Chapter 6

Jane Austen, by the Numbers

The Janeites among Our Respondents

Jane Austen bulks larger than any other single author in the data set. Out of the total of 435 characters in the data set, 56, or about 13 percent, are from Austen novels. All of her characters together received 423 codings, or about 29 percent of the 1,470 codings for the whole data set. Since we have averaged the ratings for characters who receive more than one coding, each Austen character, no matter how many codings he or she receives, counts only once in the total set of scores for all 435 characters.

The large number of characters coded from Austen's novels offers an opportunity to examine scoring patterns across the whole body of her novels. On many categories, scores for her characters converge with those of characters by other novelists seemingly very different—the Brontës, Dickens, George Eliot, Thomas Hardy, Joseph Conrad, Oscar Wilde. In other ways, though, in the characterization of male consorts of female protagonists and in the tonal quality captured in the emotional responses of readers, Austen stands apart from these other novelists. Quantifying those differences gives us a new angle of access in interpreting her work, enabling us to confirm the validity of some common views, refine insights from her most perceptive critics, offer new evidence on disputed issues, and locate all particular observations within a systematic organization of categories lodged in an evolutionary understanding of human nature.

Is Austen Too Sensible To Be Explained?

In order to claim legitimate standing as "explanation," interpretive criticism must reduce phenomenal surfaces to underlying causal

patterns. The alternative is merely to describe, analyze, summarize, and appreciate. Most of the criticism that has been written on Austen's novels has departed relatively little from the phenomenal surface. Before the poststructuralist revolution in the 1970s, most interpretive criticism operated within the range of analytic summary and appreciative evaluation. More recent critics have sought to subordinate analytic summary to theoretical terms such as Class Struggle, the Phallus, the Mirror Stage, Compulsory Heterosexism, the Other, Desire, Patriarchy, Dialogism, Textuality, Semiosis, Discourse, and Power.[1] In criticism of Austen, though, these interpretive gestures often seem perfunctory or half-hearted. Austen's own commitment to "sense" at the common level seems to have chastened the more rhetorically flamboyant impulses of the theoretical schools. The bulk of more recent critical commentary on Austen overlaps heavily with traditional analytic summary couched in the common idiom.

By breaking down Austen's thematic and tonal structures to their component parts, we can discover patterns of meaning not readily apparent to the common understanding and can give an empirically grounded analysis of the total imaginative effect produced by her work. Our data indicate that Austen mutes male sexuality, feminizes male motives, and uses an emotional palette largely devoid of Sorrow. Her novels thus embody a female domestic ethos with a positive emotional tone. In the social vision implicit in her fiction, the primary function of the larger social order is to protect and nurture this female domestic ethos. The muting of Sorrow and the correlation between Main Feature and Achieves Goals give evidence that in her imagined world society largely succeeds in fulfilling this function.

In Austen's novels, the desexualized resolutions of domestic romance converge with the depoliticized resolutions of an agonistically isolated social order. By reducing her imagined world to a single social class, she eliminates any serious consideration of class conflict. Within that one class, though, she makes a strong appeal to evolved dispositions for suppressing dominance in individuals. By inviting readers to participate vicariously in an elite social class, she satisfies their impulse toward Social Dominance; by stigmatizing individual assertions of dominance within the elite class, she also fulfills readers' needs for communitarian cooperation.

For Austen's own protagonists, at least, romantic and social conflicts culminate in a near-perfect resolution. That dual resolution is an essential part of the total imaginative effect produced by her work. Our respondents' scores indicate that they recognize and resonate to this effect. They clearly distinguish major from minor characters and

good from bad, recognize success in outcomes, and respond emotionally in predictable ways. Character role assignments and scores on Root For and Achieves Goals indicate that the outcomes of the novels give solid satisfaction to the respondents.

The research described here offers an advance on the critical consensus about Austen's work. Many of our particular findings, though, converge closely with that critical consensus. That convergence has complementary implications: it offers empirical evidence for the correctness of the critical consensus and also for the explanatory power of the model of human nature used to obtain the data. The empirical character of the model of human nature lends epistemological credibility to the critical tradition. The convergence between our results and the critical tradition gives evidence that this model, simple as it is, is nonetheless complex enough to replicate insights from generations of the most capable readers of a master novelist—replicate them, and also advance on them.

Integrating Empirical Methods with
Traditional Literary Criticism

Many theorists and critics feel that theoretical explanation should be counterintuitive and produce imaginative impressions radically at variance with the common understanding. We think this feeling is misguided. Literary works are meant to be understood. They use the common language, depict common motives and features of personality, and elicit common emotional responses. The questions in the questionnaire are derived from an evolutionary model of human nature but couched in the common language. They are thus situated at the point at which the evolutionary model converges with the common understanding. The questions register the common understanding, quantify it, and locate it within the context of empirical social science. Quantification enables us to give an objective, formal analysis of the common understanding, assess statistically the relations among its elements, and draw new inferences from those relations.

While drawing large interpretive inferences from the scores on the attributes of characters and the emotional responses of readers, we also use our general knowledge of Austen and the critical tradition to help interpret the scores. To get the full benefit of the data, it is necessary to bring the data to bear on issues of authorial stance, reader response, and aesthetic quality. Consequently, we have drawn no hard and fast line between data-driven analysis and interpretive literary criticism. Even so, in the exposition that follows, we take care to identify claims

that are primarily inferences from data and to distinguish them from interpretive propositions that depend heavily on literary judgment.

