

“God Gave Us Our Relations”: The Watson Family

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“God gave us our relations,” goes the saying; “but we can *choose* our friends.” If Jane Austen didn’t invent that proverb, she could have, for the sentiment echoes through her writings. In her work, the relations—the family—are God-given and determined; either a boon or a curse, but in any case part of the essential “given” at the outset of a heroine’s story. The family forms the envelope of circumstances, a ready-made set of contingencies for which she can’t be held responsible, but which must be a major factor in the choice of the “friends” to whom she turns. God gave Elizabeth the Bennets, but she can and does choose Darcy rather than Collins, and she is richly responsible in that choice.

To change the proverb, the family is the frying-pan, out of which the heroine may leap, perhaps into the fire—into that hell of a loveless marriage; but perhaps the heroine may leap from the frying-pan to some better fate, to adorn the ponds and streams of Pemberley or Donwell Abbey, and complete a fortunate evolution.

It can of course be claimed that Jane Austen’s novels are all about sexual love, courtship and marriage. I’ve written about Jane Austen on love myself. But it can equally be asserted that they are all about the family; for the family is the essence of the world from which the heroine moves, with more or less of relief and delight, to her new sphere as wife and mother, in a family of her own that is to extend beyond the boundaries of the book she chiefly inhabits. What is Jane Austen’s subject? Why, “3 or 4 Families in a Country Village,” of course (*Letters*, 401). What does she principally create?—in her own words again, “pictures of domestic life” (*Letters*, 401, 452).¹

Her titles too focus on relations and the family. One of her juvenile compositions was called “The Three Sisters.” According to one Austen family member, her last novel, which we know as the fragment *Sanditon*, was to have been called *The Brothers*.² And in the middle of her career comes *The Watsons*. Conveniently for my purposes, *The Watsons* is named not for a central character, like *Emma*; not for a principal place, like *Northanger Abbey* and *Mansfield Park*; not for a prominent theme, like *Sense and Sensibility*, *Pride and Prejudice* and *Persuasion*; but for a family. If it was a title selected by its first editor, James Edward Austen-Leigh, rather than by its author, I’m sure he would still have had his aunt’s blessing. He certainly has mine!

The family for Jane Austen is the context and battleground for the heroine’s moral and psychological testing. And in its combination of intimacy, routine, long-standing and inescapable relationships, love, and exasperation, it forms a testing ground for judgement and charity, the two great virtues celebrated respectively in the Old and New Testaments, and extensively dramatized in Jane Austen’s novels at large. And before I plunge into *The Watsons*, I would like to take a few minutes to explore this major theme.

The conflict between judgement and charity forms one of the constant and recurring moral crises for Jane Austen's heroines, particularly for the highly intelligent ones. We know that one of the things her heroines must learn to do is to judge correctly.³ They are going through a constant process of sharpening and refining their perceptions: of correcting their "first impressions," discovering when "sensibility" is not sensible, when "pride" is proper pride, when judgement is "prejudice." To be good is not enough. The successful heroine must learn to be intelligently good; and to be intelligently good one must justly estimate people, one must discriminate. But on the other hand there is the dilemma of what one is to do with one's judgement once one has learned to make it. The educated heroine is all too likely to discover, "Use every man after his desert, and who shall 'scape whipping?" And to brandish the whip, to become a castigator and a misanthrope, is no graceful role for a heroine.

Jane Austen spoke of her favourite niece, Fanny Knight, as "one who had rather more Acuteness, Penetration & Taste, than love" (*Letters*, 408). I think that the same could be said of Jane Austen herself. We are all aware, all the time, of the acuteness, penetration and taste at work in the novels, and that is why we read them. And yet we judge her, I think, not deficient in the love: and here I mean love in its large and Christian sense of *caritas*, the Charity that suffereth long and is kind; that thinketh no evil, and rejoiceth not in iniquity. She values this virtue, values it fully, but sometimes perhaps with a wistful sense that it's one that other people are better at than she is.

In the Bennet sisters, Elizabeth and Jane, we have a little allegory of the conflict of judgement and love. Elizabeth has judgement, in its unrefined form as prejudice. We might almost say that Elizabeth does rejoice in iniquity. She admits, "Follies and nonsense, whims and inconsistencies, do divert me, I own." And she means to be uncommonly clever in taking decided dislikes (*P&P*, 57, 225). She has more acuteness, penetration and taste than love. Jane, on the other hand, has "candour" (in its eighteenth-century sense), "that key word in Miss Austen's vocabulary."⁴ Johnson defines *candour* as "sweetness of temper; . . . kindness." To be *candid* is to be "free from malice; not desirous to find fault"—to be very different from Elizabeth, even after her reform. Between them the two sisters epitomize Old Testament judgement and New Testament mercy. And although we judge and sympathize with Elizabeth, not Jane, and would rather be triumphantly right, or even stylishly wrong with her than kindly deluded with Jane, still Elizabeth who prided herself on her discernment must learn to reproach herself for having "disdained the generous candour of my sister" (208).

