



“The three Sisters”: A “little bit of Ivory”

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IN HIS PREFACE to the posthumous edition of *Northanger Abbey* and *Persuasion* Henry Austen cited his sister's now-famous description of her style of composition: “What should I do with your . . . spirited Sketches . . . ?” she wrote to her nephew Edward (16 December 1816). “How could I possibly join them on to the little bit (two Inches wide) of Ivory on which I work with so fine a Brush . . . ?” Since its 1817 “publication” the combined image of the ivory and the brush has come to stand as a measure of Austen's brilliance. We continue to admire and marvel. How can she so effectively transform the micro into the macro? How do we (how does *she*) get from the “two inches” to the broad, satirical critique of her society?

“The three Sisters” is a little gem that amply rewards close examination.¹ In a variety of ways it represents a sort of paradigm of Jane Austen's bit of ivory and shows her fine brush at work as she deftly creates her characters, their contexts, their predicaments.

Its bare bones show the young author to be adhering to her preferred subject, as later recommended in a letter to her niece Anna, of “3 or 4 Families in a Country Village” (9 September 1814). The story centers on the Stanhope family: three daughters—Mary, Sophy, Georgiana—and a widowed mother. Two of the Stanhope sisters have confidantes with whom they frequently correspond: Fanny and Anne, the two correspondents, are most likely from the same neighborhood since they are on such intimate terms with Mary

and Georgiana, and share a knowledge of their family and its dynamics (perhaps they too are sisters). The Stanhopes' immediate friends, Jemima and Kitty Dutton, live within walking distance. Mr. Watts, in search of a bride, must also live nearby. Georgiana describes him as "Our neighbour" (61), and he is often to be found at the Stanhopes' home. The apparent outsider, Mr. Brudenell, is nonetheless on comfortable terms with the Duttons and evidently connected to their family by marriage. We know that the community is comprised of more families since the giving of balls is assumed, but these are the few that Austen focuses on. Here is one way in which "The three Sisters" is a little bit of ivory.

"The three Sisters" (composed in 1792 or 1793) is a short fragment, consisting of four letters (Georgiana's first consists of two parts, written on a Wednesday and a Friday, so perhaps we should say there are actually five). Yet despite its brevity "The three Sisters" manages to blend important elements of both "Love and Freindship" (1790) and *Catharine* (1792): it includes the satirical hilarity of the early juvenilia, as epitomized in the sparkling "Love and Freindship"; and, along with the elegant *Catharine*, it foreshadows the mature novels. Together, the burlesque and the realistic cooperate to enhance Austen's social and moral message, revealing the corrupt tendencies of her society and allowing for the development of her protagonists. As Margaret Drabble remarks, "In some of the shorter fragments there are also hints of another Jane Austen, a fiercer, wilder, more outspoken more ruthless writer, with a dark vision of human motivation (how brilliantly those three sisters battle, in unredeemed sibling rivalry!) . . ." (xiv). So as it ranges from parody to darker social satire, "The three Sisters" is also a true bit of ivory.

There are many reasons that we are drawn, and re-drawn, to Jane Austen's juvenile works—and to their spirited author. They show her literary precocity, and the ways she was commenting on what she'd been reading and thinking about as she developed her own style and agenda. In their wit and adolescent energy the juvenilia show her unabashed iconoclasm, and effervesce with a sense of irreverent mischief. As Margaret Doody notes, the juvenilia are "disconcertingly sophisticated" (103).

"Jane Austen," says A. Walton Litz, "was a supremely conscious artist, and the best evidence of her awareness lies in her incisive criticism of the fiction of her own age, [which can be] found in the burlesques and parodies of her early career" (3). Though composed in a spirit of fun, her first writings imply an unequivocal disdain for the abuse of language and reason, for a tradition that relied on "improbable plots" and "emotional titillation" (Litz 5).

Austen was well-read, and “measured her own talents against those of other writers” (Litz 3, 5; also Lascelles 41 ff.). In F. R. Leavis’s words, “her relation to tradition is a creative one. . . . Her work, like the work of all great creative writers, gives meaning to the past” (5). Beneath the burlesque surface lies an implied preference for the company of those whose work she admired (e.g., Johnson, Richardson, Burney, Edgeworth). Edward Copeland remarks that as Austen challenges the “consumerized sentiment” of the *Lady’s Magazine*, she links herself with the “higher literary tradition . . . and asserts her own social claims, as a writer, to the upper ranks of society” (159). So in her feisty literary spoofs and her tacit tribute to her gurus, the two inches of ivory are, even in the early juvenilia, already evident.