The Figure in Austen's Carpet

One of our findings—a finding we perhaps should have anticipated but did not—is that in motives and in the criteria for selecting long-term mates, Austen's female protagonists and their male consorts display few individual differences. They are all much the same. In personality, though, and in the emotional responses of readers, the individuals stand out sharply from one another. Evidently, the differences in the emotional responses of readers are produced chiefly through differences in personality among the characters. This finding has a practical bearing on the exposition that follows. For motives and the criteria for selecting mates, we present graphic displays only for the character sets as groups, not singling out individual characters. For personality and emotional responses, in contrast, we include graphic displays for both the groups and the individual characters.

Since we did not ourselves anticipate this difference between motives and mating, on the one side, and personality and emotional responses on the other, and since we are aware of no critical commentaries on Austen that clearly register the contrast between these two sets of categories, we regard this finding as a noteworthy result of having conducted an empirical, quantitative analysis of Austen's novels: *motives and mating are constants; personality is the key that opens up the possibility of meaningful variation in Austen's imaginative world.*

Analyzing relations among scores across all Austen's novels, we argue that the novels form a unified thematic and tonal field. The variations in personality and in emotional response for individual characters are contained within an overarching set of values—domestic and social—that we designate Austen's "ethos." In each novel, the female protagonist must use the resources of her own personality, different for each character, to solve the problem presented in the plot: achieving a satisfactory marital union. Our chief interpretive hypothesis is that in each novel solving this problem also fulfills the main thematic motive in the novel: depicting the female protagonist's successful effort at achieving emotional maturity. By "thematic motive," we mean what is really at stake with respect to the attitudes and beliefs of the protagonist. By "emotional maturity," we mean fulfilling the emotional potential available in human nature.[2] For Austen, that potential consists in achieving what she calls "rational

happiness."[3] This, we think, is the main design, the figure in Jane Austen's carpet. In the course of each novel, the female protagonist must meet a moral and intellectual challenge: to achieve emotional and intellectual maturity in the sense defined by Austen's ethos.

The figure in this particular carpet is not startlingly unfamiliar. But it is decisively clear. It is based on the responses of knowledgeable readers giving quantitative evidence on simple, basic categories derived from an evolutionary model of human nature. It constitutes the first empirically grounded interpretive proposition about the chief constants and variables that produce meaningful order on a large scale in Austen's novels. Accordingly, we think that the results reported here could serve a useful function in future criticism of Austen's works. They could constrain interpretive commentaries, both limiting the range of plausible hypotheses and also stimulating scholars to develop, qualify, or correct the conclusions we draw.

Generalizing from our findings about the significance of personality in Austen's work, we draw one large theoretical inference that extends well beyond Austen's particular case: the factors of personality are themselves primary thematic terms, on a par, as terms of "meaning," with the allegorical reductions of the theoretical schools: the Mirror Stage, Class Struggle, Compulsory Heterosexuality, and all the rest. Personality is an ultimate interpretive term at the level of "appropriation" or "theoretical explanation."[4]

Sorting the 56 Austen Characters into Character Sets

All but five of the 56 characters from Austen's novels were assigned to a role either on the basis of a single respondent's decision or on the basis of a majority vote among multiple respondents. Four characters received tie votes, and one (Sir Walter Elliot of *Persuasion*) received only one coding and no role assignment ("other"). Table 6.1 displays the distribution of characters into character sets.

Table 6.1 Number of Austen characters in the eight agonistic character sets (and the unassigned characters)

Character Sex	Unassigned	Protagonists	Good minors	Antagonists	Bad minors	Total
Males	4	1	13	5	1	24
Females	1	7	16	8	0	32
Total	5	8	29	13	1	56

Good minor characters bulk largest, and bad minors smallest, as is also the case in the larger data set of the 382 characters assigned to agonistic roles. Female protagonists are in good supply, and the supply of antagonists, both male and females, constitutes a percentage of the Austen characters (23 percent) substantially larger than that in the larger data set. In contrast with the larger data set, characters from Austen contain a somewhat larger proportion of females, also. The proportion of male protagonists is miniscule compared to that in the larger data set.

Only one of the 20 male characters from Austen—Fitzwilliam Darcy of *Pride and Prejudice*—is officially identified as a protagonist, and even Darcy's assignment is marginal. Only 12 of 30 respondents identify him as a protagonist, 11 as a good minor character, 5 as an antagonist, and 2 as "other." (The five designations of Darcy as an antagonist can be attributed to the shift in his relation to Elizabeth and her family midway through the novel.) Five of Austen's six novels focus clearly on a single main character as a protagonist, and in every novel that character is female. (*Sense and Sensibility* has two female protagonists, sisters, Elinor and Marianne.) In each of her novels, Austen aligns her own perspective closely with that of a female protagonist, and we infer that it is for this reason that our respondents usually designate the leading male figures in the novels as "associates of a protagonist."

The paucity of official male protagonists in table 6.1 is misleading. Each of Austen's female protagonists has a male consort, and in each case for which we have scores, the male consorts score within the protagonistic range on the key features that distinguish characters as male protagonists. On the substantive attributes of characters and on Dislike, Root For, and Main Feature, the six consorts are typical male protagonists. The six consorts for the six novels are Darcy in *Pride and Prejudice*, George Knightley in *Emma*, Captain Wentworth in *Persuasion*, Edmund Bertram in *Mansfield Park*, Henry Tilney in *Northanger Abbey*, and Colonel Brandon in *Sense and Sensibility*. (We have no scores for Elinor Dashwood's consort Edward Ferrars, but in profession and temperament he is similar to Edmund Bertram in *Mansfield Park*. Both are quiet, conservative clergymen.)