The same conflict is the basis of one of the most memorable and morally loaded incidents in the novels, Emma's snub of Miss Bates. Emma is another character in whom taste and discrimination are at war with charity. Priding herself on her discernment, she is exasperated by Miss Bates's "universal goodwill" (*E*, 21); and when the moment arrives she can't resist humiliating her. It takes Mr. Knightley to make Emma properly aware how her rampant "Acuteness, Penetration & Taste" have trampled on Miss Bates's "candour and generosity" (*E*, 375).

What, then, is the perceptive heroine to do with her perceptions? If the vigorous activity of the mind so acquaints us with evil, where are we to find the mercy to tolerate it? Must intelligent judgement, so painstakingly arrived at, be simply shelved, and subsumed in an indiscriminating benevolence? That is what Marianne Dashwood supposes is Elinor's principle: "I thought our judgments were given us merely to be subservient to those of our neighbours," she says sarcastically. But Elinor and Jane Austen have already worked out a practical relationship between judgement and mercy. "My doctrine," Elinor explains, "has never aimed at the subjection of the understanding. All I have ever attempted to influence has been the behaviour" (*S&S*, 94). One may judge Miss Bates accurately, as Mr. Knightley does, and recognize that she is one in whom "what is good and what is ridiculous are most unfortunately blended" (*E*, 375); but one must nevertheless treat her with courtesy and give her the best of the apple crop. The conduct, but not the judgement, must be regulated.

It is an ongoing moral battle, this reconciliation of judgement with charity, and it clearly occupied Jane Austen herself. In her letters she is both the erring Elizabeth and Emma, armed with the sharp awareness of what is wrong or ridiculous, and the author by whom they are punished for their lack of charity. We see the constant see-saw between her waspish acuteness and her determined benevolence. "I cannot anyhow continue to find people agreeable," says the Elizabeth in her author. But, speaks the Knightley, "I like the Mother, . . . because she is chearful & grateful for what she is at the age of 90 & upwards" (*Letters*, 129, 342).

In a classic essay, D. W. Harding characterized Jane Austen's position as one of "regulated hatred."⁵ We may argue to and fro about the phrase and its particular emphasis. Perhaps some of us would prefer "enlightened candour," or "compassionate judgement." But we do recognize the need for some such oxymoron to suggest the constant effort of the moral life to reconcile an acute awareness of evil with a determined practice of generous tolerance.

For the exercise of this tense moral life, the family is the perfect location. Where but in the intimacy of the family has one so golden and continuing an opportunity for gleaning knowledge and arriving at full and soundly-based judgement? And where but among close relations are the love and forbearance most abundant?—or at least most needed if *not* abundant. The family furnishes to the full both the opportunity for judgement and the urgent need for charity. In the family, if anywhere, we have the best sphere for the regulation of conduct. Here is the frying-pan, with the heroine and the other family fishes in it. Will it be down into the fire for her, or up and home free to the pond?

Brian Southam finds in *The Watsons* "a failing in generosity and a loss of creative power."⁶ I think many of us here would dispute the "loss of creative power"; but the failing in generosity is perhaps there to the extent that in this fragment Jane Austen's judgement is more to the fore than her charity. Emma Watson is bravely successful in regulating her behaviour; but she has more cause than any other heroine to judge her neighbours, and particularly her family, adversely.

The Watson family forms the hottest and most desperately disagreeable frying-pan that any Jane Austen heroine has to endure. And Emma Watson's plight in it is worse than Elizabeth's among the Bennets or Anne's among the Elliots, because, coming from a sojourn of fourteen years in her aunt's home, she is catapulted into immediate intimacy with a set of strangers. She is an alien by her own fireside. She has had no shared life in which to grow the love that will make candour easy. Neither has she developed those mental callouses that habit brings, whereby she will cease to be chafed by the family bristles and roughnesses. Her situation is most like Fanny Price's at Portsmouth; but Fanny knows she can go back to Mansfield Park, and is besides no financial burden on her family. Emma Watson has no escape. Her unfeeling brother brutally summarizes her situation,

