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Sororal Generations: Fanny Price's Sister Strategy

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<1>Charles Darwin's theories of evolution reframe everyday family connections between parents and children as part of a larger narrative shaping not only individuals, but also far-future generations. Contemporary evolutionary theory broadens Darwin's scope to acknowledge that relationships between siblings also have a powerful impact on the biological success of family groups, as altruistic acts between sisters and brothers can alter the whole family's evolutionary and generational legacy.¹ This article argues that Jane Austen's *Mansfield Park* reflects contemporary evolutionary theory's acknowledgement of the importance of sibling connections, while further suggesting that substantial generational shifts in family groups can occur not only through parents and children, but also between older and younger sisters. In an example of what I term "lateral descent," Fanny Price actively works to ensure that her younger sister Susan can "reproduce" her own plot with small, but significant improvements. In doing so, Fanny not only helps to guarantee the economic and reproductive success of her larger family unit, but also seeks to shape the coming generations by nurturing her connection with another woman – a surprising achievement for a such an unrelentingly passive character. Understanding Fanny's actions on behalf of her sister as evolutionarily-motivated helps readers make sense of how this meek heroine exerts such a powerful influence over her environment and challenges the perception that Austen's novel is invested in stasis, rather than subtle, but significant change.

<2>Viewing Fanny and Susan's relationship as a form of descent pushes against the narrow readings of Darwin, and Darwinian readings of novels, that only grant the impulse to reproduce oneself to parents. Granted, Darwin himself rarely mentions siblings in his theories, instead spinning a generational narrative of repetition and variation that is largely motivated and enacted by sex and childbearing. His theory of sexual selection, which depends "on the advantage which certain individuals have over others of the same sex and species solely in respect of reproduction," especially foregrounds erotic desire leading to children as the primary force behind both generational continuity and change (*Descent of Man* 243). Organisms are attracted to partners with certain appealing or beneficial qualities that they hope to pass on to their offspring, creating a new generation that is similar to, but better than the previous one. Current evolutionary literary criticism often echoes Darwin in focusing on erotic and parental relations (and ignores the more recent evolutionary research focusing on larger kin groups) because his forces of generational repetition and variation can so easily be found in nineteenth-century courtship narratives, in which a heroine must decide which qualities matter the most to her in a husband and a potential father to her children. If she chooses poorly, she dooms her

children to repeat the mistakes of their parents; if she chooses well, she will satisfy her evolutionary parental drive to create another, better version of herself.

<3>Because of Darwin's focus on sexual reproduction and the nineteenth-century novel's preoccupation with marriage and descent, many critics who perform evolutionary readings of Austen's novels, including *Mansfield Park*,² focus narrowly on individual romantic and reproductive desires as manifestations of biological urges, ignoring vital sibling relationships.³ Brian Boyd's 1998 article "Jane, Meet Charles: Literature, Evolution, and Human Nature," for example, views Austen's novel as dramatizing the Darwinian process of female choice, and therefore focuses primarily on the romantic relationships between Henry and Fanny and Fanny and Edmund. He uses such "truths" as "females choose males as partners on the basis of their ability to support the offspring" (17) and "Women the world over prize intelligence...and verbal skills...in prospective partners" (18) to support the idea that Fanny's negotiation of these two men is fraught with the forces of sexual selection. Similarly, the 2012 study *Graphing Jane Austen: The Evolutionary Basis of Literary Meaning* demonstrates the tendency to restrict the analysis of characters to their individual marital outcomes and implied reproductive futures, as the study's heroines are declared successful based only on their marriages rather than a broader network of relations and influence. These arguments are limited by their focus on romantic relationships as the primary mode of communicating evolutionary desires and their assumption that individual sexual reproduction is the primary marker of success for all characters; in this narrow view, regardless of her efforts on behalf of her whole family, Fanny Price cannot truly succeed as an evolutionary agent until she becomes a mother.

