

Absent Fathers: An Examination of Father-Daughter Relationships in Jane Austen's Novels

CHRISTINE GIBBS

Gainesville, Florida

Did Jane Austen hate her father? "Oh, horrors!" I hear you cry, "Surely not!" Well, no, probably not; but her portrayal of the fathers in her novels is certainly thought-provoking. Viewed as a group, the heroines of her novels have been endowed with a most unsatisfactory set of fathers. They fail to guide and protect their daughters, interfere with their progress towards maturity, or simply absent themselves from the responsibilities of fatherhood, with potentially disastrous consequences. Jane Nardin has suggested that Jane Austen's heroines suffer from "absent-parent syndrome."¹ I would take this a step further. These young women can cope without mothers—it is the absence of their fathers that causes all the trouble.

What made Jane Austen draw so many portraits of inadequate fathers? Who or what inspired them? It has been suggested by feminist critics² that Jane Austen was more radical in her view of women, and more familiar with such radical writers as Mary Wollstonecraft, than her Victorian descendants would have had us believe. Wollstonecraft wrote,

... the absurd duty, too often inculcated, of obeying a parent only on account of his being a parent, shackles the mind, and prepares it for a slavish submission to any power but reason.³

—and this is surely an attitude with which JA concurred; dutiful daughters as her heroines all are, no-one could accuse them of having shackled minds. But it does not wholly explain the attitude of condemnation and outright contempt with which she portrays the fathers in her last two novels.

Unfortunately for comfortable theorizing, the relationship of Jane Austen with her own father seems, from what remains of her correspondence, to have been a good one. John Halperin characterizes him as a gentle, scholarly man, a good teacher and an excellent classical scholar.⁴ It was he who gave his daughter her literary education, and he who took sufficient interest in her work to offer her first novel to a publisher. It would seem that there are no clues there.

It is, however, interesting to look at Jane Austen's work in relation to the circumstances of her own life, and trace the increasing attention that she pays to father/daughter relationships. Though revised later, the first three novels were basically written between 1796 and 1799, when she was living at Steventon with her parents. In *Sense and Sensibility* and *Northanger Abbey* the fathers are simply absent, though this fact has considerable repercussions in the lives of their daughters.

The two heroines of *Sense and Sensibility* are the victims of a male-dominated, marriage-oriented society—Marianne is betrayed by a man who, it transpires, is already a seducer, and both she and Eleanor have

been made poor through the heartlessness of their half-brother. Their father's only fault, mild in comparison, has been to die at the wrong time. Henry Dashwood is described as having "goodness of heart" and "a temper cheerful and sanguine" (p. 4); but he survives for only two pages, casting his daughters adrift with no fortune to cushion their encounters with harsh reality, and in the care of a charming but unworldly mother. It takes all of Eleanor's steadfastness and common sense to rescue them from disaster.

Northanger Abbey presents us with another absentee father, though this time a living one. Mr. Morland is a shadowy figure in the background of his daughter's life. We are told that he is a clergyman, "not in the least addicted to locking up his daughters" (p. 13), but his speech is never directly reported, and on the only occasion on which his presence is required—to help his wife sustain a conversation with Henry Tilney—he cannot be found. His attention to Catherine's welfare borders on negligence; he entrusts her to the care of a neighbor for a visit to Bath, and then agrees to her leaving Bath in the company of complete strangers—the Tilneys—who take her even further from home. He fails, in fact, to perform the most basic function of a father: to protect his daughter from danger. This is not malevolence on his part; he is simply too unworldly to know what dangers the outside world has in store for her.

Catherine is provided, however, with a quite horrifying example of the burlesque Wicked Father—her future father-in-law, General Tilney. Here is a father who might lock up his daughters. The gentle Catherine strongly suspects him of murdering his wife, and he puts Catherine in real physical danger when he turns her out of his house. His son, however, is an honorable man, and our heroine's trials are rewarded with a husband and a pretty parsonage in the country.

For Emma Watson, the heroine of the fragment "The Watsons," life's trials are harsh indeed, and her father a virtual stranger to her. Brought up by her uncle and aunt in great material comfort,

From being . . . the expected heiress of an easy independence, she was become of importance to no-one, a burden on those whose affection she could not expect. (pp. 118-19)

Her uncle/father-substitute has formed her mind and expectations but neglected to form a legacy to match; and her aunt has re-married and no longer wants her. (One wonders why the judgment of middle-aged women in Jane Austen's novels is so little to be trusted!) Emma is forced, after an absence of fourteen years, to rejoin a family of strangers struggling under the humiliations of genteel poverty, and an invalid father who is merely a dim figure on the periphery of his daughters' lives.

As a provider and protector, Mr. Watson is decidedly unsatisfactory. He seems totally self-absorbed, unconcerned at the predicament his daughters will face when he dies, and uninvolved in their attempts to get themselves out of it by marriage. In fact, when a potential suitor does show an interest, he not only fails to follow it up but forgets which daughter was mentioned.