"Unluckily [your Aunt] has left the pleasure of providing for you, to your Father, & without the power.—That's the long & the short of the business. After keeping you at a distance from your family for such a length of time as must do away all natural affection among us & breeding you up (I suppose) in a superior stile, you are returned upon their hands without a sixpence."
(VI, 352)

There is a delicate expression of brotherly affection! And Emma has further cause to dislike these family strangers with whom she is thrust into immediate and embarrassing intimacy. Her sisters are rivals and enemies. Margaret competes for Tom Musgrave's exclusive attention, and Penelope has ruined Elizabeth's happiness by turning Purvis against her. "Rivalry, Treachery between sisters!" Emma exclaims, deeply shocked (316). Her brother is coarse and unfeeling, her sister-in-law vulgar and pretentious. At the end of the fragment we are left with the bleak picture of Emma's taking refuge in her invalid father's room "from the dreadful mortifications of unequal Society, & family Discord—from the immediate endurance of Hard-hearted prosperity, low-minded Conceit, & wrong-headed folly" (361). From such a frying-pan, who would not leap into the fire? Her sister, Elizabeth, like Charlotte Lucas, feels she can't afford the luxury of marriage for love. "I should not like marrying a disagreeable Man. . .—but I do not think there *are* many very disagreeable Men;—I think I could like any good humoured Man with a comfortable Income" (318). But the more "refined" Emma, we know, will have to prove her outstanding moral integrity by refusing even the temptingly eligible Lord Osborne, even in the teeth of her misery at home. The precious liberty to choose your friends must be dearly bought.

I have summarized the pains of Emma's family situation only briefly, but Jane Austen fills in the picture with wonderful specificity, and in the process shows herself acquainted with the fine tuning of family dynamics, and surprisingly modern in many of her perceptions.

She is the first and most prominent author, I think, to specialize in dramatizing an emotion that is very familiar to us in the twentieth century, but which receives only limited attention in earlier literature: family shame. Can you ever forget the convulsions of embarrassment you suffered as a child, when mother came to school on sports day wearing a purple hat? Or when father cross-questioned the teacher about her

qualifications to teach you Latin? Confusion worse confounded? Or, to bring the record up to date, how many of *us* cause, almost every day of our lives, the same pangs of embarrassment to our sons, daughters, nephews, nieces, grandchildren. Jane Austen knew, in advance, how they feel!

The eighteenth-century novel, which reflects a more patriarchal society than our own, seldom notices this acute if not very exalted emotion. There, parents or brothers or sisters may be wicked or absurd, but their shortcomings don't reflect on their relatives in such a way as to make them squirm. To cause this particular emotion, there must be three parties: A, the sensitive consciousness; B, the erring relative; and C, some third person, more or less exalted, before whom A feels shame for B. B, the relation, is usually serenely unaware of doing anything wrong.

Dickens, closer to our own time, knew all about family shame, and dramatizes it most memorably in *Great Expectations*. You will remember how Pip, mediating between his blacksmith brother-in-law and the stately Miss Havisham, is driven nearly frantic by Joe's bumpkin maunderings. And when Joe proposes to come and visit Pip and his new genteel friends in London, Pip is appalled:

Let me confess exactly with what feelings I looked forward to Joe's coming [writes Pip].

Not with pleasure, though I was bound to him by so many ties; no; with considerable disturbance, some mortification, and a keen sense of incongruity. If I could have kept him away by paying money, I certainly would have paid money. (Ch. 27)

Jane Austen may be said to have specialized in this kind of "mortification."⁷ We remember Elizabeth at the Netherfield ball, agonized by the displayed absurdities of her mother, her cousin, and even her father:

To Elizabeth it appeared, that had her family made an agreement to expose themselves as much as they could during the evening, it would have been impossible for them to play their parts with more spirit, or finer success. (*P&P*, 101)

Fanny among the Prices at Portsmouth has many things to suffer; but the crowning torture is the arrival of Henry Crawford. Even though she doesn't like him and doesn't want to impress him, to her he is that refined third party whose scrutiny of her family immeasurably increases her sense of its shortcomings. "To her many other sources of uneasiness was added the severe one of shame for the home in which he found her" (*MP*, 400). The fact that such shame is irrational does not mend the matter. "It was soon pain upon pain, confusion upon confusion; for they were hardly in the High Street, before they met her father, whose appearance was not the better from its being Saturday" (401).