<4>In focusing on Fanny's relationship with her sister, through which she attempts to create a more successful version of herself, however, I hope to broaden this narrow view and correct the misapprehension that evolutionary descent can only occur through traditional generational relations; *Mansfield Park's* readers can see that the drive to "reproduce" oneself does not only express itself in parent-child affiliations. My argument is supported by a contemporary strain of less individualistic, essentialist, and teleological Darwinism than the narrow version favored by the Darwinist literary critics above. Evolutionary biologist Sarah Blaffer Hrdy's *Mother Nature*, for example, celebrates the power of maternity, but acknowledges the multitude of influential roles females play in generational shaping, even when – as in the case of a hive's many sterile bees, who nevertheless watch over the queen's many offspring – they do not literally reproduce. Feminist neo-materialists like Elizabeth Grosz also argue that "Darwin develops an account of the real that is an open and generative force of self-organization and growing complexity, a dynamic real that has features of its own which...are more readily understood in terms of active vectors of change" (19). In Grosz's, and my, conception of Darwinism, there is no single path for an individual, humanity, or any species to follow, no set biological destiny for mankind, let alone for women. Fanny Price, like a mother in a more typical narrative, works to create a better future for her family by manipulating circumstances so that her sister, rather than her child, becomes her rightful "offspring." In a result that Darwin, with his admiration for "endless forms, most beautiful and most wonderful" himself would have appreciated, the expected straight line of reproduction is shown to have curves after all (*The Origin*...507).

<5>This broader evolutionary context is necessary for reconciling Fanny Price's status in the Austen pantheon as her most passive and meek heroine with the fact that Fanny nevertheless is rewarded for her subtle manipulations of her environment.⁴ Fanny gets what she wants in her marriage to her cousin Edmund, and what she wants is a closing off of Mansfield Park to dangerous outsiders like the Crawford siblings; in comparison to, for example, Pemberley's revitalization through Elizabeth's comparatively cross-class marriage to Darcy, Mansfield Park and Fanny seem destined for claustrophobic stasis and stagnation – forever repetition without variation.⁵ This assumption is challenged, however, by critics like Mary Jean Corbett, whose analysis of Fanny's marriage recognizes its ability to, among other things, nurture her connection with her sister Susan. The “breach between sisters created by the unequal alliances described at the opening of *Mansfield Park* is repaired in one branch of the next generation, as... two of the Price sisters...renew their attachment” (47). I echo Corbett's attention to this significant achievement and further argue that through Susan we can see Fanny's influence expanding beyond her own romantic and reproductive destiny to that of her younger sister, and, potentially the entire Mansfield estate. Fanny reproduces herself in the figure of Susan and sets her sister up as potentially an even more powerful shaper of the next generation – as, I argue below, a potential wife to heir Tom Bertram – than she herself comes to be. Fanny not only achieves exactly what she wants through her marriage to Edmund – she also positions those around her for the maximum benefit of her family group and all coming descendants, not just her own.

<6>Fanny's interest in Susan begins in her ill-fated visit to Portsmouth. Susan is at first simply described as the elder of Fanny's two living younger sisters, and “a well-grown fine girl of fourteen” (377). Fanny soon finds herself paying greater attention to this largely unknown sister, however; first, she speaks to their mother in “a fearless, self-defending tone, which startled Fanny...” (379) who is of course, far more used to the polite rebellions of her cousins and her own meek silence. Soon after Susan proves herself to be active in attempting, albeit unsuccessfully, to bring some measure of gentility to the loud household. When Susan brings her sister tea after the long journey to Portsmouth, which ended in Fanny's intense disappointment at the state of her family's home, Fanny, “... was very thankful... Susan had an open, sensible countenance; she was like William, and Fanny hoped to find her like him in disposition and goodwill towards herself” (383-384). At this moment, Fanny, who does not feel much connection to any of her siblings other than the prized William, hopes to see Susan as a potential ally. Even more so, however, this is a moment of kin recognition in which Fanny connects to Susan through William – if there could be similarity between William and Susan, perhaps Fanny ought to treat Susan as she treats William, whose professional success she actively promotes (and eventually, through Henry, secures). Though Fanny is not consciously thinking of her siblings in such mercenary terms, this is nevertheless the first moment in which, like William, Susan shows the potential to be a worthwhile investment for Fanny's attention and access to resources.