A recent article by Emily Auerbach examines the ways Austen’s relatives apparently sought to create an idealized posthumous image that can in fact only have been a very partial one. In his “Biographical Notice,” notes Auerbach, brother Henry stressed her “piety and . . . humility”; he favored adjectives such as “kind, happy, and tranquil” (32), but he failed to mention that she wrote “saucy adolescent burlesques” or that she discussed the difficulties of talking with her neighbors “because of ‘their bad breath’” (31). According to Henry, Jane “never spoke an unkind word to anybody or had anything but sweet thoughts” (Auerbach 32)—which, having read the scathing portrayals of her many selfish characters, we know can hardly have been the case. Cassandra’s burning of so many of her sister’s letters could be seen as complicit with this softening tendency. “Together,” says Auerbach, “Henry and Cassandra Austen carefully destroyed or sprayed verbal perfume on portions of their sister’s letters . . .” (32). Nephew James Edward Austen-Leigh subsequently contributed to this project. The emendations made to the Jane Austen letters reprinted in his 1870 *Memoir* combine to dull the barbs—so the image that emerges is of a more polite Austen than is apparent in the unexpurgated originals.

Thankfully, the insistent satirical undercurrent of Austen’s mature novels comes through loud and clear in the juvenilia. She was an exceedingly sharp critic, both literary and social, from the very start. So we must be grateful to the youthful writings, as they help us to get to know her better. Here the juvenilia’s bit of ivory turns out to be of major importance as it qualifies the image of the pious aunt who had no interests or ambitions beyond her family.

“The three Sisters” is of particular value because it shows Austen in transition, moving from parody towards a more sober social commentary. It

includes both absurd eighteenth-century ‘types,’ and a set of more realistic characters, who together collaborate to offer a critique of the profoundly classist, materialist society into which Jane Austen was born. At the one extreme, the risible Mr. Watts is as close to pure caricature as Elfrida, Frederic, and the rest of the beloved juvenilia crowd; in his obsessive nature Watts recalls a range of stock literary antecedents. On the other hand, the alluring, three-dimensional Mr. Brudenell seems to foreshadow future rakes. And in its graphic account of the sordid marriage game, and the hypocrisy and greed it entails, “The three Sisters,” argues Litz, “explores motives of economic and social aggression which appear in all her mature novels” (25; also Southam 35, Fergus 52, Knuth 100). Once again, as it shows the transition from parody to social commentary and looks forward to the syntheses of the later works, we encounter that magical bit of ivory.



Much good work has been done on Austen’s literary antecedents, and the various uses she makes of them; so an examination of the ways in which “The three Sisters” predicts the mature novels would seem appropriate. Most obviously, it foreshadows *Pride and Prejudice*. As Q. D. Leavis observed, the “second sister [Sophy] is . . . Jane Bennet and the youngest . . . [is] Elizabeth” (74). In her eagerness to secure Mr. Watts for one of her daughters, Mrs. Stanhope is indeed quite like Mrs. Bennet. And the odious Mr. Watts certainly looks forward to the odious Mr. Collins.

“The three Sisters” includes other foreshadowings as well, as a more detailed consideration of plot reveals. As the eldest, Mary has received an offer from Mr. Watts. She detests him but also wants to be the first married. Because their mother has decreed that if Mary won’t have him one of the other two shall, Mary decides she’ll have him, though clearly she and Mr. Watts are at acrimonious odds over everything. The day after Mary accepts Watts the Stanhope sisters go to visit the Duttons. As Mary parades her “‘triumph’ and preens herself” (Southam 35), it’s clear that Kitty and Jemima are horrified at the idea of marriage to Mr. Watts. Mary is oblivious. At the Duttons’ we then encounter the mysterious Mr. Brudenell; his scorn for Mary, who continues to act the fool, is patent. The fragment concludes with another grotesque conflict between Mary and Watts; Mrs. Stanhope, indifferent to the couple’s total incompatibility, effects a truce.

