is spared their "crusading chivalrous sexual zeal" (19). Attracted to an effeminate radio announcer named George Matthews, who turns out not to be homosexual after all, she is drawn to his disembodied BBC voice but the word is made flesh when he impregnates her in a nearly immaculate conception on their first and only sexual encounter. Rosamund falls in love not with George but with her infant daughter, named Octavia for the feminist heroine Octavia Hill, a love that is reinforced by the

trauma of Octavia's surgery to correct a congenital heart defect. When a chance encounter reunites Rosamund with George temporarily, she rejects his tentative hints at marriage, even lying about Octavia's birth date so that George will have no conception that he is her daughter's father. At the conclusion of *The Millstone*, Rosamund acknowledges her own defect of the heart, as her millstone is transformed into a talisman, proving that, just as a grain of sand or a scarlet letter can produce a pearl, so affliction can inspire affection and adversity development:

It was no longer in me to feel for anyone what I felt for my child; compared with the perplexed fitful illuminations of George, Octavia shone there with a faint, constant and pearly brightness quite strong enough to eclipse any more garish future blaze. A bad investment, I knew, this affection, and one that would leave me in the dark and the cold in years to come; but then what warmer passion ever lasted longer than six months? (172)

Clearly, *The Millstone* illustrates Drabble's commitment to motherhood and suspicion of marriage.

Clara Maugham, the heroine of *Jerusalem the Golden* (1967), has a very ambivalent attitude to marriage. Escaping from the miserable Maugham home in Northam, where her mother is just too bad to be true, to the metropolis of London through a scholarship won by her own intellectual brilliance, she finds a surrogate family in the Denhams. Denham recalls Austen's final, unfinished novel *Sanditon*, which Drabble edited for Penguin, where Lady Denham adopts another Clara—Clara Brereton, "the beautiful heroine in distress" (JA 30). Clara Maugham is attracted as much to her alter ego Clelia Denham as she is to Clelia's look-alike brother Gabriel. Gabriel's marriage to the neurotic Phillipa and Clara's own fling with Clelia and Gabriel's married elder brother Magnus protect Clara from the danger of a permanent commitment. She prefers the complexity of her relationship with the Denham siblings to conjugality, choosing "the nostalgic connexion more precious, more close, more intimate than any simple love" (206). Still star-struck, Clara contemplates complacently at the conclusion of the novel an eternally shifting conjunction of pop stars in celluloid constellations that reflect the celestial symbolism of *Jerusalem the Golden* and Drabble's own "golden vision" in an ironic manner, suggesting that, brazen as ever, Clara will continue to elect the glitter of guilt over gold. In a romantic *la ronde* that smacks more of the permissive society of the sixties than Jane Austen's Regency romances, Clara anticipates:

all the years of future tender intrigue, a tender blurred world where Clelia and Gabriel and she herself in shifting and ideal conjunctions met and drifted and met once more like the constellations in the heavens: a bright and peopled world, thick with starry inhabitants, where there was no ending, no parting, but an eternal vast incessant rearrangement. (206)

The Waterfall (1969), Drabble's next novel, involves the most explicit rebellion against Jane Austen thus far in Drabble's career. Her heroine, Jane Gray, remarks that "Both my father and my mother came from such genteel middle class descent that Jane Austen herself could have described their affiliations with ease" (54). Perhaps that is why Jane Gray dislikes her

namesake so vehemently and tries “to deny the distinctions I had been reared in, the Jane Austen distinctions of refinement and vulgarity, of good and bad taste” (93). The character echoes her creator in her early condemnation of the Regency novelist, as she declares:

How I dislike Jane Austen. How deeply I deplore her desperate wit. Her moral tone dismays me: my heart goes out to the vulgarity of those little card parties that Mrs Philips gave at Meryton, to that squalid rowdy hole at Portsmouth where Fanny Price used to live, to Lydia at fifteen gaily flashing her wedding ring through the carriage window, to Frank Churchill, above all to Frank Churchill, lying and deceiving and proffering embarrassing extravagant gifts. Emma got what she deserved, in marrying Mr Knightly. What can it have been like, in bed with Mr Knightley? Sorrow awaited that woman: she would have done better to steal Frank Churchill, if she could. (57-58)

Certainly, Jane finds going to bed with the man she married, Malcolm Gray, singer of Renaissance laments, a desultory business at best. Jane recalls the sacrificial aspect of her wedding in dismay, reflecting: “It is a curious business, marriage. Nobody seems to pay enough attention to its immense significance. Nobody seemed to think that in approaching the altar, garbed in white, I was walking towards unknown disaster of unforeseeable proportions” (98). Jane’s experience demonstrates the consequences of leading a “difficult woman” to the altar and leaving her there.