<7>Soon, after a short period of doubt that Susan's disposition might be “far from amiable” (391), Fanny's opinion of Susan rises as she gets to know her better. Her earlier concerns are put down to the fact that she and Susan possess different characters, but greater

understanding allows her to see that difference as an asset. She begins to actively compare the younger girl to herself, and finds Susan coming out the stronger of the two sisters. "Susan was only acting on the same truths, and pursuing the same system, which her own judgment acknowledged, but which her more supine and yielding temper would have shrunk from asserting. Susan tried to be useful, where she could only have gone away and cried..." (395). Fanny has moved from recognition to disapprobation to some measure of admiration for her rougher younger sister.

<8>This development in attitude would mean little if Fanny were not willing to act on her new-found understanding. She does not merely quietly admire her sister's gumption, however, but begins to work to help and improve Susan's character, and, eventually, station in life. This begins in small ways, with Fanny resolving a dispute between Susan and Betsey, and then encouraging the former to more delicate behavior toward the rest of the family and higher education through daily reading direct by Fanny.

Her greatest wonder on the subject soon became—not that Susan should have been provoked into disrespect and impatience against her better knowledge—but that so much better knowledge, so many good notions should have been hers at all; and that, brought up in the midst of negligence and error, she should have formed such proper opinions of what ought to be; she, who had had no cousin Edmund to direct her thoughts or fix her principles. (397-398)

Once again, Fanny compares her situation, under the just direction of Edmund's attention, to her sister's more solitary upbringing, and comes away impressed with Susan's inner capacities

<9>During this time, the reader becomes aware that Susan longs for something beyond her narrow Portsmouth life: to follow her sister's path toward relative comfort and refinement represented by Mansfield Park. Among lessons on literature and history, Susan and Fanny's educational mornings also touch on:

... description of the people, the manners, the amusements, the ways of Mansfield Park. Susan, who had an innate taste for the genteel and well-appointed, was eager to hear, and Fanny could not but indulge herself in dwelling on so beloved a theme...after a time, Susan's very great admiration of everything said or done in her uncle's house, and earnest longing to go into Northamptonshire, seemed almost to blame her for exciting feelings which could not be gratified. (419)

Susan's "innate taste" pulls her toward a family home she has never seen, only heard described by Fanny and referenced by her mother. Encouraged by Fanny's nostalgia, she begins to see herself as more properly aligned with the Mansfield family than with her Portsmouth siblings.

<10>She also perhaps begins to imagine a method for officially entering into that faraway household – when news of Tom's illness reaches Portsmouth, Fanny finds a sympathetic listener in Susan. "Susan was always ready to hear and to sympathise. Nobody else could be interested in so remote an evil as illness in a family above an hundred miles off" (428). In emphasizing the physical distance between the two cousins, the author perhaps wryly implies a reason for Susan's surprising "interest." Cousin Tom is a profligate son, but he is also the unmarried heir to the wealthier branch of the family's estate, and his illness is just the thing to

seem romantic to a dissatisfied teenager. The trepidation with which Fanny treats Henry Crawford demonstrates that she at least is wary of a rake who claims to be reformed, but Susan may be more willing to accept such a transformation, especially if it came coupled with the opportunity for a better life.

<11>Fanny of course cannot acknowledge such hidden desires (she barely acknowledges her own unspoken wants, after all), but this yearning in her sister nevertheless comes to fruition when Susan is included in Fanny's summons back to Lady Bertram's side following Maria's flight with Henry Crawford and Julia's elopement. Edmund simply writes "My father wishes you to invite Susan to go with you for a few months" (443), and the reader is left to fill in the blanks of how Sir Thomas would have known that Susan would be an asset to Fanny in her travels, or suited to life at Mansfield. One must conclude that Fanny writes of her sister in her letters to Edmund, and that Edmund includes her observations about the girl's potential in his reports to his father (who would be very interested to know if his lesson about Fanny's place in the world were taking hold). There is very little other reason for Susan to be included in the invitation, other than Fanny's good reports and perhaps even hints about the younger girl's desire to know her cousins better; Edmund easily could fetch his cousin alone from Portsmouth to Mansfield with no breach of propriety or comfort. From being the object of charity, therefore, Fanny has grown to be a patron; she has, however indirectly, secured her sister a temporary place in the home she desires and a temporary respite from the chaos of Portsmouth.