There is no direct implication that Mr. Watson is to blame for his neglect of his daughters; suffering from some unspecified illness (surely his gout is not sufficient to explain its severity?) he is frequently too ill to hold a conversation, and Emma seeks his silent company as a relief from the discords among the rest of the family. His absence from their daily lives has had grievous consequences, but it is a sin of omission rather than commission, and Emma herself is quite saintly in her refusal to blame anybody for her misfortune.

It is in *Pride and Prejudice* that Jane Austen begins to deal in earnest with the more subtle influence of an inadequate father on the lives of his daughters. The relationships between Mr. Bennet and his daughters are so subtly portrayed that the enormity of the damage he has done is not at first evident. Mr. Bennet is an intelligent man, but selfish and lazy, regarding with sardonic humor his wife's attempts to marry off their daughters, when in fact marriage is a stark necessity for them all, just as it is for Emma Watson and her sisters. True, his estate is entailed on a male heir, but it is made clear that with care and economy he could have provided for his daughters. His abandonment of their moral welfare is even more culpable, and here Jane Austen departs radically from the stereotypical acquiescent heroine. Elizabeth, affectionate and dutiful though she is, not only views her father rationally and condemns his behavior, she also tries to warn him of its consequences.:

Excuse me,—for I must speak plainly. If you, my dear father, will not take the trouble of checking her (Lydia's) exuberant spirits, and of teaching her that her present pursuits are not to be the business of her life, she will soon be beyond the reach of amendment. (p. 231)

Elizabeth is the first of a new line of heroines, equipped with the moral courage to think for themselves. There is an interval of thirteen years before this line continues (leaving aside the vexed question of when, and how much, *Pride and Prejudice* was revised), during which Jane Austen's own father died, leaving her peering into the abyss at exactly what could happen to a dependent woman with no means of her own. Whether or not this fact is significant, it is clear in her last three novels that Jane Austen's attitude towards unsatisfactory fathers hardened in the interval. Her next heroine, Fanny Price of *Mansfield Park*, conforms to the nineteenth-century ideal of womanhood much more closely than does Elizabeth Bennet, in that she is timid, staunchly moral and physically weak; but behind her "soft, light eyes" is a critical and observant mind. Poor Fanny is saddled with two unsatisfactory father-figures. Her own father is lazy and a drunkard, utterly uninterested in the females of his family except insofar as they cater to him; and his view of daughters is summed up in his reaction to the news of the disgrace of Fanny's cousin Maria: "... if she belonged to me, I'd give her the rope's end as long as I could stand over her" (p. 440).

In her uncle, Sir Thomas Bertram, Fanny has a father-substitute who at least observes the social niceties; but he is a patriarch and a slave owner, and, as Margaret Kirkham has pointed out,⁵ he owns his womenfolk in

the same way that he owns his slaves. His daughters are to behave decorously, look attractive and marry creditably. Their education and manners are of great concern to him, but of their true thoughts and feelings he knows nothing, since his high principles are not humanized by love or laughter. When his emotional distance from his daughters is compounded by his physical absence on a journey to his property in Antigua, the consequences to them are disastrous. Without principles of their own to guide them they behave like prisoners freed from jail; "disorder, noise and impropriety", all the things that Sir Thomas hates most, are the result. Only Fanny manages to preserve her integrity through the intrigues and emotional upheavals that beset the family during Sir Thomas's absence. When he returns her real trials begin, for he begins to make the same mistakes with her that have already wrought havoc with his daughters, and tries to coerce her into marrying the man who, unknown to him, has been trifling with his daughters' affections.

Poor Sir Thomas, a parent, and conscious of errors in his own conduct as a parent, was the longest to suffer. . . . Bitterly did he deplore a deficiency which now he could scarcely comprehend to have been possible. (pp. 463-64)

The final poetic justice is administered through Fanny. The child of his charity has managed to imbibe the high principles that he failed to inculcate in his daughters; and when she marries his son he welcomes her as his true daughter.

In *Emma*, the examination of the father/daughter relationship becomes one of the central themes. Emma is at first sight a traditional heroine—"handsome, clever and rich" (p. 5), and devoted to her widowed father. She has quite charmed herself with her romantic ideas of daughterly devotion, but there is an ironic twist to this self-sacrifice, for it is Emma's position within her father's household that gives her social power and status outside it; and with equal irony Jane Austen exposes Mr. Woodhouse's role as Emma's father.

At first sight, Mr. Woodhouse seems an old pet, lovingly if ineffectually concerned about the inhabitants of his little world. He is in fact a stupid, selfish hypochondriac for whom Emma has had to double in the roles of wife and mother. His timidity and dislike of change have isolated him and everyone close to him in a kind of time-warp in which nothing ever happens, with the result that Emma's horizons are pathetically limited, both physically and socially.