Rejecting her husband, Jane elects instead to have an incestuous affair with James Otford, husband of her cousin and alter ego Lucy in an intertextual connection that echoes George Eliot’s *Mill on the Floss* more than Jane Austen. Their elopement, however, concludes in a car crash. The original title of *The Waterfall* was *A Moving Accident* because Drabble intended to conclude this tale of romantic passion tragically by killing both lovers in the climactic car crash, for, as Drabble asserts, “The end of romantic love is death” (VGMI 4). But, apart from the technical awkwardness of killing her narrator, Drabble could not bring herself to kill her own creations—perhaps because they are based, like most of her characters, on real-life models. Jane Gray speculates, “We should have died, I suppose, James and I. It isn’t artistic to linger on like this. It isn’t moral either. One can’t have art without morality, anyway, as I’ve always maintained. It’s odd that there should be no ending” (232). Unfortunately, however, as Jane observes, “There isn’t any conclusion. A death would have been the answer, but nobody died. Perhaps I should have killed James in the car, and that would have made a neat, a possible ending” (230).

Drabble acknowledges of *The Waterfall*, “I couldn’t resolve the ending” (CFI 117). Indeed she parodies her inability to conclude her novels in a highly self-conscious manner by trying out a series of different endings—tragic, comic, romantic, ironic—much as she might try on hats in a shop. After rejecting the tragic conclusion of death in the automobile accident, for example, Jane Gray observes that “our adventures resolved into comedy, not tragedy” (233). She asserts, “I searched for an image to express my assent to my fate, as I search now for a conclusion, for an elegant vague figure that would wipe out all the conflict” (230). She finds that elegant figure in the

waterfall of Goredale Scar, that site of the Romantic sublime, for, as Drabble notes in *Jane Austen*, “We are all post-romantics now” (28-29). Finally, she finishes rather apologetically with what she terms “A feminine ending?” (231), as the lovers are reunited at the Scar, where they see a flower called “Heart’s Ease” (237), suggesting a renewal of the romance. But Jane undercuts this romantic idyll with the image of a glass of scotch, tasting of “dust and death” into which she has accidentally spilled her talcum powder—“A fitting conclusion to the sublimities of nature” (238), as she judges. But she cannot leave it even there: “No, I can’t leave it without a postscript, without formulating that final, indelicate irony” (238), she notes, in the form of her own thrombic clot—“The price that modern woman must pay for love. In the past, in old novels, the price of love was death, a price which virtuous women paid in childbirth, and the wicked, like Nana, with the pox. Nowadays it is paid in thrombosis or neurosis: one can take one’s pick” (238-39). So *The Waterfall* is possibly the most problematic example of closure in Drabble’s career.

In *The Needle’s Eye* (1972), the novel that established her reputation in North America, Drabble portrays a disastrous marriage and considers the divorce case and contingent problem of child custody that ensue. Her heroine, Rose Vertue Bryanston, is an heiress in this rather Jamesian novel about money and morality in the modern world. Impressed by the biblical parable of the needle’s eye, which warns that it is as difficult for a rich man to enter the kingdom of heaven as it is for a camel to go through the eye of a needle, Rose, overwhelmed by a sense of original sin at her inherited wealth, attempts to reject her heritage by marrying Christopher Vassiliou, son of an impoverished Greek immigrant family. Although she does divorce him, ultimately Rose returns to Christopher, reaffirming their destructive relationship.