<12>When Susan enters the Mansfield home, she gives immediate subtle indication that her stay may not, in fact, be temporary with just how cannily she understands the relationships of those around her and manages her own fears. She has some trepidation that "all her best manners, all her lately acquired knowledge of what was practised here, was on the point of being called into action. Visions of good and ill breeding, of old vulgarisms and new gentilities, were before her; and she was meditating much upon silver forks, napkins, and finger-glasses" (446). Still, she acquits herself well with Lady Bertram and learns quickly to ignore Mrs. Norris's agitation at her presence: "Susan... came perfectly aware that nothing but ill-humour was to be expected from aunt Norris; and was so provided with happiness, so strong in that best of blessings, an escape from many certain evils, that she could have stood against a great deal more indifference than she met with from the others" (449). In this moment Susan demonstrates a deeper understanding of, or at least healthier reaction toward, Mrs. Norris than Fanny has ever been able to muster. Susan realizes that Mrs. Norris is naturally unpleasant and that her unpleasantness was not personal or controllable, and so simply ignores her and enjoys her time at the estate. Fanny, who spent her time under Mrs. Norris's judgmental gaze trying to make herself small enough to escape censure, only to find that that was not possible, would not be able to disconnect another's "ill-humour" from her own unworthiness, real or imagined. Susan's greater strength of character, noted by her sister in their earlier interactions, allows her to be a happier guest and niece than Fanny has yet managed.

<13>Susan's success in integrating into the Mansfield family is confirmed in the closing paragraphs of the novel, which make official both the transfer of position between Fanny and Susan, and Susan's superiority in fulfilling that position. When Fanny and Edmund desire to

marry, the only thing holding them back is Lady Bertram's insistence that she could not do without Fanny's constant assistance. Thankfully, Susan, who never left after the proposed temporary stay, is available to fill the void:

But it was possible to part with [Fanny], because Susan remained to supply her place. Susan became the stationary niece, delighted to be so; and equally well adapted for it by a readiness of mind, and an inclination for usefulness, as Fanny had been by sweetness of temper, and strong feelings of gratitude. Susan could never be spared. First as a comfort to Fanny, then as an auxiliary, and last as her substitute, she was established at Mansfield, with every appearance of equal permanency. Her more fearless disposition and happier nerves made everything easy to her there. With quickness in understanding the tempers of those she had to deal with, and no natural timidity to restrain any consequent wishes, she was soon welcome and useful to all; and after Fanny's removal succeeded so naturally to her influence over the hourly comfort of her aunt, as gradually to become, perhaps, the most beloved of the two. (472-473)

Fanny was never entirely comfortable in her position as her aunt's helper. Granted, some of this was due to Maria and Julia's constant mocking of her, Mrs. Norris's unrelenting criticism, and her homesickness due to her romanticized memories of life in Portsmouth; Susan does not have to contend with these since the cousins have been expelled from the family nest, and their overly supportive aunt with them, and her greater worldliness keeps her from thinking of her former home with undeserved nostalgia. Some comfort, however, as the narrative states, simply comes down to her "fearless disposition and happier nerves." Susan is enough like Fanny to slide seamlessly into her position, but enough unlike Fanny to occupy it more successfully. She is a better version of her sister, and her happy place by Lady Bertram's side at the end of the novel demonstrates this.

<14>This is not to say, however, that Susan's ascendance is entirely due to her own inborn characteristics. The reader should not forget that it was Fanny who first recognized Susan's potential, Fanny who shaped her education and her manners to ensure that she could socialize with a better class of family, and Fanny who secured her sister the trip to Mansfield that allowed both that work, and Susan's greater potential, to be seen by those with the power to help her sister escape Portsmouth. Susan's temper may be her own, but her path is only possible because it was first cleared by her sister, through Fanny's own circumstances and then by her careful replication of those circumstances for Susan.