Despite their official role assignments as good minor characters, the six male consorts of Austen's female protagonists stand out very distinctly from the profiles of good minor male characters who are not consorts of female protagonists. On Main Feature, Constructive Effort, Conscientiousness, Stability, Openness, and Interest, the

consort males as a group score at least half a standard deviation higher than the other nine good minor males. Taking account of these signal differences, within this chapter we separate the six male consorts into a distinct group that we designate "male consorts." In the study as a whole, the scores for five of these six characters are designated good minor males. Such designations have much to do with the degree to which good minor males approximate, in scores on Constructive Effort, to male protagonists.

Motives

One of the two most important things to register about motives in Austen's novels is that she uses motives to diminish differences between the sexes. The unisex character of her imagined world enters fundamentally into the ethos and emotional tenor of the novels, shifting the balance of interest away from sexual romance and toward companionship. Unisexuality reduces conflicts of reproductive interest between males and females, thereby reducing also the struggle for power between them. It brings males and females into closer convergence than they are in the actual world or in the world depicted in the novels of the period as a whole. All these effects contribute to the completeness of the tonal resolutions in the novels—hence to the unusually high level of positive emotionality in readers' experience of Austen. A few critics have intuitively recognized some aspects of unisexuality in Austen's novels—particularly the diminution of specifically sexual romance.[5] No critic, to our knowledge, has combined all the aspects of Austen's unisexuality to form part of a comprehensive interpretive argument.

In contrast to male protagonists in the larger data set, Austen's male consorts score unusually high on Romance (figure 6.1).

Even more importantly, they stand far apart from the average male protagonist on Nurture. They score higher on Nurture than both major female sets. They are kinder, gentler males, not so sexually exciting as males in "romance novels"—the pulp fiction genre—but good for the long haul in domestic life. The erotic moment is never a culminating moment for Austen. She glosses over the passionate kiss that seals the deal, and dwells on the terms of the deal. Those terms are the terms of "domestic" romance. The males suitable for this sort of romance are socially decorous, responsible, steady, and companionable. Above all, they are good family men.[6]

The other most important thing to register about motives in Austen's novels is the peculiar way in which she reconciles rank

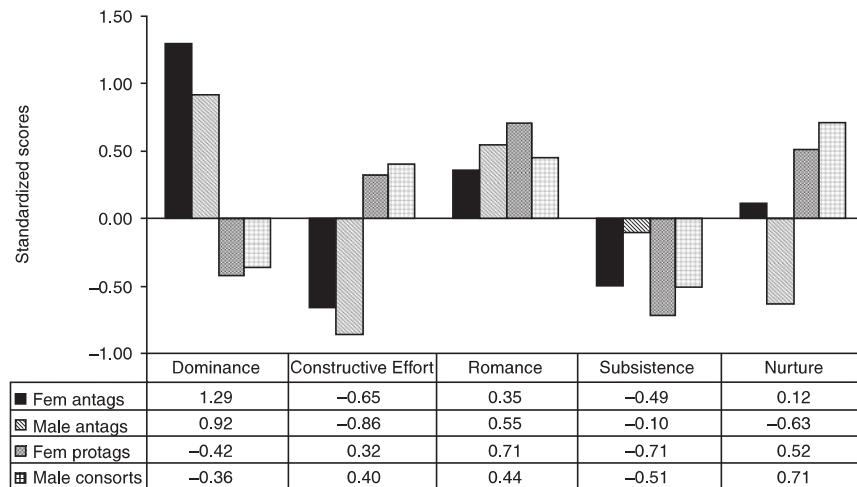|	Dominance	Constructive Effort	Romance	Subsistence	Nurture
■ Fem antags	1.29	−0.65	0.35	−0.49	0.12
◩ Male antags	0.92	−0.86	0.55	−0.10	−0.63
▣ Fem protags	−0.42	0.32	0.71	−0.71	0.52
⊞ Male consorts	−0.36	0.40	0.44	−0.51	0.71

Figure 6.1   Motive factors in Austen's antagonists, female protagonists, and male consorts.

and privilege with the evolved dispositions for an egalitarian ethos. Virtually all the characters in Austen's novels, good and bad alike, are overtly committed to seeking or sustaining high social rank and material prosperity. Now, high social rank and material prosperity are of course the chief constituents of Social Dominance. The difference is that the good characters, and especially the protagonists and their consorts, make fine discriminations of personal and moral value. Antagonists, in contrast, place rank and wealth above all other considerations, or leave other considerations out altogether. Antagonists either recognize better things but sacrifice them to social and material advantage, or they simply fail, out of stupidity or bad nature, to recognize any forms of value except rank and fortune. Instances of antagonistic characters who see the better and follow the worse include Wickham in *Pride and Prejudice*, Willoughby in *Sense and Sensibility*, Henry Crawford in *Mansfield Park*, and William Elliot in *Persuasion*. Instances of antagonistic characters who follow the worse because that is all they see include Isabella Thorpe and Captain Frederick Tilney in *Northanger Abbey*, Mr. Collins and Lady Catherine de Bourgh in *Pride and Prejudice*, the Reverend Philip Elton and his wife in *Emma*, John Dashwood and Robert Ferrars in *Sense and Sensibility*, Anne Elliot's father and sister in *Persuasion*, and Mrs. Norris in *Mansfield Park*.

Since Austen restricts all her major characters to the members of the leisure class, they receive uniformly low scores on Subsistence as

a motive. Jane Fairfax's anguish at the prospect of becoming a governess, in *Emma*, suggests the intensity of the selective pressure for remaining within the leisure class. By restricting her major characters to a single social class, Austen restricts the conflict between communitarian motives and Social Dominance to interpersonal relations within that class. She thus derogates Social Dominance as an individual motive but also tacitly affirms the social legitimacy of the dominant class. Each of her protagonists wins a secure position within that class.