This resolution, or rather irresolution, on Rose’s part, ran counter to the growing women’s liberation movement of the early seventies. Rose’s return to her divorced husband who beat her and kidnapped their children disturbed feminist critics of Drabble’s fiction profoundly. Monica Mannheimer objected to “the defeatism of Rose’s decision to return to her husband, Christopher, which women in particular, and Women’s Liberation even more particularly, tend to see as some kind of sell-out,” concluding that “*The Needle’s Eye* is a sad and defeatist novel in which the possibility of genuine self-realization seems more remote than in any of Margaret Drabble’s previous works” (19). Drabble took these feminist responses so much to heart that she published a response entitled “The Author Comments,” in which she defends her conclusion of reaffirming the marriage, but also acknowledges that “it is in the cards that the marriage will again degenerate into violence, and that they will, again, part” (37). She illuminates the autobiographical origins of this fictional irresolution in an interview in which she explains, “I wrote the whole of *The Needle’s Eye* while Clive and I were still together. And I might not have made it end like I did if we had separated first. I might have allowed [Rose] her freedom. I wonder” (NSI 277). And so do we. Later, she acknowledged candidly in a letter to

Mannheimer, "If I were to write *The Needle's Eye* now, I would end it quite differently, but then, of course, it would have to be a different book right through." Clearly, the failure of Drabble's own marriage, complicated by hostile feminist reaction to her novel's conclusion, resulted in an even more tentative attitude to closure.

Since some feminist critics complained that Drabble's previous protagonists, like Rose, were too passive, Drabble created a more positive model of womanhood in the heroine of her next novel, *The Realms of Gold* (1975), who is, Drabble declares, "a creation conscious of the developments of feminism and the Women's Movement in Britain in the 1960s and 1970s" (TWF 85-86). Frances Wingate, an archaeologist with the Midas touch, is the proverbial "golden girl" (45), "the blessed and the lucky, the winner at cards, the finder of gold" (306). Separated from her long-time lover, historian Karel Schmidt, whose discarded dentures she carries in her brassiere, to the dismay of potential lovers engaged in staring down her cleavage, Frances finally decides to marry Karel, recently divorced from his maniacal wife Joy, who has conveniently become a Lesbian, to the relief of Karel and Frances, "who had not dared to hope for so unlikely and so happy a resolution" (355-56). Although she condemned Austen's "fairy-tale endings," Drabble concludes *The Realms of Gold* with the "happy ending" of marriage. The narrator comments, "A happy ending, you may say. Resent it, if you like. She will not care: she is not listening" (356). Drabble observes, "I felt at the end that I was creating my own happy ending, a Jane Austen ending, a happy marriage, but that it would undoubtedly arouse a great deal of opposition. And it did" (TWF 16). Her narrator challenges the reader rather belligerently: "So there you are. Invent a more suitable ending if you can" (356). And many feminist critics did precisely that.

Ellen Cronan Rose, for example, declared, "I want her next novel to be 'not only a book but a future,' an unequivocally feminist blueprint" (129). In *The Tradition of Women's Fiction*, Drabble comments on this new difficulty: "The danger arises when a contemporary writer is told how to conclude or how to direct the course of her own fiction. . . . I have to contend with a good many women critics who write to me and tell me how my novels ought to be ending, and describe the endings that I should have given to them instead of the ones that I myself chose" (TWF 112-13). Drabble is damned if she does and damned if she doesn't: she complains, "one is criticized by both sides amongst the feminist critics. . . . between these two, the Scylla and Charybdis of feminism and womanhood, one is walking a tight rope" (TWF 115). Certainly, Jane Austen did not have to defend her comic closure against radical feminist critics.

Following this furor, fearful of coming down on one side or the other, Drabble teeters on the tightrope of narrative closure, preferring the safety net of a suggestive symbol to a decisive conclusion. *The Ice Age* (1977), a state-of-Britain novel about the real-estate recession, which begins with the (second) marriage of Anthony Keating and Alison Murray—mother of two daughters, the precociously bright Jane and the tragically retarded Molly—concludes with their separation. This separation is not the result of any actual

