

**Sisterly Affection, Sisterly Competition:
Sibling Rivalry in Jane Austen's Novels**
by Mary Oakley Strasser

“But dearest of all to the heart of Jane was her sister Cassandra ... Their sisterly affection for each other could scarcely be exceeded” (Austen-Leigh 1). Considering Jane Austen’s particular devotion to her sister, it is all the more remarkable that so few of her characters share similar relationships. Certainly Jane and Elizabeth Bennet and Elinor and Marianne Dashwood are very close. Their sisterly devotion is obvious in their tender care of each other in illness. However, Louisa and Henrietta Musgrove, Lydia and Kitty Bennet, and Julia and Maria Bertram are not examples of devotion but of rivalry and competition. Instances of rivalry are more typical of the sisterly relationships in Jane Austen’s novels *Persuasion*, *Pride and Prejudice*, and *Mansfield Park*. Unlike Jane and Cassandra, sisterly affection for these characters is indeed “exceeded.” In each pair of sisters, one sister dominates the other in their competition for affection.

In *Persuasion*, Jane Austen introduces Henrietta and Louisa Musgrove as “some of the happiest creatures of [Anne’s] acquaintance...and [she] envied them ... that seemingly perfect good understanding and agreement together, that good-humoured mutual affection” (Austen 1234). This sisterly affection is strained by the arrival of Captain Wentworth, a wealthy naval officer openly seeking a bride, as they compete for his attention. They “seemed hardly to have any eyes but for him” and acted accordingly, learning everything they could about the lives of naval officers and ensuring that he was frequently included in family gatherings (Austen 1248). The Musgrove family gossip centers upon which sister Captain Wentworth prefers. Anne soon observes that “Louisa certainly put more forward for his notice than her sister” (Austen 1260). When Charles Hayter, a young man who had been previously courting Henrietta, returns to his home near Uppercross, he is unhappy to find Henrietta interested in Captain Wentworth. With Hayter’s return, Henrietta is suddenly forced to reevaluate her feelings. Should she pursue the dashing Captain Wentworth, or should she continue to foster the “considerable appearance of attachment” to Charles Hayter (Austen 1254)? Louisa, sensing her sister’s hesitation, takes action to ensure that Henrietta will soon be unavailable to the Captain.

Louisa capitalizes on her sister’s ambivalent feelings and is the “principle arranger of the plan” to walk to Winthrop, Mr. Hayter’s home (Austen 1261). Once there, Louisa manipulates Henrietta into visiting Charles, sure that she will renew their relationship. Louisa then promptly returns to the party on the hill and “drew Captain Wentworth away” (Austen 1262). Unlike her sister, Louisa shows no hesitation to compete for the affection of Captain Wentworth. John Lauber notes that “Louisa...seems hardly more than an eager child...who insists on having her way at all costs” (Lauber 102). And in this case, the “cost” is her sister’s feelings. While Louisa may genuinely believe that she is acting in her sister’s best interest, she also achieves her goal of distracting her rival.

In *Pride and Prejudice*, Lydia and Kitty provide another example of sibling rivalry. Their relationship is not so much a feminine competition for any gentleman’s attention, but more a game of follow-the-leader. In their scramble to catch the eyes of the officers and local gentlemen, Kitty plays second fiddle to Lydia. Oliver MacDonagh comments that “Lydia dominated Kitty... affording a deplorable but powerful model of one particular form of ill-reared

girl” (MacDonagh 6) Mrs. Bennet’s maternal negligence contributes to Kitty’s submissive role in the form of an inferiority complex that she unwittingly instills in her daughter. Mrs. Bennet breaks one of the basic rules of parenting by openly comparing her daughters. “Lizzy is not a bit better than the others; and I am sure she is not half so handsome as Jane, nor half so good-humoured as Lydia” (Austen 232). Here, Kitty’s qualities do not even earn her mother’s consideration. Mrs. Bennet frequently makes such observations about her children, and Mr. Bennet openly favors Lizzy. It is no wonder, then, that Kitty’s imposed inferiority causes her to defer to Lydia. As Elizabeth remarks, “She [Kitty] will follow wherever Lydia leads” (Austen 370).

Kitty is willing to “follow-the-Lydia-er” until the stakes are higher. When Lydia receives an invitation to accompany Mrs. Forster to Brighton, Kitty is not so complacent about her secondary role to Lydia. “Wholly inattentive to her sister’s feelings, Lydia flew about the house in restless ecstasy” (Austen 369). Lydia leaves Kitty in Meryton “weep[ing] from vexation and envy” (Austen 372).

With Lydia’s absence, Kitty becomes the primary “silly and ignorant...girl” of the Bennet household (Austen 232). She takes full advantage of her new role by dramatically bemoaning the departure of the regiment and the lost opportunities for sea-bathing. However, Jane Austen gives no indication that Kitty assumes a larger role in Meryton society. Instead of blossoming into a respectable young woman by following the example of her two elder sisters, Kitty sinks into a stupor of Meryton-induced tears and endless re-readings of her sister’s letters, which are “much too full of lines under the words to be made public” (Austen 374). Even after Lydia’s scandalous elopement, Kitty continues to compare herself to Lydia and to emulate her behavior, saying, “If I should ever go to Brighton, I would behave better than Lydia” (Austen 410). Kitty’s maturation is hindered by her weak sense of self and her continued willingness to follow Lydia’s example. She only reaches her full potential after Lydia moves to the north and Kitty spends most of her time visiting Elizabeth or Jane. “Removed from the influence of Lydia’s example, she became... less irritable, less ignorant, and less insipid” (Austen 462).