In “The three Sisters” we find the required 3 or 4 families, and the bit of

ivory here succinctly predicts the drama to come, including an impressive range of elements: the ruthless lengths to which the mercenary mother will go to acquire an 'eligible' suitor for the advantage of her family and her *own* future well-being; the crass misogyny of a system that encourages the selling of a daughter to someone so indisputably repulsive; the pathos of a situation that turns sisters against one another; the implied/underlying fear of what will happen to young women who don't marry; the claustrophobic social scene. Even as these serious themes are established, Mary and Watts continue to provide an effective satirical counterpoint. In the plot alone we see evidence of the particular transitional brilliance of "The three Sisters."

Character, of course, is at least as important as plot, and in its blend of parody and social commentary the fragment may be seen to predict both the heartless Fanny Dashwood and the compassion of Colonel Brandon. Christine Alexander and David Owen remark that "The three Sisters" shows "sustained seriousness," and "though epistolary [it achieves a great] degree of narrative transparency and realism" (60). That seriousness and realism are largely accomplished through the portrayal of the characters: again, within the difficult strictures of the epistolary format, Austen's fine brush is busily at work.

As the story's center, the Stanhope family must be first considered. Since Georgiana and Mary write the actual letters, we most clearly "hear" their voices, and so they are the most fully presented. But within their letters each records extensive dialogue. The effect of the letters, then, is two-fold. First, the writers address their correspondents, telling them "what happened," and in this way we hear them, directly. Second, they document conversations they took part in: these "records" of direct speech thus acquaint us in some detail with the other characters in the drama.

Georgiana's epistolary voice serves to characterize her in a number of ways. Like Elizabeth Bennet, she is vibrant, lively, witty, intelligent and irreverent. As she reports to her correspondent, Anne, it is she who devises the scheme to trick Mary into accepting Mr. Watts. Beyond Georgiana's cleverness there is also an implied understanding of the brutal life-and-death nature of what they're dealing with: she shows few qualms about sacrificing Mary but only because she must save Sophy—who, she fears, would accept Watts out of "Good nature & Sisterly affection" (61). As a narrator, Georgiana inspires our confidence, is eminently dependable. We understand that she is open and honest in her letters and has a precise memory; that she writes so soon after the fact better allows her to report conversations and events with particular accuracy.

Here she recounts a scene with Sophy, as communicated to her friend. “My dear Anne,” she writes. “Sophy and I have just been practising a little deceit on our eldest Sister . . .” (60). Georgiana recounts the scheme but also the trouble she had convincing her gentle sister to overcome her scruples: “how can I hope,” asks Sophy, “that my Sister may accept a Man who cannot make her happy” (61). Georgiana sees she must make use of her wit and draws a playful, idealized portrait of Watts that only serves to underscore his odiousness:

“[H]is temper . . . has been reckoned bad, but may not the World be deceived in their Judgement. . . [?] They say he is stingy; We’ll call that Prudence. They say he is suspicious. *That* proceeds from a warmth of Heart always excusable in Youth. . . .” (62)

(In fact, Watts is 32, only a few years younger than Colonel Brandon of the flannel waistcoats.) Now Sophy cannot help but laugh. Georgiana continues, “However . . . I am resolved. . . I never would marry Mr Watts were Beggary the only alternative. So deficient in every respect! Hideous in his person and without one good Quality to make amends for it” (62). At length, with more laughter, Sophy agrees to the deception. Through this exchange, Georgiana includes enough of her older sister to let us see Sophy’s sweetness and vulnerability. Unlike Mary, Sophy would be utterly destroyed by marriage to Watts. In contrast, writes Georgiana to Anne, Watts and Mary “will probably have a new Carriage,” and perhaps a Phaeton, “which will be paradise to her. . . . These things however would be no consolation to Sophy or me for domestic Misery.” Georgiana concludes with this telling sentence: “Remember all this & do not condemn us” (63).

In this three-page letter Georgiana gives us a world of information. Her lively intelligence and independent spirit come through most strongly. We also see her great devotion to Sophy, and can infer her role as protector of her sister, who, despite being older, is less tough. The trick that Georgiana is suggesting is not a pretty one, and it says something for Sophy that she tries to resist, even though she is the next victim in line. In this letter Georgiana reveals an unqualified trust in Anne, evidently a dear friend who is also aware of the realities they face. She does not need to explain to Anne her revulsion at a social situation that so baldly fosters greed. She trusts Anne to delight in the cleverness of her scheme, but also, with her final sentence, asks Anne not to condemn: she knows that deceiving Mary is not admirable. Her integrity is further indicated in her insistence that poverty is better than prostitution—selling oneself for financial security. As Lloyd Brown observes, “most of the letters . . . are assigned to the pen of Georgiana Stanhope, whose ironic

detachment anticipates the narrative strategies of the major novels" (155). With these few brush strokes, an early version of Elizabeth Bennet is created.