Long-Term Mate Selection

The feminizing of Austen's male consorts extends into their criteria for selecting mates (figure 6.2).

In this category, the male consorts are much more like Austen's female protagonists than they are like male protagonists in the whole set of novels in this study. With a minor qualification for Catherine Morland of *Northanger Abbey*, Austen's female protagonists are all attractive; there are no plain Jane Eyres. But physical attractiveness is not the main thing that attracts the males to them. Austen's male consorts select marital partners not on the basis of sexual passion, but on the basis of their admiration and respect for qualities of character and mind.
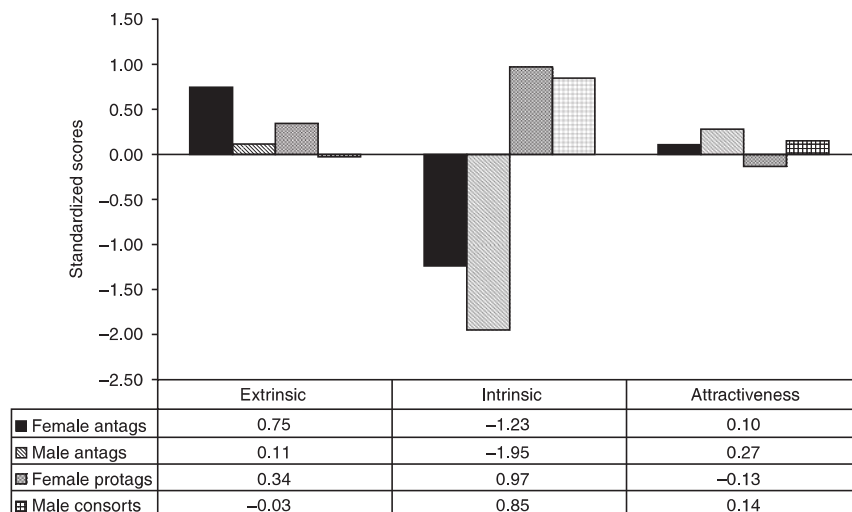
	Extrinsic	Intrinsic	Attractiveness
■ Female antags	0.75	−1.23	0.10
▨ Male antags	0.11	−1.95	0.27
▤ Female protags	0.34	0.97	−0.13
⊞ Male consorts	−0.03	0.85	0.14

Figure 6.2 Criteria for selecting marital partners in Austen's antagonists, female protagonists, and male consorts.

Austen is evidently aware that her sexual ethos differs from that in the world at large. She has Emma Woodhouse dramatize this issue and bring the reader's attention forcibly to it. Emma is a clever young woman, but she is inexperienced, and her inventive wit often leads her to false conclusions that correspond with her wishes or preconceptions. One of her chief projects is to find a husband for her protégée Harriet Smith. Harriet is physically attractive and has a pleasant temperament, but she is not well educated and not at all clever. Emma and her friend George Knightley engage in a warm debate over Harriet's value on the marriage market. Emma contends that men in general favor physical attractiveness over qualities of mind. "'Till it appears that men are much more philosophic on the subject of beauty than they are generally supposed; till they do fall in love with well-informed minds instead of handsome faces, a girl, with such loveliness as Harriet, has a certainty of being admired and sought after.'"[7]

Emma's generalization corresponds well with the data on mate selection in the whole set of novels in this study, and it corresponds also with findings on current male mating preferences.[8] But with respect to the male consorts in Austen's novels, Emma's judgment is mistaken. That kind of mistake indicates one way in which Emma must still be educated in the sexual norms that are specific to Austen's own imaginative universe. Emma's mistake about sexual norms in Austen's world manifests itself particularly in her judgment about Knightley's sexual preferences. She tells him, "'Oh! Harriet may pick and chuse. Were you, yourself, ever to marry, she is the very woman for you'" (1.8). As it happens, Emma is herself the very woman for Knightley. The resolution of the marriage plot—Emma's betrothal to Knightley—is thus also an embodiment of Emma's successful education in Austen's domestic ethos.

The scores on criteria for selecting mates indicate that Austen places a primary emphasis on intelligent companionship. Though Emma has not herself recognized her own proclivity for this kind of romantic bond, she has already begun, unconsciously, to school herself in it. Her judgment is often poor, and she has never submitted herself to disciplined study, but her mind is sharp and subtle. The dialogue that she has with Knightley over the criteria of male mate selection produces vexation for both of them, but it also displays the acuity and intellectual vigor, on both sides, that forms a chief basis for their companionship. This particular dialogue has a function very similar to that of the dialogue between Elizabeth and Darcy, early in their relations, on the limits of satiric laughter (1:11). Both couples argue,

but the quality of their conversation, even as they disagree, tacitly forms the basis for a companionable bond between them.

The capacity to engage in intelligent and civilized dialogue is an essential criterion for the selection of marital partners among all of Austen's protagonists and consorts. It also serves a larger social function in the interactions among the author, the characters, and the readers. In conversations like those between Emma and Knightley and between Elizabeth and Darcy, the focal characters display qualities of perception, inferential acuity, and stylistic force commensurate with those in the narrator's own exposition. The dialogue tacitly brings the focal couple within the privileged circle of the narrator's own perspective. By responding with intelligent sympathy to the qualities of mind displayed by both the focal characters and the author, the reader also enters into this privileged circle. Author, characters, and readers all form a community of civilized and intelligent intercourse.[9] Our respondents evidently delight in joining this particular community.