<15>The relationship between Fanny and Susan therefore represents a form of sideways descent; before Fanny has the opportunity to become a mother, she creates her own replacement – she reproduces herself – in the figure of Susan. Fanny's subtle manipulation of Susan's situation could be viewed as further evidence of her spooky tendency to get her way without actively trying; not only do all of her enemies vanish by the end of the novel, but her chosen friends within the family are rewarded with better lives and recognition of their superiority. In evolutionary terms, however, Fanny has control over kin recognition, not just for herself, but for the whole family, for the betterment of the entire kin group. The above-quoted closing paragraph ends with noting that:

In [Susans'] usefulness, in Fanny's excellence, in William's continued good conduct and rising fame, and in the general well-doing and success of the other members of the family, all assisting to advance each other, and doing credit to his countenance and aid, Sir Thomas saw repeated, and for ever repeated, reason to rejoice in what he had done for them all, and acknowledge the advantages of early hardship and discipline, and the consciousness of being born to struggle and endure. (473)

Sir Thomas's understanding of the value of those Fanny supports – and whose excellence he imagines as “repeated and for ever repeated” in coming generations – may not explicitly acknowledge Fanny's role in bringing all of this comparative virtue to his notice, but the reader must recognize her pivotal part in the creation of this acknowledged family.

<16>If the closing paragraphs of the novel indicate just how successful Fanny has been in creating her own double in her sister and shaping the present Mansfield family circle, reader speculation may choose to continue the story in a way that broadens Fanny's influence to include future generations. As indicated by her position as “stationary niece,” Susan treads the same path as her sister, but with important differences: after spending more of her lifetime in Portsmouth, Susan's temperament is stronger, she is less of a pushover, and she does not fear her relatives as Fanny once did. She becomes, perhaps, the “most beloved of the two,” by her aunt Lady Bertram, who may have relied on Fanny, but rarely fully appreciated her. Given Susan's abilities – recognized and supported by her sister – to be a better version of Fanny, it does not seem like too much of a leap to imagine her future following a similar, or perhaps even more fortunate, path to Fanny's – namely, she will, after an appropriate amount of time, attract the attention of a wealthier cousin and become a daughter of the Mansfield family in law as well as sentiment. Importantly, the narrator imagines Susan's establishment in the household as having “equal permanency” to Fanny's, which is to say, it will not actually be permanent at all, but rather will end in a wedding at the appropriate age and to an appropriate gentleman. Since the Crawford siblings have so clearly demonstrated the dangers of romancing those outside of one's intimate acquaintance, the most appropriate man available to Susan would be the still unmarried, and, following his illness and subsequent repentance, quite eligible, cousin Tom.⁶

<17>Tom's single status at the end of the novel, when so much has been made of his significance as the heir to the estate, is a tantalizingly dangling thread that begs the reader to imagine how it might be resolved. He may very well live to be a somber bachelor, allowing Edmund and Fanny to produce the necessary heirs, but there are many things to recommend the match between Tom and Fanny's younger sister. Not only would the cousin-marriage have all the same benefits as Fanny's and Edmund's – it would allow the family to accept a known and valued quantity into the household, rather than a relative (no pun intended) stranger, and would give Susan the benefit of legally cementing her place within the household – but it also allows Susan's story to follow a certain logical progression: She is Fanny, only better. Therefore, if the meek Fanny is able (eventually) to attract the younger, and therefore “lesser,” non-inheriting son of the household, surely Susan with her manifold charms, should have little trouble attracting Tom Bertram, the heir to the Mansfield estate (“cousins in love, and etc.,” in the words of Sir Thomas). She would continue being the better version of Fanny in not only

being accepted by the landed, wealthy family members, but by becoming them. Fanny's children will be comfortable and secure in a way their mother was not, but Susan's children will have the estate, the wealth and title to ensure an evolutionary advantage far into the future. In this potential future, Fanny has not only secured her own individual reproductive security through her marriage to Edmund, but has also secured the generational future of the most likely to prosper branch of her family by planting her sister within Mansfield Park. That she does this before she is certain of Edmund's esteem and the likelihood of her own marriage indicates that she is working toward multiple biological goals at one time. She has directed her energies, such as they are, not only to mate identification and selection, but also to sibling support and a broader conception of success for the family. And she is undoubtedly successful in both realms; that is, she obtains resources and security for herself and her children, and exerts influence over the character of the next generation to inherit Mansfield Park through her sister.