Mary is a very silly and, finally, a very sad character: "a fool, dazzled and confused by the prospect of marriage" (Southam 35). Her letters to her friend Fanny reveal her to be Georgiana's opposite (in fact the opposition serves to characterize both). Brown notes the essential contrast between the two sisters' accounts: Georgiana's comments are "analytical, . . . carefully constructed" while Mary's . . . are a "breathless jumble of contradictions" (145). Mary has no steadiness of character, no inkling of integrity, no energy beyond that inspired by greed, no loyalty to her sisters (indeed she takes great delight in the idea of besting them). She has no self-awareness: she really does not know if she is "the happiest creature in the World" (57), as she tells Fanny, or if when she accepts Watts, she "shall be miserable all the rest of my Life" (58). She is incapable of rational thought or intercourse. "He is extremely disagreeable & I hate him more than any body else in the world. He has a large fortune & will make great Settlements on me; but then he is very healthy. . . . [He is] so stingy that there is no living in the house with him" (58). What intelligence Mary may have is successfully neutralized by her acquisitiveness. She is the epitome of the warped and stunted sort of creature that is produced by a materialist, misogynist society. "I beleive I shant have him," she runs on to Fanny. "I would refuse him at once if I were certain that neither of my Sisters would accept him. . . . I cannot run such a risk, so, if he will promise to have the Carriage ordered as I like, I will have him. . . . I hope you like my determination" (59).

Versions of Mary reemerge in the mature novels. In her ignorant folly she is like Lydia but rather more cynical: she wants to drive a hard bargain (though, pettily, it comes down to the "pinmoney" [64]). This bargain is close to the bottom of the basement: for what is Mary selling herself? How horribly unhappy will she be? Does Austen, in fact, ask us to feel compassion for Mary? Perhaps so. Can we imagine (and I think she implicitly asks us to) what it would be like to have sex, night after night, with Mr. Watts? Still, Mary remains resolute. In her pragmatic acceptance of a man she despises, she is similar to Charlotte Lucas and Maria Bertram; in her callous ambition, she looks forward to Lucy Steele and Augusta Elton (those delightful and appalling eighteenth-century throwbacks); as the "bad" sister, she is perhaps like Elizabeth Elliot. Mary seems to have provided a nearly inexhaustible palette for Austen's later use.

Mrs. Stanhope, the mother, is a principal figure in advancing both action and theme. She looks back to the satirical tradition and forward, a little, to

Mrs. Dashwood, who, having effectively been left with nothing, understandably fears what will become of her daughters. But in fact, Mrs. Stanhope reveals a gross insensitivity to her daughters' personal happiness that is more akin to that of Mrs. Bennet. In her second letter to Fanny, Mary recounts a recent dialogue with her mother:

Mother came up & told me she wanted to speak with me. . . .

“Ah! . . . (said I) That old fool M^r Watts has told you all about it. . . . However you shant force me to have him if I dont like it.”

“I am not going to force you Child, but only want to know what your resolution is with regard to his Proposals, . . . that if *you* dont accept him *Sophy* may.”

“Indeed (replied I hastily) *Sophy* need not trouble herself for I shall certainly marry him myself.” (59)

Mrs. Stanhope feigns sympathy at the start of this scene. As she discovers Mary's ambivalence, she becomes increasingly manipulative, playing a relentless cat-and-mouse game. “But will *Sophy* marry him Mama,” whines Mary, “if he offers to her?” “Most likely,” replies her mother. “Why should not she?” Mrs. Stanhope is “determined not to let such an opportunity escape of settling one of [her] Daughters so advantageously” (60). The vain, slow-witted Mary is no match for her.

In this satirical portrait we see that Mrs. Stanhope is in fact rather more complicit than Georgiana and *Sophy* in driving Mary into the Watts trap. What does Austen's fine brush (*via* Mary), tell us about this mother? She is mercenary, fully aware of the dangers of financial vulnerability, ruthlessly pragmatic. Mary's depiction of Mrs. Stanhope serves to underscore the themes, detailed above, that expose the harsh realities of Austen's world. We are reminded of several desperate animals fighting over one piece of meat. Mrs. Stanhope wants it (however rancid) and intends to get it. Georgiana writes to Anne that “my Mother's resolution . . . I am sorry to say is generally more strictly kept than rationally formed” (61), but the daughter here perhaps shows an excessive generosity towards the mother. Had this mother been the naïve and sentimental Mrs. Dashwood, she might have been forgiven, but Mrs. Stanhope is emphatically a predator—easily as ravenous and unprincipled as Lucy Steele, and with less excuse.