Drawing more on general knowledge about Austen than on the scores in this particular study, we can affirm that the resolutions of the mating game in Austen also typically resolve, by proxy, conflicts in the larger structure of family life, kin relations, and the community. Elizabeth Bennet's parents are a model of conjugal frustration. Emma Woodhouse's and Anne Elliot's parents, like Elizabeth's, are ill-matched. The Dashwood sisters in *Sense and Sensibility* have an emotionally extravagant mother and a father who does not provide properly for them. Fanny Price's parents live in squalid disorder. In all of these novels, the concluding marital arrangement between the female protagonist and her consort offers a model of domestic propriety, coupled with warm affection, that replaces the defective parental model. The married couple is the nucleus of the family, and all Austen's protagonistic couples give good promise that they will be affectionate and responsible parents. Within the socioeconomic polity of the landed gentry, the family is also a nucleus for a harmonious social order organized around the estate. All these forms of resolution depend on the successfully completed quest of the female protagonist: to achieve emotional maturity within Austen's domestic ethos.

Male antagonists in Austen, like male antagonists in the larger data set, have no definite mating preferences. Mr. Collins in *Pride and Prejudice* is exemplary in this respect. (Because of his dual affiliations with the Bennett household and Lady Catherine de Bourgh, respondents sometimes assign him to the role of good minor or bad minor character, but his general profile is unambiguously that of an antagonist.) He shows up at the Bennet household intending to offer

marriage to one of the five daughters, none of whom he has ever before met. He first chooses the oldest, Jane, is told she is spoken for, and within a couple of days proposes to Elizabeth; she turns him down; and within a few more days, he proposes to her much older and plainer friend, Charlotte Lucas, who accepts him. On all three criteria of long-term mate selection, Mr. Collins scores below average, and on the preference for Physical Attractiveness, he scores far below average (−.62). For him, one woman is as good as another. His lack of discrimination in choosing a wife is symptomatic of his general insensitivity to all finer qualities of individual identity.

Mr. Collins' lack of discrimination illustrates a chief function of antagonists: they provide a foil for the ethos embodied in the pro- tagonists and their consorts. The ethos set off by the foil includes the communitarian social ethos and also goes beyond that ethos to include all the attractive features embodied in the protagonistic community: some social, some intimately personal, and some intel- lectual. As we argue in the final section of chapter 5, mental dull- ness has no necessary, intrinsic association with an egoistic craving for Social Dominance. In the ethos of the novels, though, the two are typically found in association with one another. In this respect, Austen's ethos conforms entirely with the ethos evident in the aver- age scores for the novels in the period as a whole. Hence it is that Mr. Collins, like his patroness Lady Catherine, is not only a snob but a fool. Hence it is, too, that he has no real power of discrimina- tion in evaluating the attractions of women. The attraction men and women feel for each other as individuals is an important part of the protagonistic ethos.

Personality in the Major Character Sets

The Explanatory Power of Personality

The terms Austen uses to distinguish shades of difference in per- sonality are closely concordant with the five factor model that now dominates the field of personality psychology. This claim might at first seem far-fetched. Austen's observations on human psychology are those of a woman with very little formal education who lived for the most part in retired rural settings some two centuries ago. The five factor model has been produced only within the past few decades, not by an isolated artistic genius operating in a world in which systematic psychological research did not even exist, but by a collective, multigenerational scientific effort involving the statistical

analysis of thousands of personality descriptors and tens of thousands of live human subjects.

The seeming oddity of this conjunction is superficial. Modern personality psychology is based on the "lexical" concept: the idea that if concepts are important enough to ordinary human social interaction, they eventually become embedded in the common lexicon—the idiom of ordinary speech. For good evolutionary reasons, humans are tireless and skilled social evaluators. The statistical analysis of personality descriptors identifies the underlying commonalities among multifarious lexical variants. Austen intuitively recognizes the same commonalities. Moreover, Austen did not in fact work in isolation. Though she had little formal education, she had access to the collected works of English literature—to Shakespeare and Chaucer, to Richardson and Fielding—and they too are psychologists of the first order. Austen's implicit psychological model is in some ways more reductive, schematic, and repetitive than that of these other writers. That simplicity is a crucial element in her artistic economy.

In deciding how to interpret Austen's imagined world, it would be a mistake to overlook the obvious. Personality is so much a part of our everyday lives, so thoroughly built into our intuitive folk psychology, that we can fail to register that it is a fundamental, biologically grounded feature of human nature. It is not just a counter or proxy for some other explanatory dimension—political, ideological, metaphysical, psychological, or aesthetic. It is a real and primary fact, a central organizing principle in our lives. Moreover, it is not amorphous, mysterious, infinitely complex, consisting only of nuances and shades of differences. It consists of a few basic features of temperament deriving from the realities of our lives as social animals.

If we strip away the now standard triad of race, class, and sex, what is left? More than has been taken away. Beneath ethnic and class identity, beneath even the two basic human morphs of male and female, personality forms a bedrock of personal identity. The composition of that bedrock can be assessed with the five factors of personality: the organism's drive outward toward rewarding stimulus in the environment (Extraversion); the capacity of all higher organisms to feel pain and react against it (Emotional Stability); the disposition of all mammals for affiliative bonding (Agreeableness); and the specifically human capacities for organizing behavior over time (Conscientiousness) and generating imaginative culture (Openness to Experience).