Conditions in the Watson family are such as to make this particular pain one of the major trials of the heroine. The relations are certainly not such as to be proud of; Lord Osborne, the third party, though not himself highly discriminating, is of a class to perceive the family's shabbiness in sharp focus; and Emma has a consciousness refined enough to suffer fully the shame of the exposure of the one before the other. Like Pip, she has been educated beyond her station, so that she is intensely aware of her

relations' vulgarity; and like Fanny, she has come down in the world; so that she suffers a particular complication of emotions. When Lord Osborne and Tom Musgrave come visiting, and catch the Misses Watson about to sit down to their unfashionably early dinner, Emma,

having in her Aunt's family been used to many of the Elegancies of Life, was fully sensible of all that must be open to the ridicule of Richer people in her present home.—Of the pain of such feelings, Eliz[abeth] knew very little;—her simpler Mind, or juster reason saved her from such mortification—& tho' shrinking under a general sense of Inferiority, she felt no particular Shame. (345).

The "particular Shame" is Emma's portion, and it is likely to be a recurring emotion when she goes to live with Mr. and Mrs. Robert Watson in Croydon. No other novel is set up with quite this emphasis on the trials of a heroine stuck with an alien and uncongenial family to afflict her with complicated embarrassment.

Another aspect of family life to which Jane Austen paid particular attention in *The Watsons* is one that the family shares with any small and closely-knit community: habit and routine. The many recurring actions and events in our lives, the means by which we structure our time, and come to expect that, say, breakfast will be at eight and lunch at noon, may be felt as a comforting and sustaining ritual, but may also become a maddening monotony. Consider the opening of *The Watsons*:

The first winter assembly in the Town of D. in Surry was to be held on Tuesday Octr ye 13th, & it was generally expected to be a very good one; a long list of Country Families was confidently run over as sure of attending, & sanguine hopes were entertained that the Osbornes themselves would be there.—The Edwardes' invitation to the Watsons followed of course. (314).

The emphasis is on what is recurrent, expected, predictable. The assembly is the first of a series, the participants can be "confidently run over," in advance, "as sure of attending"; and—as the narrator moves in to identify the two families that are to concern us—the invitation of one to the other "followed of course." Even the Watsons' old mare knows the routine, and proceeds to the Edwardes' house without guidance, "making only one Blunder, in proposing to stop at the Milleners" (322). Stanton and the town of D form a predictable world. In the opening scene of dialogue, Elizabeth Watson confidently and accurately predicts many of the details of the assembly and the behaviour of those attending it. The Edwardes will go early, and if Mr. Edwards wins at cards will stay late; there will be good soup afterwards in any case; Tom Musgrave will wait in the passage for the Osbornes, but will pay attention to Emma as he does to every new girl. And it's all perfectly accurate. All that is yet to be decided, it seems, is who is to dance with Mary Edwards. As the story advances we are constantly reminded how everything proceeds according to precedent. The Tomlinsons go first, and the sound of their passing carriage is "the constant signal for Mrs Edwards to order hers to the door" (327). All happens "as usual" (327). Elizabeth has had "a ten years Enjoyment" of the winter assemblies (315), her sisters several seasons; and now Emma, the youngest, she says, will "have as fair a chance as we have

all had, to make your fortune" (320). The Watson sisters are considered as a series, and Tom Musgrave apparently expects them to fall for him as regularly as a row of dominoes.

Tom Musgrave, who occupies the role of anti-hero, makes it his business both to observe predictable routines himself and to be acquainted with other peoples'. "You are determined to be in good time I see, as usual," he greets the Edwards at the ball (327). He knowledgeably declares, the next day, "As to Mrs Edwardes' carriage being used the day after a Ball, it is a thing quite out of rule I assure you" (340). And he is perfectly acquainted with the usual mealtimes among the Watsons at Stanton. It becomes Emma's task to combat and overthrow his confident expectations, and restore some spontaneity and reality to an existence lived according to rule and precedent. She takes a certain pleasure in disappointing him. When, according to his constant rule, he retires to solitude after the Osbornes have left the ball, Emma assures him—though somewhat against her conscience—that the dancing had been as spirited as ever (340).

It is to be Emma's role, in the local society and in her family as with Tom Musgrave, to break the monotonous and predictable chain of expected occurrences. She is the Cinderella, or the youngest of the twelve dancing princesses. Already at the ball we see the process beginning. She surprises and charms everybody by dancing spontaneously with little Charles Blake. "Emma did not think, or reflect;—she felt & acted," we hear (330). And her action is the more healthy and refreshing for the stultifying social routines that it interrupts. She overthrows Tom's confident expectations by refusing to dance with him, flirt with him, or ride in his phaeton. But after the ball is over, Emma in Stanton must reconcile herself to the trivial round and common task. In the emphasis on ritual recurrence and social routines—the predictable events of the winter assembly, the dreary timetable observed by the Edwards, the early hours kept by the Watsons, the foreseen invitation to Croydon—Jane Austen has established an atmosphere that goes with Emma's stultifying entrapment in her uncongenial family circle. Things in families and small towns can be monotonous, claustrophobic, frustrating. That is one more of the pains of the frying-pan.