difference, but rather of Anthony's accidental involvement in a political upheaval in a dictatorship behind the Iron Curtain. Keating seems to have accidentally wandered into a LeCarre novel when he is imprisoned during an attempt to rescue Jane, who is being held in Walachia on suspicion of drugs. Not committing herself either to incarceration or to liberation, Drabble concludes with an ambiguous symbol. She explains that, while she hoped to conclude the novel with the happy ending of the recovery of her hero and of England, the action seemed to be leading inevitably toward the death of her hero and the downfall of Britain. Ultimately, she rejected both comic and tragic endings, preferring an allusive symbol to such conclusive action. Images of birds in flight, symbolizing the spirit of the hero and of Britain—for Drabble believes "The spirit of a person is like a bird trapped in his body" (NHI 291)—frame the entire allegory of the novel. The portentous image of the pheasant that falls dead of a heart attack at the feet of the hero at the opening of the novel is redeemed by the free flight of a wall creeper over the walls of Anthony's prison to suggest future freedom for the hero and for Britain without committing the agnostic author to orthodox Christianity or to a conclusion about Britain's moral and economic crisis. The narrator concludes equivocally: "The bird will fly off, fluttering away its tiny life. There, we leave Anthony" (287). But Drabble cannot end there. She adds a post-script: "Alison, there is no leaving. Alison can neither live nor die. Alison has Molly. Her life is beyond imagining. It will not be imagined. Britain will recover, but not Alison Murray" (287). So equivocation has the last word in Britain's modern ice age.

Drabble admits that *The Middle Ground* (1980) "ends on a note of total ambiguity," and "I couldn't resolve this book" (Cooper-Clark 30); so "I end the novel on a complete question mark" (TWF 17). In *The Middle Ground*, Drabble again treads a middle road between comic and tragic resolutions, as she portrays her quartet of characters weathering their respective mid-life crises: "If it is a mid-life crisis . . . what on earth is on the other side of it?" (9-10), wonders one character. The middle ground represents the present, that stumbling block between the past and future: "The middle years, caught between children and parents, free of neither: the past stretches back too densely, it is too thickly populated, the future has not yet thinned out" (165). The novel ends, as it began, *in medias res*: as the heroine, feminist journalist Kate Armstrong, dresses for a party to celebrate her survival of her mid-career crisis, the narrator interjects, "Let us leave her there, in an attitude of indecision, confronted by choice" (247). The novel ends with embarkation:

Anything is possible, it is all undecided. Everything or nothing. It is all in the future. Excitement fills her, excitement, joy, anticipation, apprehension. Something will happen. The water glints in the distance. It is unplanned, unpredicted. Nothing binds her, nothing holds her. It is the unknown, and there is no way of stopping it. It waits, unseen, and she will meet it, it will meet her. There is no way of knowing what it will be. It does not know itself. But it will come into being. (248)

Drabble comments, "I left my character at the end of *The Middle Ground* about to give a party but uncertain what the future holds. This is very much

my own feeling both about the novel as a form, the woman's novel as a form, and about the future of women" (TWF 17).

Perhaps this difficulty with closure inspired Drabble to compose a trilogy of connected narratives, beginning with *The Radiant Way* in 1987, continuing with *A Natural Curiosity* (1989), which starts where *The Radiant Way* left off, and concluding with *The Gates of Ivory* in 1991. The trouble Drabble experienced in beginning *The Radiant Way*—until she conceived the happy idea of opening the new novel where the last one finished, with a party—may have also influenced her conception of a series of sequels. Critics have wondered whether her trilogy is saga or soap opera, suggesting that her problematization of Austen's conclusive comic closure has gone too far.

The Radiant Way, hailed as a panorama of contemporary Britain, follows three friends—Liz Headleand, psychiatrist, Alix Bowen, literature teacher, and Esther Breuer, art historian, as well as Liz's sister Shirley Harper, Northam housewife—from their Cambridge days in the fifties to the present of the late eighties, where they stand on the threshold of the future. But the novel also abandons them there, observing the setting sun, that auriate but ambiguous symbol of the novel's ironic title, while "The sun stands still" (396). Liz thinks, "On she would go, relentlessly, into the dark-red sun, down the radiant way, towards the only possible ending" (389).

Drabble assumed that social worker Alix Bowen would be compelled by natural curiosity to visit serial murderer Paul Whitmore, the specialist in severed heads who is apprehended at the conclusion of *The Radiant Way*, in order to discover what formative influences led him to a career of decapitations. Readers also complained that Drabble had neglected Shirley Harper in favour of her professional sister. Drabble's "Author's Note" (1988) prefaces *A Natural Curiosity*:

A Natural Curiosity is a sequel to *The Radiant Way*, and picks up some of the characters and stories, while adding others. I had not intended to write a sequel, but felt that the earlier novel was in some way unfinished, that it had asked questions it had not answered, and introduced people who had hardly been allowed to speak. At the moment of writing this, I intend to write a third but very different volume, which will follow the adventures of Stephen Cox in Kampuchea.