<18>In doing so, as Mary Jean Corbett has persuasively argued, Fanny heals the family breach that was first caused by the unequal marriages of the three Ward sisters. She also, however, effects a shift in the family from an individualistic evolutionary strategy to a more diffuse and communal approach. The original three sisters made their matches with little attention to their siblings. Maria Ward – the eventual Lady Bertram – does startlingly well on the marriage market, but fails to exert herself to spread her good fortune (or to do much of anything else, of course). Even though she “had two sisters to be benefited by her elevation; and such of their acquaintance as thought Miss Ward and Miss Frances quite as handsome as Miss Maria, did not scruple to predict their marrying with almost equal advantage,” the other two Ward sisters make comparatively weak matches (1). The reader eventually understands that Lady Bertram is naturally indolent and would be unlikely to expend energy for anyone; after all, she cannot prevent her daughters from heading toward personal and romantic ruin. How could she be expected to secure any sort of future for her sisters? Though the eldest Miss Ward, and the future Mrs. Norris, does eventually marry a man of her brother-in-law's acquaintance, implying that she was able to benefit from her sister's wider social circle, one gets the sense that this was more the effect of individual perseverance than Lady's Bertram's assistance. Mrs. Norris's childlessness and inability to exert any real control over even her favorite nieces cements her evolutionary weakness; she is rendered generationally impotent. The younger Miss Frances, meanwhile selfishly and marries unwisely “to disoblige her family” (3). Sir Thomas considers assisting the couple: “from a general wish of doing right, and a desire of seeing all that were connected with him in situations of respectability...but her husband's profession was such as no interest could reach” (4). He leaves Mr. Price to his own devices, and the more successful sisters condemn their impetuous sibling, casting her and her overly-large family from their acquaintance. The earlier generation is therefore marked by insufficient good intentions and a greater focus on individual desires than broader family success.

<19>Even when Mrs. Norris and the Bertrams agree to assist the unwieldy Price family, they stop short of promoting true communal reproductive success – where Mrs. Price's fertility could be supported by her sisters' access to economic resources – and instead prefer to preserve the differences between the branches of the family. Sir Thomas's early fear of “cousins in love and etc.” (6) is a fear of pollution by a weaker family line, represented, of

course, by Fanny. Mrs. Norris's assurance that should they "breed her up with them from this time, and suppose her even to have the beauty of an angel, and she will never be more to either than a sister" (7) is meant to cement these boundaries under the illusion of erasing them. Fanny is never treated as a true "sister" to her more privileged cousins; it is a sign of justice that this imposed distance perhaps becomes the very motivation for Fanny's eventual acceptance as Edmund's wife.

<20>In their marital successes, both realized by Austen, and that speculated by the reader, Susan and Fanny offer a do-over of the Ward sisters' divisionary selfishness. Both sisters in effect replace members of the earlier generation. Fanny, as a comfortable cleric's wife, becomes a kinder and gentler Mrs. Norris, and Susan, as the possible mistress of Mansfield Park will become a livelier and more assertive Lady Bertram. Through their commitment to one another they signal that these successes will have a far-reaching impact on the character of the family and its extension through coming generations. In Fanny's act of lateral descent, in her insistence on reproducing herself through her sister rather than only her potential children, both Price sisters have effected replication of their antecedents with important and beneficial variation. The future of the family is strong because of their attention to one another.

<21>Fanny's efforts on Susan's behalf are all the more remarkable for their singularity in a novel otherwise populated by antagonistic or indifferent sibling relations. The only other sister pair of any consequence – Maria and Julia Bertram – fail entirely to recognize the importance of sisterly cooperation, and instead spend the narrative in direct competition with one another over the affections of Henry Crawford. Far from improving one another or contributing positively to the other's future, the sisters goad each other into acts of exposure and flirtation to gain the shallow attentions of an unworthy man. Maria, though she is engaged, fumes to see, "Mr. Crawford and her sister sitting side by side, full of conversation and merriment; and to see only his expressive profile as he turned with a smile to Julia, or to catch the laugh of the other, was a perpetual source of irritation..." (81). Julia, similarly, seethes when the fickle Mr. Crawford chooses Maria for a walking partner during the rambles around Sotherton. Their competition ends when Mr. Crawford, tired of waiting for a reticent Fanny to return his affection, absconds with the now-married Maria, and Julia, not to be outdone, elopes with Mr. Yates. In failing to attend to or support each other, the Bertram sisters instead contribute to each other's downfalls: Julia, angered by Maria's flirtations with Mr. Crawford, is not present to warn her sister away from her affair, while Maria is too wrapped up in her marital misery and eventual adultery to caution Julia away from an unsuitable match. They both end the novel in states of disgrace (though Maria's far more severe than Julia's) on the comparative outskirts of society, signaling both Austen's disapproval of their sisterly combativeness, and the failure of their individualistic sexual strategies. Had they worked together, instead of at cross-purposes, they could have found better-suited partners and maintained the resources and influence of their family.