Beyond the Stanhope family, the first character we meet is Mr. Watts. He doesn't get to say much, but what he does say condemns him. He is mean, rude, stingy, ugly. When Mrs. Stanhope begs Mary not to be rude to Watts, he interjects:

“Pray Madam do not lay any restraint on Miss Stanhope by oblig-

ing her to be civil. If she does not choose to accept my hand, I can offer it else where, for as I am by no means guided by a particular preference to you above your Sisters it is equally the same to me which I marry of the three.” (64)

He may be compared most immediately to Mr. Collins, though Watts probably is rather the worse of the two. Charlotte Lucas knows how to manage the foolish, malleable Collins, and their life as we see it, when Elizabeth visits, is possibly comfortable for her friend. Watts, *au contraire*, is rigid and pitiless, even punitive. There is no suggestion that Mary, lacking Charlotte’s intelligence, will be able to arrange a tolerable life for herself (even if she does get her new carriage).

The mature novels are replete with comparable situations—desperate women willing to compromise—all of which are redolent of something like despair: older women selling their daughters, young women selling themselves, whether for financial expediency, or sexual fantasy, or social advantage, or sheer survival: Isabella Thorpe, Lucy Steele, Lydia Bennet, Charlotte Lucas, Maria Bertram, Augusta Elton, Mrs. Clay. Such examples indicate something approaching an epidemic. The eighteenth-century stereotypes function to underscore this mercenary agenda. In contrast, realistic characters like Georgiana Stanhope and Elizabeth Bennet, who would prefer “Beggary” (Georgiana’s term) are rare indeed.

We next meet the Dutton sisters, Kitty and Jemima, who are worthy of serious consideration. Their contrast with the unscrupulous husband-hunters of the later novels is indicated by their mutual shock at the news of Mary’s engagement: “that anyone who had the Beauty & fortune (tho’ small yet a provision) of Mary would willingly marry Mr Watts, could by them scarcely be credited” (68). Though we see little of them, they show wit, warmth and social awareness, representative—as are Sophy and Georgiana—of Austen’s new, realistic project. Kitty, in particular, seems as mischievous as Georgiana: when Mary boasts that, once married, she will be able to chaperone them, Kitty replies,

“You are very good . . . & since you are inclined to undertake the Care of young Ladies, I should advise you to prevail on Mrs Edgcombe to let you [also] chaprone her six Daughters. . . .”

Kitty made us all smile except Mary. . . . (69)

The Duttons would surely have been more fully developed if Austen had continued with “The three Sisters.” At a ball, or a dinner—which must have taken place had this fragment been more fully developed—they would have

been significant both as affectionate allies of Sophy and Georgiana, and as a fulcrum between Mary and her sisters, between satire and realism.

Through Kitty and Jemima we are introduced to the smooth, sardonic Mr. Brudenell, who may look forward to some of Austen's later sexy men: Willoughby, Henry Crawford, Frank Churchill. Brudenell is "distantly connected" to their family, but is on evidently good terms with the sisters, as they are all together "in the dressing-room" (67) when the Stanhopes arrive at Stoneham. Georgiana describes him as a "very handsome Young Man" (67) and six lines later declares him to be "the handsomest Man I ever saw in my Life" (68). Additionally, we learn that he is the son of Sir Henry Brudenell of Leicestershire (67).

So young Brudenell is attractive, well-connected, with the added allure of being from outside the narrow community. Judging by Georgiana's response, Brudenell will turn out to be a sort of love interest for her. As the scene progresses Mary, sadly revealing her eighteenth-century roots, proceeds to make a fool of herself as she brags about her engagement. Brudenell's reaction seems to foreshadow Darcy's scorn of Elizabeth's family:

"However [says Mary of her betrothed] I do not much dislike him tho' he is very plain to be sure."