And she does. *The Gates of Ivory* portrays the trio investigating Stephen's disappearance in Cambodia. Like the other texts in the trilogy, it ends with anticipation, as the trio plan to return to England: "Yes, they will defy the English climate, and make a plan. Their spirits rise" (460).

Drabble says she too may return to rural England in her next novel, which she predicts will deal with a few families in Somerset, where she and her husband, biographer Michael Holroyd, have a home. Will she choose "3 or 4 families in a Country Village" as "the very thing to work on," as Austen describes her own subject matter in a 9 September 1814 letter to Anna Austen?

Older and wiser than the writer who condemned Austen's "fairytale endings" to Bergonzi in 1968, the editor of *Jane Austen*, who notes that "Austen has been criticized for the triviality of her subject matter" (JA 20),

no longer considers, as some critics do, that “she is cozy, complacent, middle class, conservative, unemotional, dry” (SS v), as she says in her 1989 Virago introduction. Happily remarried, Drabble can appreciate the comic closure of marriage: she notes, “As Jane Austen was well placed to realize, the plight of a poor old maid was not a happy one” (JA 19). While Drabble disapproves of “the unremitting efforts of Emma’s three sisters to get themselves married” (OCEL 1048) in Austen’s novel fragment *The Watsons*, she acknowledges (JA 20-21):

[E]ngagements and marriages were then, unlike now, the events which determined the entire future of the female half of the race. A whole career and every prospect of happiness hung on finding the right (or at times, any) man. So it is not surprising that the process of discovering the man was a theme to be treated with some seriousness. There was no other destiny: heroines could do no other than marry. The period before marriage was the most decisive part of a woman’s life, and the only period where choice played a considerable part.

Drabble notes, “We know that she liked to view her characters as real people, imagining futures for them beyond the end of the book” (JA 31). Perhaps this has encouraged subsequent writers to compose sequels to Austen’s novels. Drabble paid Austen that compliment herself by composing a sequel to *Persuasion*—“The Dower House at Kellynch: A Somerset Romance”—for the 1993 JASNA meeting. After reading this original fiction at Lake Louise, Drabble asserted, “All my novels are a dialogue with Jane Austen—and with various other people as well. But I’m always worrying about Jane Austen, answering her back and agreeing with her.” When asked to expand on her definition of her own fiction as a “dialogue with Jane Austen,” Drabble explained:

I suppose because she was so much the fonder of the genre in which I write and from which I have diverted quite often, but nevertheless she’s a very strong presence in the tradition, and her moral perceptions, her perception of English country life, her perception of personal relationships, these are always in the back of one’s mind, and I’m always asking myself how much have we changed, are we still obsessed by the same gentilities, the same snobberies, the same morality—some of which is manners, not morals—how deep is this in us? And I think that a lot of my fiction is about manners and morals, as is hers.

Margaret Drabble’s resistance to Austen’s certainties regarding closure persists in her fiction, however, despite her critical celebration of her Regency ancestress. Drabble’s “Somerset Romance” leaves her heroine Emma Watson up in the air quite literally, as she flies over the Canadian Rockies, anticipating her interview with Bill Elliot in Calgary regarding her potential purchase of Kellynch Hall and her possible marriage to either Bill or Burgo. “The Dower House at Kellynch” concludes thus: “I do not know what will happen. Emma Watson’s story has no ending. Who knows what awaits me, down there on earth?” (88). In the discussion period following her reading of the story at Lake Louise, Drabble replied to a question about her conclusion in this way: “I wasn’t quite sure how to resolve it, and, as you note, I don’t.”

So, “The Dower House at Kellynch,” Drabble’s first piece of fiction since *The Gates of Ivory* in 1991, suggests that, despite her admiration for Austen

so clearly acknowledged in her critical works, the contemporary writer's resistance to her Regency model's comic closure persists.

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