In the 1960s the psychologist Eric Berne gave our language a new phrase, *Games People Play*.⁸ He could have used Jane Austen's characters, particularly those in *The Watsons*, as the case studies. For Jane Austen, like Berne, is alert not only to the routines and rituals in families and small communities, but to their development into dishonest psychological manoeuvring that is conducted according to its own sets of tacitly acknowledged rules. Husbands and wives and family members, because of their intimacy and continual association, are particularly adept and prone to play games with each other, and the games may be more or less destructive. The Edwards, we hear, know when to stop in their ritual sparring about his evenings at the whist club:

"Your Club wd be better fitted for an Invalid, said Mrs E[dwards] if you did not keep it up so late."—This was an old greivance.—"So late, my dear,

what are you talking of; cried the Husband with sturdy pleasantry—. We are always at home before Midnight. They would laugh at Osborne Castle to hear you call *that* late; they are but just rising from dinner at midnight." —"That is nothing to the purpose.—retorted the Lady calmly. The Osbornes are to be no rule for us. You had better meet every night, & break up two hours sooner." So far, the subject was very often carried;—but Mr & Mrs Edwards were so wise as never to pass that point. (325)

Other players of games are not so forbearing, and their games are more damaging. Tom Musgrave skilfully plays the game called "Flirt" with the Watson family over a number of years, with painful consequences for all other players. Mrs. Robert Watson perpetrates various fictions, which everybody knows to be fictions, but which are effective in the game that Berne might call "The Style to Which I am Accustomed." The object is to put down her in-law relations, and make them properly conscious of her superior status:

Mrs Robert exactly as smart as she had been at her own party, came in [to dinner] with apologies for her dress—"I would not make you wait, said she, so I put on the first thing I met with.—I am afraid I am a sad figure." (353)

And later, at dinner, she cries,

"I do beg & entreat that no Turkey may be seen today. I am really frightened out of my wits at the number of dishes we have already. Let us have no Turkey I beseech you." (354)

There is clearly not a word that is honestly meant to convey its own meaning in such speeches. Essentially they announce, "You are my poor relations, and I'm not going to let you forget it." Elizabeth Watson, cast in the ungracious role of Patsy, has to bring on the turkey, by way of putting on the special show that her sister-in-law expects, but refuses to appreciate.

Margaret Watson is another habitual game-player, though not a very good one; and she early angles for some losing role in which to cast Emma. There is no way for Emma to win in the issue of whose bedroom she is to share:

"I suppose, said Marg[are]t rather quickly to Emma, you and I are to be together: Eliz[abe]th always takes care to have a room to herself."—"No—Eliz[abe]th gives me half her's."—"Oh!—(in a soften'd voice, & rather mortified to find she was not ill used) "I am sorry I am not to have the pleasure of your company—especially as it makes me nervous to be much alone." (351)

Margaret performs a set of poses, moves, ploys, aimed at getting a payoff. Reality doesn't get a look in, for games played in life, as Berne shows, are basically dishonest. Emma's instinct to withdraw from Margaret is sound and healthy. She is one who will win by refusing play.

Eric Berne provides a full set of rules for the game called "Alcoholic." Jane Austen, I think, gives all the material for a cognate game called "Invalid." She might well have coined a new aphorism: "God gave us our diseases; but we can choose our ailments." In the basic tension between judgement and charity that I have identified as a central moral concern in her work, ill health provides a crucial test. Who so deserves our compas-

sion as the sick? On the other hand, who so wears it out? And the devoted attendance exacted by those who fall ill prompts the sneaking suspicion that perhaps they do it on purpose. "Speak roughly to your little boy," advises the Duchess in *Alice*, "And beat him when he sneezes; / He only does it to annoy, / Because he knows it teases." Such exasperation with other people's symptoms is familiar in both real and fictional families. "Kitty has no discretion in her coughs," says Mr. Bennet drily of his daughter; "she times them ill" (*P&P*, 6). There are other characters who seem to choose their ailments, and do it to annoy. Mrs. Bennet is forever involving her nerves in order to get extra compassion and attention. Mrs. Churchill in *Emma* is always assumed to be using her ill health as a power play, until by actually dying she is "fully justified," and cleared of all suspicion of having done it to annoy (*E*, 387). The valetudinarian Mr. Woodhouse is a constant tax on Emma's good humour, and it is much to her moral credit that she is more patient with him than most modern daughters would be.