<22>Nor do the brothers of the Mansfield Park household demonstrate responsible stewardship over their siblings; while Edmund makes half-hearted efforts at protecting his sisters from exposure, he is easily distracted by Mary and saves the true force of his "brotherly"

love and protection for Fanny. Tom Bertram, meanwhile, is an entirely selfish elder brother whose extravagance compels his father to sell a living that had been intended for Edmund early in the novel. While Sir Thomas regrets that, “the younger brother must help to pay for the pleasures of the elder,” Tom shows little remorse about his own actions, thinking only that “he had not been half so much in debt as some of his friends,” and so cheerfully allows Edmund’s future to be limited because of his own individual pleasures (24). More subtly, however, his lack of care for his siblings leads him to introduce other similarly-flighty young men into his family circle, without care for how this may impact his sisters. While Fanny is careful to lead Susan toward improving literature and more refined company, Tom brings the idiotic Mr. Yates into his home, inadvertently setting into motion both the infamous amateur theatricals, instigated at the latter’s insistence, and his younger sister’s eventual elopement with Yates. While Julia’s choices are of course her own, Tom’s lack of consideration for her sexual safety indicate a blindness as to his responsibilities as a sibling – he may not suffer the consequences of his carelessness, but the family as a whole is reduced by his actions.

<23>This fraternal selfishness is also echoed outside of the Bertram family by Henry Crawford who, though he seems friendlier with his sister Mary than Tom is with either Maria or Julia, still refuses to curtail his own freedom out of brotherly consideration. After the death of their aunt (and the instillation of their uncle’s mistress in her place) compels Mary to leave the home of her childhood, she “had tried in vain to persuade her brother to settle with her at his own country house...To anything like a permanence of abode, or limitation of society, Henry Crawford had, unluckily, a great dislike: he could not accommodate his sister in an article of such importance...” (41). Though Mary’s security should matter to her brother, Henry merely agrees to escort her to their half-sister’s home, and only extends his stay because of the amusements offered by the Mansfield Park family.

<24>Mary herself is not blameless, however, and offers only a perversion of properly sisterly support. She dotes on her brother, instead of guiding him, and looks on his flirtations with indulgence instead of disapprobation. She sees Henry’s actions in terms of amusement and her own interests instead of his betterment. When Henry plays the two Bertram sisters against each other, Mary merely laughs at his audacity. She encourages his attachment to Fanny, who is undoubtedly a “better” woman than either Julia or Maria, but mostly because she imagines that their connection will act as a spur for her own romance with Edmund. The flaws in Mary’s character as a woman and as a sister are revealed to the reader (and Edmund) when she fails to acknowledge the importance of her brother’s infidelity with Maria Bertram – calling it only “folly” because of the openness of the scandal (457). Edmund mourns “the manner in which she treated the dreadful crime committed by her brother and my sister...giving it every reproach but the right ...” (457-458) In a novel rife with sibling relations, therefore, only Fanny and Susan are able to avoid competitiveness and indifference, and strike the particular balance of support and critique necessary to improve each other’s future and expand each other’s generational influence.

<25>Fanny’s focus on her sibling, and the impact she is able to have through her actions on Susan’s behalf also allow the reader to see Austen’s own subtle interest in futurity. The author

has been repeatedly assumed to be telling only the most self-contained tales, beginning with romantic interest and ending, always, with marriage. Critics have noted that she never fully narrates the marriages she arranges, instead giving the reader vague hints about how the future will unfold for her heroines.⁷ Austen's novels in general and *Mansfield Park* in particular are seen as closed to further changes or plot after the longed-for marriage has been accomplished. Fanny's possible establishment of Susan's own potential marriage plot belies this assumption, however, and demonstrates that both she and her author are envisioning a tomorrow, indistinct though it may be. Like Charles Darwin, Austen cannot tell her readers exactly what the future will hold; they both only give a sense of time "repeated, and forever repeated." The future of *Mansfield Park* will, however, be different because Fanny paid due attention to Susan and worked to ensure her and the family the best possible future. The Bertram family, with all of its land, money, and adherence to the laws of male inheritance is essentially changed because of the connection between these two women.