The depiction of personality in Austen's characters provides an explanation for a paradoxical sensation that many of her readers have

felt: it is such a small world she depicts, with such a limited range of settings and plot situations; how can it be that Austen gives the impression of classic grandeur? A large part of the answer is personality. When Austen depicts her female protagonists making their way in the world by using the resources of their own personalities and learning to discriminate the pitfalls and hidden strengths in the personalities of others, she is moving with the precision of genius over ancient, evolved features of human nature.

Personality, Ideology, and Gender

Some of Austen's critics, most of them traditional humanists, have argued that Austen affirms the legitimacy of the social power structure depicted in her novels.[10] Others, especially among the more recent critics, have argued that through devices of style or characterization Austen casts doubt, if only surreptitiously, on the legitimacy of existing power structures.[11] Evaluating scores on personality offers a new angle of approach on this issue.

Personality has an ideological dimension that includes a contrast between conservative and unconventional personality types.[12] Knightley's scores on Extraversion (–.41), Conscientiousness (.78), Emotional Stability (.92), and Openness to Experience (–.05) offer one example of the conservative temperament—self-sufficient, reliable, stable, and conventional. Darcy's scores offer a still more extreme example: Extraversion (–1.61), Conscientiousness (1.05), Emotional Stability (.92), and Openness to Experience (–.15).

Across the whole body of her novels, Austen pairs off unconventional and conservative protagonists or consorts—Elizabeth with Darcy, Emma with Knightley, Catherine with Henry Tilney, and Marianne with Elinor and then finally also with Colonel Brandon. *Mansfield Park* varies the pattern by having two potential candidates for protagonistic status, Henry and Mary Crawford, paired off against two conservatives, Fanny Price and her consort Edmund Bertram. The one main exception is *Persuasion,* in which both Anne and Captain Wentworth are conservative. Maria Musgrove and William Elliott provide the foils in that case. Austen's pairing of unconventional and conservative personalities produces a struggle for moral authority, and in each case the unconventional personality types accept the moral authority exercised by their more conservative counterparts. In our judgment, this pairing gives decisive evidence of Austen's conservative ideological orientation.

Austen gives a distinctive ideological turn to the personalities of female protagonists and male consorts (figure 6.3).

The male consorts are much more introverted, on average, than the female protagonists, and they are also more conscientious and more stable. The females are more open to experience. In this gendered division of psychological labor, female protagonists are typically agents of cultural curiosity. They thus tend to put pressure on conventional social standards. The male consorts, in contrast, typically serve to anchor the conventional system of values. They are, in a word, conservative. Patriarchy is of course part of the conventional system of values, but within Austen's ideological dynamics, preserving differences of male and female power seem less important than preserving the privilege of the leisure class. Since so many of Austen's critics have taken gendered power relations as the central organizing theme in her work, this contention clearly cannot be taken as self-evident. What evidence can we adduce to support the idea that Austen subordinates gendered power relations to the desire, shared by female protagonists and their male consorts, to preserve genteel privilege?

Austen shows us little or nothing of the male sphere of activity— the world of work and war. Virtually all the action of the novels takes place within the domestic sphere, at social gatherings or intimate family encounters. None of Austen's female characters evinces any desire
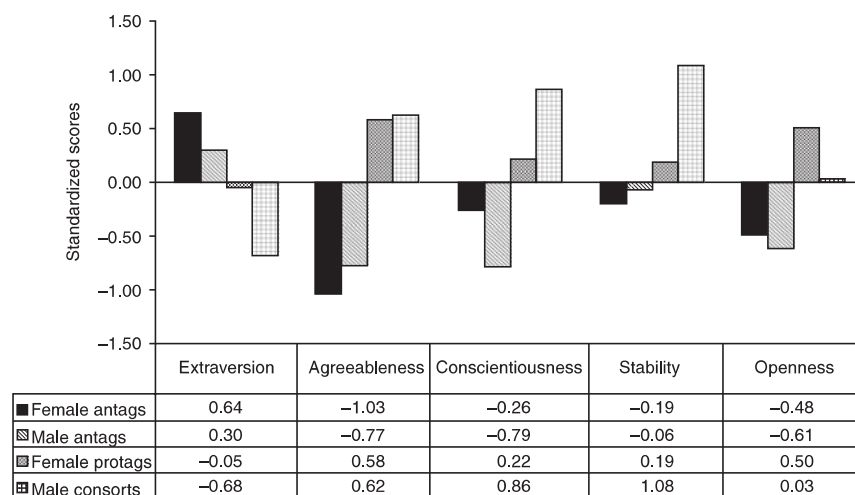
	Extraversion	Agreeableness	Conscientiousness	Stability	Openness
■ Female antags	0.64	−1.03	−0.26	−0.19	−0.48
▨ Male antags	0.30	−0.77	−0.79	−0.06	−0.61
▧ Female protags	−0.05	0.58	0.22	0.19	0.50
⊞ Male consorts	−0.68	0.62	0.86	1.08	0.03

Figure 6.3 Personality in Austen's antagonists, female protagonists, and male consorts.

to move outside this sphere, and many males clearly wish to remain wholly within this sphere. Frank Churchill in *Emma* yearns for an inheritance that will free him from any necessity of ever quitting the domestic sphere, and Bingley in *Pride and Prejudice* is delighted to have inherited enough money so that he will never have to enter the world of "trade" that is the source of his money. Barring an entail like that which disadvantages the Bennet sisters, males and females both can inherit wealth and exercise the power that derives from it, as is the case, for instance, with Lady Catherine de Bourgh in *Pride and Prejudice*, Willoughby's aunt in *Sense and Sensibility*, and Frank Churchill's aunt in *Emma*. Within the domestic sphere of the leisure class, males exercise no preemptive authority on the basis of their sex. Males and females fulfill complementary functions in sustaining a civil order.