Jane Austen herself had her own experience of parents who play "Invalid."

My mother continues hearty [she wrote to Cassandra from Steventon], her appetite & nights are very good, but her Bowels are still not entirely settled, & she sometimes complains of an Asthma, a Dropsy, Water in her Chest & a Liver Disorder. (*Letters*, 39)

For one who eats and sleeps well, that is quite a list of complaints, and Jane's patience is clearly tried, although she stops short of the witticism that she would employ of someone less nearly related.⁹

Health and ill health are a major issue in the Watson family. Emma Watson's brother Sam, who is clearly to be the hero of a sub-plot, is a surgeon, and is prevented from attending the ball because "just now it is a sickly time at Guilford" (321). Her sister Penelope is trying to make a match with "rich old Dr. Harding" before he expires of asthma (317). Her uncle Turner was an invalid who died, and her father is another, and also fated to die soon.

The presentation of Mr. Watson shows a tension between judgement and compassion that is not fully resolved. Some critics have found him to be one of the few admirable characters in the work.¹⁰ We know that he is "a Man of Sense and Education" (361), and that he has the correct views about the proper way to deliver a sermon (393-94). And Emma and the hero Howard demonstrate their virtue by being solicitous for his comfort. So far compassion reigns. But the invalid in the family is subject to sharp judgement, too. A father of four girls who needs babysitting by one of them, even on the night of a ball, calls for great filial self-sacrifice. And what business has such a father to tell them, of an eligible young clergyman, "By the bye, he enquired after one of my Daughters, but I do not know which. I suppose you know among yourselves" (344). He begins to make Mr. Bennet look like a truly solicitous parent. Mr. Bennet, as we all remember, *did* pay that crucial visit to Netherfield; but when Lord Osborne visits at Stanton, Mr. Watson is not about to exert himself to promote this eligible acquaintance. A message of excuse is sent to

Osborne Castle, we are told, "on the too-sufficient plea of Mr Watson's infirm state of health" (348). The plea may be sufficient; but we have just heard Mr. Watson testily exclaim, "I cannot return the visit.—I would not if I could" (348). There he declares himself responsible, and must be judged accordingly. On one occasion he causes his daughters severe and avoidable embarrassment. When Elizabeth and Emma are just recovering from the humiliation of Lord Osborne's arriving simultaneously with the early dinner service, and the visit is proceeding pleasantly, Nanny arrives with the querulous message, "Please Ma'am, Master wants to know why he be'nt to have his dinner" (346). There is only so much one can forgive a father, even one who is "a little peevish under immediate pain" (348). The invalid Mr. Watson presents in a vivid form the moral testing that is a constant condition of family life.

In the Watson family, it sometimes seems, charity begins anywhere but at home. It is one of the distressing aspects of Emma's sojourn among the strangers who are her brothers and sisters (348) that she must learn how quickly familiarity breeds contempt. Robert Watson, when visiting at Stanton, refuses to put fresh powder in his hair when he dresses for dinner. "I think there is powder enough in my hair for my wife & sisters," he declares, when his wife reproaches him (353). But when company arrives, in the person of Tom Musgrave, he swiftly makes excuses: "You cannot be more in dishabille than myself.—We got here so late, that I had not time even to put a little fresh powder in my hair" (357). Jane Austen has a sharp sense of the dual identity adopted by those who are one person within the family, and another before those they want to impress. Margaret is an extended study in such a person. She even has two voices, one for the family, and one for company. Emma, as the new sister, initially gets the benefit of the company voice:

On meeting her long-absent Sister, as on every occasion of shew, [Margaret's] manner was all affection & her voice all gentleness; continued smiles & a very slow articulation being her constant resource when determined on pleasing.—

She was now so "delighted to see dear, dear Emma" that she could hardly speak a word in a minute.—"I am sure we shall be great friends"—she observed, with much sentiment, as they were sitting together. (349)

But presently, Emma hears Margaret address Elizabeth, on domestic matters, "in a sharp quick accent, totally unlike the first" (351); and Emma herself, after a few days of Margaret's acquaintance, is soon reduced to the same status of mere sister, and finds "the continuance of the gentle voice beyond her calculation short" (361). It is not surprising that she should come to be relieved even by the company of Tom Musgrave, because his presence produces the relative graciousness of company manners among family members who otherwise bicker and quarrel. Emma has already learned that "a family party might be the worst of all parties" (358).