Nowhere in Jane Austen’s novels is sisterly competition more apparent than in *Mansfield Park*. In describing Maria and Julia Bertram, Jane Austen writes, “With no material fault of temper, or difference of opinion, to prevent their being very good friends while their interests were the same, the sisters, under such a trial as this, had not affection or principle enough to make them merciful or just, to give them honour or compassion” (Austen 568). The arrival of the Crawfords upsets this balance of “interests.” Both sisters are taken with the handsome and sophisticated Henry Crawford. In one short week, Julia feels that she is “quite ready to be fallen in love with” (Austen 494). All of a sudden, Maria feels less bound by her engagement to Mr. Rushworth and decides that there is “no harm in her liking an agreeable young man” (Austen 494). If Maria were truly a devoted sister, she would not have competed with Julia for Mr. Crawford’s attention. Her selfishness and vanity make it impossible for her to place her sister’s interests before her own.

As the relationship between the Bertrams and the Crawfords grows, Maria and Julia’s competition for Mr. Crawford’s attention escalates. This rivalry intensifies during the day trip to Sotherton, Mr. Rushworth’s estate. The family chapel is one of the first rooms that the party tours at Sotherton. When Julia notices Mr. Crawford’s quiet conversation with Maria, she

pointedly directs the party's attention to the impending nuptials of Mr. Rushworth and her sister. Thus, Julia succeeds in catching Mr. Crawford's notice while forcing her sister to attend to her betrothed. In depicting this scene, Jane Austen writes that Julia "expose[d] her sister to the whispered gallantries of her lover [Mr. Rushworth]" (Austen 522). By using the word "expose," Austen clearly indicates that Julia knew her sister's distaste for such comments from Mr. Rushworth and that she sought to punish Maria for monopolizing Mr. Crawford. After receiving Mr. Rushworth's "gallantries," Maria's vanity is only appeased when she "led the way" out of the chapel, a role which should have been the privilege of the lady of the house (Austen 523).

When the party moves out of doors, Jane Austen describes one area as "a good spot for fault-finding" (Austen 523). This double entendre refers to improvements at Sotherton and the inappropriate behavior of Maria and Mr. Crawford when they slip through a locked gate to escape the party. Julia, realizing Maria and Mr. Crawford are now alone, is determined to join them. She then encounters the locked gate and ha-ha which the two have circumvented and declares, "I think I am equal to as much as Maria" (Austen 530). Not only is she determined to catch up with Mr. Crawford, but Julia refuses to admit any inferiority to her sister, even in immorality.

Their competition reaches its peak during the production of *Lover's Vows*. Maria intends to play the role of Agatha, the mother of the character Frederick. She manipulates the casting to ensure that she receives Mr. Crawford as the "proper Frederick" (Austen 550). Julia also wants to play the role of Agatha opposite Mr. Crawford. This competition allows the characters to "blur the distinction between erotic and fraternal love in order to screen their improper flirtations" (Johnson 118). Mr. Crawford is delighted with this opportunity for "improper flirtations" and proposes to give the part to Maria. Julia "saw a glance at Maria, which confirmed the injury to herself...she was slighted, Maria was preferred" (Austen 550). At this point, Julia withdraws from the play as well as from the competition for Mr. Crawford's attention. The main difference between Julia and Maria lies in their reactions to the other's disappointment. When Julia is slighted, Maria barely suppresses her "smile of triumph" and continues doggedly with her plans of eliciting a proposal from Mr. Crawford (Austen 550). However, when Henry Crawford leaves Mansfield, dashing Maria's hopes, Julia "could even pity her sister" (Austen 586). Julia is neither as vain nor as foolish as Maria. While Maria is banished from the family for her marital transgression, Julia eventually enjoys a respectable marriage and life.

It is interesting to note that while all these sisters compete for the attention of certain gentlemen, invariably the women who seek the gentleman's affection do not win it. Lydia and Kitty are both taken with Mr. Wickham and "they each...meant to dance half the evening with [him]" at the Netherfield ball (Austen 283). Elizabeth catches Mr. Wickham's eye, and though she does not dismiss his attention, she does not seek it as blatantly as her younger sisters. Though Louisa and Henrietta jostle for Captain Wentworth's regard, Anne eventually wins his hand. Finally, Maria and Julia compete for Mr. Crawford's affection, but the unwilling Fanny Price ultimately receives his proposals. In these scenarios, Jane Austen demonstrates the importance of sisterly regard and the results of sisters who compete at the expense of the other. Elizabeth, Anne, and Fanny show genuine affection for their sisters; their sincerity is rewarded with happy and loving marriages.

Jane Austen did not have a relationship of competition or rivalry with her sister, Cassandra. However, since “pictures of perfection” made her “sick and wicked,” it is hardly surprising that she would paint portraits of flawed characters in her novels (Letters, 335). Today, Janeites everywhere celebrate these observations of imperfect sisterly affection and appreciate the fact that they can “scarcely be exceeded” (Austen-Leigh, 1).

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