Mr Brudenell stared, the Miss Duttons laughed & Sophy & I were heartily ashamed of our Sister. (69)

Interestingly, at this point, Georgiana begins to feel sorry for Mary, calling her "the poor Girl." Her compassion sheds critical light on Brudenell's subsequent reaction: "I was sorry for my Sister's sake," writes Georgiana, "to see that Mr Brudenell seemed to take pleasure in listening to her account . . . & even encouraged her by his Questions & Remarks, for it was evident that his only Aim was to laugh at her" (69). Brudenell's pleasure in toying with Mary may, as Susan Allen Ford suggests, "look forward to Catherine Morland's suspicion that Henry Tilney indulged himself a little too much with the foibles of others" and is perhaps more reprehensible than Darcy's snobbery.

Brudenell's amusement in this quarter evidently palls, and so he looks elsewhere for diversion. "He kept his Countenance extremely well," reports Georgiana, but "[a]t length . . . seemed fatigued & Disgusted with [Mary's] ridiculous Conversation [and] turned from her to us" (70). This preferential treatment must have pleased Georgiana, who goes on to say that he "spoke but little to [Mary] for about half an hour before we left Stoneham" (70). Brudenell's skill at playing members of an attentive female audience off against one another might be compared with that of Henry Crawford and

Frank Churchill; and like Crawford and Churchill we sense that not only is he attractive but also bored and idle. The fact that he is good at disguise—keeping “his Countenance”—may mean that, like Willoughby or Wickham, he will turn out to be more generally duplicitous. In his character the transition away from parody would seem to be complete. Although we never actually “hear” his voice (in Georgiana’s letter he is not quoted), the complexity of his character emerges even in this short scene: he is sly and manipulative, but also suave, charming, sexy, intriguing. He is the opposite of ridiculous: he is compelling, and he is sinister. Despite the mixed messages that Georgiana herself gives to Anne, “[a]s soon as we were out of the House we all joined in praising the Person & Manners of Mr Brudenell” (70).

Really, “The three Sisters” is something of a *tour-de-force*. We have been presented with an entire cast of characters and a nascent plot, all within the scope of twelve pages. In addition we encounter a paradigm of the adroit balancing act between satire and realism that will continue to figure in Austen’s mature novels. In the tradition of “Love and Freindship” Mary represents the parodic strand of the narrative. She is relentlessly predictable (grasping, competitive). In contrast we have the two younger Stanhope sisters, Sophy and Georgiana. Their characterization and implied plight *vis-à-vis* the marriage game are in the same realistic vein as *Catharine*. The sympathetic Dutton sisters too are presented realistically, perhaps recalling Catharine’s friends, the Miss Wynnes. In the two male figures, we find a quintessential blending of the strands: the robotic Watts *vs.* the sinuous Brudenell (later to be reconfigured as Mr. Collins and George Wickham).

“The three Sisters” resonates with implied sexual politics and a more general critique of society’s materialism. As Claire Tomalin says, “The three Sisters” is “a distinctly brutal story about mercenary matchmaking” (78). Austen effectively blends parody and social realism to make her political point. Having so firmly established, with the visit to the Duttons, her realist project, she concludes the fragment with an emphatic return to parody. Upon their return to the Stanhopes’, Mary and Watts are soon at it, hammer-and-tongs. ““Courting! (replied Mary) we have been quarrelling. Watts is such a Fool! I hope I shall never see him again”” (70). But after the indefatigable Mrs. Stanhope’s intervention, the evening ends with “Watts . . . going to Town to hasten the preparations for the Wedding” (71).

Copeland’s comments help bring into focus the message of “The three Sisters,” as it cogently presents an example of the “economic dilemma” to be found in the later novels: “Three young women and their mother argue over

a wealthy suitor: while two of the sisters attempt to dodge their position as negotiable commodities in the market, the third tries to raise the bargaining price . . ." (158). So Copeland implicitly points to Austen's effective braiding of parody and realism. "The three Sisters," he argues, deals with "women's vulnerability in a male-dominated system. [Women are often in the impossible] dual role, as consumer and commodity at once, often in the same transaction" (156). Here he must allude to Mary's dilemma: it's she who, specifically, is both consumer and consumed. In political terms, Mary is the real victim of this story. In an interesting twist, the story's avaricious clown in fact turns out to be the object of compassion. And it is a mark of the genius of "The three Sisters" that Austen could, with her fine brush, so deftly blend parody and realism in this brilliant bit of ivory.

NOTE

1. In her list of Contents for Volume the First, Austen writes a lower case "three," as she does for "The beautifull Cassandra" (*MW* 3). As Southam concurs, so will I.

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