However, the picture is not unrelievedly bleak. Even among the Watsons there are moments of spontaneous and joyful communion. Small

units within the family group may find themselves a precious sanctuary even in the most uncomfortable frying-pan. Elizabeth and Jane Bennet, and Fanny and Susan Price, like Jane and Cassandra Austen, form a congenial alliance within their larger families; and so do Emma and Elizabeth Watson. These two are able to enjoy the full pleasure of family intimacy, as Emma cheerfully gives her sister a detailed account of everything that happened at the ball:

As their quietly-sociable little meal concluded, Miss Watson could not help observing how comfortably it had passed. "It is so delightful to me, said she, to have Things going on in peace & goodhumour. . . . Now, tho' we have had nothing but fried beef, how good it has all seemed." (343)

But even in this mood Elizabeth has to admit that this family accord is very rare. "I wish everybody were as easily satisfied as you—but poor Marg[are]t is very snappish, & Penelope owns she had rather have Quarrelling going on, than nothing at all" (343). Some relations, perhaps, we might choose even if God hadn't already given them to us. But in *The Watsons* most of them give the heroine every reason to choose *other* friends.

As I approach my conclusion I can't resist the temptation to consider, briefly, why *The Watsons* remained a fragment, and what its shape would have been if it were finished. For Emma's place in the family is to test and qualify her for the moral and emotional victory that we expect of a Jane Austen heroine.

Critics have found fault with Emma Watson as heroine because she is too good: her judgements are sound from the outset, they say, and so close to her creator's that there is no room for moral growth, or for that irony at her expense which is one of the delights of Jane Austen's fiction, and one of the triumphs of her art.¹¹ But those who argue thus take the erring heroines, Catherine, Marianne, Elizabeth, and Emma Woodhouse as the essential Austen model. They forget that Elinor, Fanny and Anne are also heroines. These ones have less to learn, because they have the right principles from the beginning. But each has a significant progress nonetheless. Fanny Price, for instance, may be morally static, but she is socially mobile, and must learn to assert herself in society in order to make her goodness effective. Emma Watson's progress is to be comparable; and like Fanny's it will be a social rather than a moral journey.

Emma's shortcoming is also a virtue. She is "refined," as Elizabeth tells her in the first scene (318). From her advantaged home with her rich uncle and aunt she brings a moral fastidiousness into a circle that cannot afford to be fastidious. She accepts Elizabeth's comment on her refinement as a criticism: "If my opinions are wrong, I must correct them—if they are above my situation, I must endeavour to conceal them" (318). Here is the pointer for Emma's progress, and the central thematic statement of the novel that is to be. The irony at Emma's expense—and there *is* irony—is aimed at her social hypersensitivity. When Tom Musgrave is interrupted in his interesting anecdote of what Lord Osborne and Howard have said about her, anyone else would simply prompt him

to go on. But "Emma, tho' suffering a good deal from Curiosity, dared not remind him" (359). We can smile as she pays the price for being refined. Snobbery, as all the fuss about the Osbornes suggest, is a major satiric target. And the conflict of feeling with propriety, like that of sense and sensibility in the earlier novel, is to be thematically central. As Lucy Steele's unfeeling calculation is an extreme version of Elinor's "sense," so Mrs. Edwards, the "judge of Decorum" (334), is a parody of Emma's excessive concern with proper behaviour. Other characters will also have to overcome the social punctilios that are too apt to govern Emma. Sam Watson will win Mary Edwards when he conquers his own social diffidence; and she will respond to his love when she learns to recognize her feeling for him in spite of her parents' disapproval. The hero, Mr. Howard of the "unexceptionable . . . Manners" (335), will have an associated trial. An excessive deference to the wishes of his patroness Lady Osborne will initially inhibit his love for Emma, but he too will learn to follow the dictates of his own heart rather than of society. (I'm convinced, you see, that *Lady Osborne*, the "handsome" dowager [329], is Emma's rival, and not *Miss Osborne* as Chapman assumes.¹² Miss Osborne will be too busy jilting Tom Musgrave to enter deeply into a relation with Howard.) In endorsing strong and authentic feeling rather than prudence and propriety, *The Watsons* would have been one of the most Romantic of Jane Austen's novels.

We have no falling-off in creativity in *The Watsons*. In its thematic structure, as in its evocation of the family, this fragment suggests that it could have been part of a beautiful and successful novel, if not always a comfortable one. Then why did Jane Austen abandon it?