From the novel's very first scene we are made aware of the hollow center in Emma's life with her father. She has just lost her best friend and companion to marriage; Emma is depressed and in need of comfort; but Mr. Woodhouse "composed himself to sleep after dinner, as usual. . ." (p. 6). Weddings are uncomfortable things because they bring change, and if his daughter should catch on to the idea his cozy little world will crumble around him; so he pretends that nothing has happened. Unfortunately for him, with the marriage of Mrs. Weston a process has begun that awakens Emma to maturity like the sleeping princess of the fairytale. The germ of

love is abroad in the air of Highbury, and Emma has been infected by it, along with the rest of the inhabitants. Mr. Woodhouse makes a last-ditch effort to hold on to his daughter/wife/mother, but he is defeated finally by the pathetic consideration that if Emma marries George Knightley there will be a son-in-law in the house to protect him from chicken-thieves.

In her last completed novel, *Persuasion*, Jane Austen portrays the most mature adult of all her heroines, and a father-daughter relationship so cool that it scarcely exists at all. Sir Walter Elliot has abandoned all his functions as an authority figure, both as a father and as a landowner, and Jane Austen describes him with scorn:

Vanity was the beginning and end of Sir Walter's character; vanity of person and of situation. . . He considered the blessing of beauty as inferior only to the blessing of a baronetcy; and the Sir Walter Elliot, who united these gifts, was the object of his warmest respect and devotion. (p. 4)

His daughter Anne has not inherited the kind of beauty he admires, and so she is virtually invisible to him. Recognizing his false values and condemning them, she nevertheless does her best to minimize their effects on others—as, for instance, in her attention to the poor people of the parish, a duty that her father neglects. Physical independence she cannot have, but her mind and opinions are all her own, and when she quietly ignores her father's disapproval of her visits to her impoverished school friend, Mrs. Smith, Jane Austen makes it clear that the disobedience is morally justified, and that it is Sir Walter whose morals are unsound. Anne has earned the right to make her own decisions, and Captain Wentworth's second proposal is accepted without anyone's advice or permission being sought. Once again, justice is done; Anne has a husband who values her as he should, and Sir Walter is consigned to the occupation he has chosen, fawning upon his wealthy cousins.

This hardening of attitude towards her heroines' fathers must certainly reflect changes in Jane Austen's own thinking, but it seems not to have been the consequence of any increase in radicalism on her part. Rather the opposite; she requires that they should do the job which conscientious, conservative fathers of her day might rationally be expected to do—namely, guide, protect, educate and love their daughters. Not one of the fathers in the novels measures up to this standard, in fact the father image steadily worsens, while Jane Austen increasingly shows her faith in the ability of the neglected daughters to meet the challenge. Repeatedly, a cool-headed daughter is shown coping with a weak-minded father, and even standing in judgment over her parent's moral backsliding. She will also have become secure in her own self-knowledge and self-discipline, though she may fall back on a father-substitute—in other words, fall in love with a man who embodies all those virtues her father so conspicuously lacks—but by the end of each novel its heroine has ensured that her own future offspring will have a thoroughly responsible father. (Even Emma Watson is tending this way when her story breaks off.)

Perhaps what we can glean from all this is that Jane Austen's relation-

ship with her own father *was* a good one, and that his death brought forcefully home to her the deprivation she would have suffered without his support and guidance. Whatever may have been the causal factors in Jane Austen's own life—and Lord David Cecil maintains that little can be deduced about it from her novels⁶—it is clear that as Jane Austen's art matures, so do her heroines. They resolutely refuse to become perpetual children; they grow up, in spite of their fathers.

NOTES

- ¹ Jane Nardin, "Children and Their Families in Jane Austen's Novels," *Jane Austen: New Perspectives*, Janet Todd, ed. (Homes & Meier, 1983), p. 79.
 - ² In particular, Margaret Kirkham, *Jane Austen: Feminism and Fiction* (Brighton: Harvester Press, 1983). For another view, see Alistair Duckworth, "Jane Austen's Accommodations," in *The First English Novelists* (Nashville: University of Tennessee Press, 1975).
 - ³ Mary Wollstonecraft, *A Vindication of the Rights of Women* (Reprint of the 1792 edition), Gina Luria, ed. (New York: Garland Publishing, 1974), p. 268.
 - ⁴ John Halperin, *The Life of Jane Austen* (Baltimore, MD: Johns Hopkins University Press, 1984), p. 26.
 - ⁵ Margaret Kirkham, *Jane Austen: Feminism and Fiction*, p. 118.
 - ⁶ Lord David Cecil, *A portrait of Jane Austen* (New York: Hill & Wang, 1978), pp. 9-10.
- References to Jane Austen's novels are keyed to R. W. Chapman, ed., *The Novels of Jane Austen*, 3rd edition (London: Oxford University Press, 1933).