Endnotes

¹ For a more complete explication of the impact of sibling altruism see William Hamilton, "The Evolution of Altruistic Behavior," *The American Naturalist* 97 (1963):354-356.

² Despite predating Darwin's evolutionary theories by several decades, Austen's novels in general and *Mansfield Park* in particular have many times been the subject of evolutionary critique. Peter Graham's recent study, *Jane Austen & Charles Darwin: Naturalists and Novelists* suggests a certain irresistibility in pairing Austen and Darwin. Not only are they two of the most notable writers of the nineteenth century, but as Graham notes, the two figures are "both naturalists who look with a clear, cold, eye at the concrete particulars of the world around them" (xi-xii) who prefer to examine small populations to extrapolate larger principles. Graham, Peter. *Jane Austen & Charles Darwin: Naturalists and Novelists* (Burlington, VT: Ashgate Publishing Company, 2008).

³ George Levine's chapter in *Darwin and the Novelists*, "Mansfield Park: Observation Rewarded" is an exception to this rule, but he is using Austen's writing as an example of pre-Darwinian natural theology. George Levine. *Darwin and the Novelists: Patterns of Science in Victorian Fiction* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1991).

⁴ Among the many negative reactions elicited by the text are Kingsley Amis's famous query in "What became of Jane Austen?" in which he asks: "What became of that Jane Austen (if she ever existed) who set out bravely to correct conventional notions of the desirable and virtuous? From being their critic (if she ever was) she became their slave" (16-17). (He earlier wryly notes that "to invite Mr and Mrs Edmund Bertram round would not be lightly undertaken" (14).) John Halperin's "The Trouble with *Mansfield Park*" even more bluntly asserts that "One gets the impression sometimes that *Mansfield Park* was written by a neurasthenic nun" (6). Nina Auerbach declares Fanny to be nothing less than a monster. "Like Frankenstein and his monster, those spirits of solitude, Fanny is a killjoy, a blighter of ceremonies and divider of families" (25)

⁵ For example, Glenda Hudson's *Sibling Love and Incest in Jane Austen's Fiction* (New York: St. Martin's Press, 1999), Tony Tanner, *Adultery in the Novel: Contract and Transgression* (Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University Press, 1979), Ruth Bernard Yeazell "The Boundaries of Mansfield Park," *Representations* 7 (1984): 133-152. Jane Austen. *Mansfield Park*. New York: Oxford University Press, 1988). Somewhat similarly, Eileen Cleere's article "Reinvesting Nieces: Mansfield Park and the Economics of Endogamy recasts this argument in economic terms in which Fanny's appropriation into the family allows the Bertrams to make "use" of her a resource. Eileen Cleere. ""Reinvesting Nieces: Mansfield Park and the Economics of Endogamy." *NOVEL: A Forum on Fiction* 28.2 (1995) 113-130.

⁶ Lest this proposed match, and the attendant interpretation based on its likelihood, appear as only the speculation of one reader, it must be noted that several popular continuations of the *Mansfield Park* story have included just this outcome. The 1930 novel *Susan Price, or Resolution* by Francis Brown (Austen's great-grandniece), one of the first continuations of *Mansfield Park*, resolves the story of the household by having Susan and Tom marry at the end. Joan Aiken's 1985 *Mansfield Revisited* and Victor Gordon's 1989 *Mrs. Rushworth* imagine the same future for the cousins.

⁷ Some critics, such as D. W. Harding, have concluded that her fraught relationship with her own mother caused her to have ambivalent feelings about maternity, and would, perhaps, have made her reluctant to cast any of her beloved heroines in a maternal role. Harding states that "the ideal mother is dead and can be adored without risk of disturbance; the living mother is completely detestable and can be hated whole-heartedly without self-reproach" (165). One shudders to think of, for example, Emma pushed into either of those categories.

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