The usual biographical answer is derived from Fanny Lefroy: "Somewhere in 1804 she began 'The Watsons,' but her father died early in 1805, and it was never finished."¹³ The domestic frustrations and the economic difficulties following on her father's death are usually cited as the reason for abandoning a work which was in any case depressing and too "low" in its setting.¹⁴ But I believe her father's death itself, and its inevitable link in Jane Austen's mind with Mr. Watson's death, is the major reason. We know from her other works that Jane Austen was chary of representing death. Mr. Dashwood dies before the action of his novel begins, and Dr. Grant after it is over. Mrs. Churchill dies in the course of the action, but off-stage; and after all we had never met her. In her completed fiction, in fact, Jane Austen never "kills" a developed character. Mr. Watson would have been the exception. He is a prominent figure in the story—the heroine's sensible but selfish father—and he is to die in the middle of it, possibly in a dramatized scene. And while Jane Austen was working herself up to this scene—and it would have been *hard* work for her—her own father died, suddenly and unexpectedly. For one who had been musing along the lines, "God gave us our relations, but we can choose our friends," there must have been a surge of guilt, strong though irrational. With the god-like authority of an author, she had *given* her heroine a father, and planned to take him away. It must have seemed as though that god-like power had slipped nightmarishly from her fiction to her life when

her own father was removed. No wonder she closed that book, and never opened it again.

And so, for reasons that belong to Jane Austen as daughter rather than to Jane Austen as artist, Emma Watson is never to escape her family frying-pan, but must stay immobilized among her god-given relations. But we may choose to project how she would choose her friends.

NOTES

- ¹ I use R. W. Chapman's edition of the letters as of the works. See Jane Austen's *Letters to her sister Cassandra and others*, second edition (London, Oxford University Press, 1952); *The Novels of Jane Austen*, 5 vols, third edition (London: Oxford University Press, 1933-34); and *The Works of Jane Austen: Minor Works*, vol. VI in the series (London: Oxford University Press, 1954, reprinted with revisions 1963). My references to *The Watsons* are taken from the latter.
- ² See Chapman's note (VI, 363).
- ³ Susan Morgan has explored this process at large in *In the Meantime: Character and Perception in Jane Austen's Fiction* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1980).
- ⁴ The phrase is Q. D. Leavis's, from her 1941 article "A Critical Theory of Jane Austen's Writings (I)." See *A Selection from 'Scrutiny'*, compiled by F. R. Leavis, 2 vols (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1968), II, 21.
- ⁵ "Regulated Hatred: An Aspect of the Work of Jane Austen," *Scrutiny*, VIII (1940), pp. 346-62.
- ⁶ *Jane Austen's Literary Manuscripts* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1964), p. 63.
- ⁷ "Mortification" is a word that Stuart Tave connects with Elizabeth's moral development. *Some Words of Jane Austen* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1973), p. 116 ff.
- ⁸ *Games People Play: The Psychology of Human Relationships* (New York: Grove Press, 1964).
- ⁹ George Tucker, who takes a more charitable view of Jane's mother than I do, discusses Mrs. Austen's hypochondria in *A Goodly Heritage: A History of Jane Austen's Family* (Manchester: Carcanet New Press, 1983), pp. 72-73.
- ¹⁰ Marvin Mudrick finds that "Mr. Watson is the only figure . . . who aspires, in outline at least, toward the tragic." *Jane Austen: Irony as Defense and Discovery* (Berkeley and Los Angeles: University of California Press, 1952), p. 147.
- ¹¹ See especially Mudrick, pp. 141, 197, 151, and Southam, pp. 68-70.
- ¹² In the edition I use Chapman quotes from the Memoir: "much of the interest of the tale was to arise from Lady Osborne's love for Mr. Howard, and his counter affection for Emma, whom he was finally to marry." But he adds a note to "Lady Osborne": "Doubtless a slip for *Miss Osborne*. Lady O. was 'nearly fifty' (p. 329)" (363). I hope it's not only because I'm nearly fifty myself that I dispute this assumption. We likewise hear that "Of the females [including Miss Osborne], Ly. Osborne had by much the finest person;—tho' nearly 50, she was very handsome, & had all the Dignity of Rank" (329). We may remember that another widow of about the same age, Emma's aunt, has just married the dashing Irish Captain O'Brien.
- ¹³ "Is it Just?" *Temple Bar*, 67 (1883), p. 777.
- ¹⁴ James Edward Austen-Leigh had suggested that Jane Austen became aware "of the evil of having placed her heroine too low, in a position of poverty and obscurity." *Memoir of Jane Austen*, second edition (1871), p. 296.