The relationship between Elizabeth and Darcy in *Pride and Prejudice* is paradigmatic for the whole array of gendered personality relations within the protagonistic field of Austen's work. Elizabeth is lively and playful, outgoing, sociable, and flexible in wit. Darcy is taciturn, withdrawn, aloof, and rather stodgily conservative in his social views. He is "clever," but he is also grave and sober. He takes himself very seriously, and in the later phases of their relationship Elizabeth comes to depend fundamentally on his steadiness and reliability. Her own lively wit can play freely around the sobriety of his character, but it never leaves the gravitational field formed by his sober moral convictions. Elizabeth has the livelier mind, but Darcy has the greater power, and Elizabeth does not ultimately challenge the legitimacy of that power. Indeed, it would be strange if she did. Darcy's power is the basis for her security and much of her social prestige. As Claudia Johnson observes, *Pride and Prejudice* "is almost shamelessly wish fulfilling," and "it is Darcy himself who secures the happiness the novel celebrates."[13] The power does not run just one way, though. Austen's female protagonists exercise considerable force in dictating the tone of social relations. On more than one occasion, Darcy asserts his dominance in inappropriate ways—as on the occasion of the ball in which he first appears and offends everyone with his arrogance, and in his first proposal of marriage to Elizabeth. In rejecting this proposal, Elizabeth upbraids Darcy for his transgressions in manners, and he ultimately acknowledges the force of her criticisms. Mistakes of this sort are no small matter. In Austen's universe, a sustained pattern of such transgressions would make the decisive difference between being associated with antagonists rather than protagonists. In gradually altering her judgment of Darcy, Elizabeth must segregate

him in her own mind from his antagonistic aunt Lady Catherine de Bourgh.

In order to secure the happiness of the main characters in *Pride and Prejudice*, Darcy must act on the basis of principles concordant with those implicit in the perspective of the narrator—Austen herself. Not all the conservative characters in Austen are male. Fanny, Elinor, and Anne, for instance, are not. And of course, Austen herself is not. Nonetheless, the pattern of gendered psychological relationships has an important function in the emotional organization of Austen's narratives. The diminution of sexual and social conflict in her novels suggests that she aims at an ultimate "felicity," to use her own word. To achieve this felicity, she must dissolve as much as possible any sense of injustice, oppression, and resentment in her imagined world. Patriarchy and class privilege are both background features in the political constitution of Austen's world. They are not foregrounded and made into explicit issues, subjects of controversy, as they are, for instance, in the novels of George Eliot. Nonetheless, they are latent in the conditions of the world that Austen depicts. It is important, then, that the aristocratic males in Austen's world display qualities of judgment that vindicate their positions of privilege and authority. Within Austen's imagined world, male consorts are conservative not because they are repressing the righteous self-assertion of oppressed minorities; they are conservative because they are conserving the principles of justice and order that make happiness possible for all, male and female alike, within the social world depicted in the novels. That social world consists exclusively of the gentry and their satellites: Anglican clergymen and officers in the army and navy. In Austen's imaginative universe, the boundaries of interest and sympathy are coterminous with the circle of privilege.

The fact that male consorts in Austen tend to be more conservative than female protagonists subliminally confirms the legitimacy of patriarchal power. Even so, specific male consorts have moral authority not because they are male but because they are conservative. The authority exercised by males like Darcy and Knightley is moral power based on personality, not on sex. In exercising moral force—as when Knightley rebukes Emma for humiliating the decayed gentlewoman Miss Bates—they appeal to social values that encompass both sexes. Female protagonists can also exercise this kind of moral power. Fanny Price and Elinor Dashwood are exemplary instances. Conversely, female antagonists such as Lady Catherine de Bourgh in *Pride and Prejudice* and Mrs. Ferrars in *Sense and Sensibility*, both beneficiaries of inherited wealth, assert

their power in ways that violate the norms implicit in agonistic structure. In this respect, Lady Catherine and Mrs. Ferrars are like General Tilney in *Northanger Abbey*.

In chapter 4, discussing all the novels in this study, we argue that being male or female matters less than being good or bad. In Austen's case, we can make a further stipulation: being male or female matters less than having a conservative or unconventional personality. Subordinating sex to personality is all the easier for Austen in that the differences between her male and female characters, in motives and in the criteria for selecting mates, are much smaller than they are in other novelists or in the world at large. She reduces the distance between males and females not by reducing the differences from both sides of the gender divide but by feminizing her male consorts. Consequently, while indirectly affirming the legitimacy of patriarchy, Austen is also, paradoxically, affirming the gynocentric ethos that prevails in the novels of the period as a whole. To exercise moral authority in an Austen novel, a man must be more like a woman. Henry Higgins, perhaps, would not approve.

Personality in Individual Female Protagonists

The personality profiles of Austen's female protagonists display a rich variety, but all the variations are ultimately contained within a single ethos—a consistent vision of domestic happiness and social stability. This is the ethos that can be teased out of the scores on motives and mating. In each novel, the protagonists ultimately bring the particular features of their own individual personalities into concord with Austen's ethos. All the novels end happily. That observation accords with the experience of most readers, and it is confirmed by the convergence of the scores on Root For and Achieves Goals. The happy ending in each novel consists of the protagonists achieving what Austen calls "rational happiness"—"rational" meaning the very specific blend of prudence, intelligent companionship, and civil intercourse that constitutes Austen's ethos. Variations in personality place different kinds of stress on the ethos of the novels; and each specific personality offers different resources for meeting challenges to that ethos. Austen's novels thus form something like a psychological thought-experiment: a fictive exploration of the weaknesses and strengths inherent in a wide range of personalities. The constant in this experiment is the problem situation: young people seeking happy and stable marriages.

In the graphic array (figures 6.4 and 6.5), we have divided Austen's female protagonists into extraverts and introverts.

There are seven female protagonists in Austen's six novels (the Dashwood sisters double up in *Sense and Sensibility*). Four of the seven score above average in Extraversion, and three score below average. Marianne Dashwood received only four codings, and her sister Elinor only five, but we think most readers will consider the scores
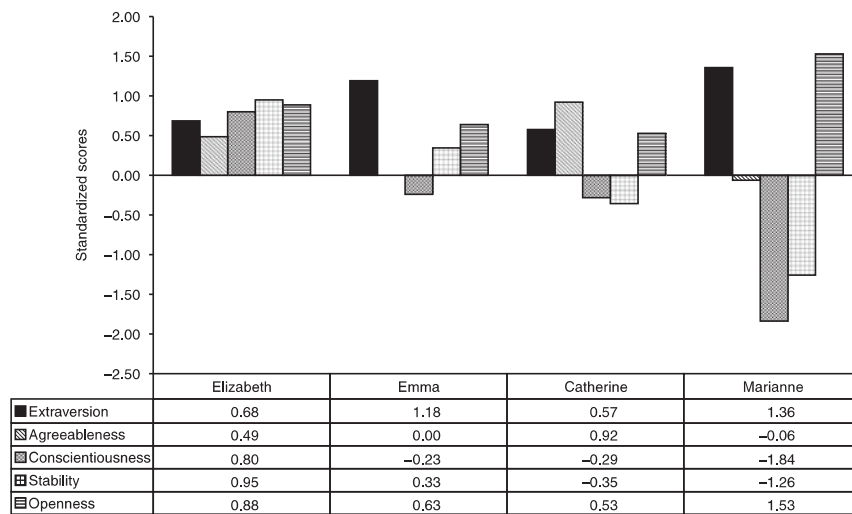
	Elizabeth	Emma	Catherine	Marianne
■ Extraversion	0.68	1.18	0.57	1.36
▨ Agreeableness	0.49	0.00	0.92	−0.06
▥ Conscientiousness	0.80	−0.23	−0.29	−1.84
⊞ Stability	0.95	0.33	−0.35	−1.26
▤ Openness	0.88	0.63	0.53	1.53

Figure 6.4 Personality in Austen's female protagonists—the extraverts.

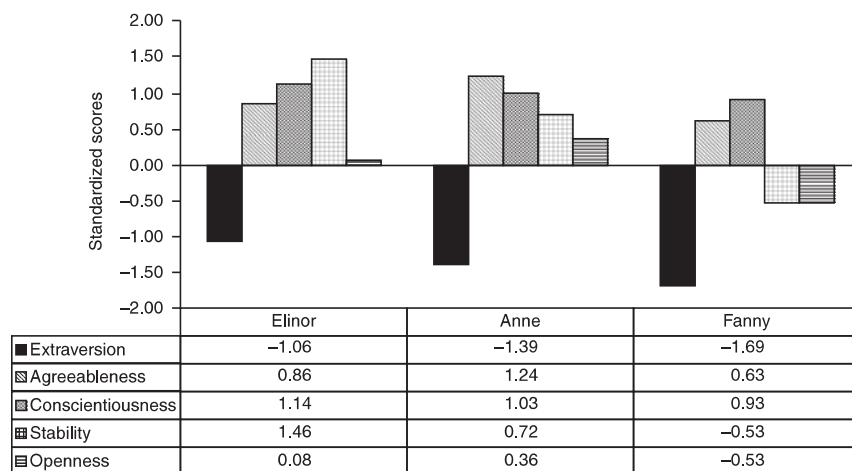|	Elinor	Anne	Fanny
■ Extraversion	−1.06	−1.39	−1.69
▨ Agreeableness	0.86	1.24	0.63
▥ Conscientiousness	1.14	1.03	0.93
⊞ Stability	1.46	0.72	−0.53
▤ Openness	0.08	0.36	−0.53

Figure 6.5 Personality in Austen's female protagonists—the introverts.

reasonable. The alpha reliability estimates—a measure of consensus among respondents—are quite high for these two characters (.93 for Elinor, and .88 for Marianne).

The scores on personality gives us a clue to the reason that *Pride and Prejudice* holds a modal position in the body of Austen's novels. It is the most often read, most often filmed, most often critiqued, and most often taught. Elizabeth Bennet's personality almost certainly constitutes a chief reason for this preeminence. In comparison with Austen's other female protagonists, Elizabeth appears to have an ideal personality. She displays a balance in all five features of personality. She is lively and outgoing but also moderately agreeable, and she is conscientious, stable, and open to experience. None of the other female protagonists displays this full an array of desirable qualities set into balance. Emma, Catherine, and Marianne are all weak in conscientiousness, especially Marianne. Emma and Marianne are weak in Agreeableness. Catherine, Fanny, and Marianne all are weak in Emotional Stability, especially Marianne. The introverted protagonists are all highly conscientious, but they are also less open to experience than the extraverts. Like all of Austen's female protagonists, Elizabeth is young and inexperienced. (Anne Elliot in *Persuasion* is the exception; but her story line actually began several years before the novel opens, when she was young and inexperienced.) Like the other Austen protagonists, Elizabeth has some learning to do. But the distance she has to travel between her own natural disposition and that of the implied author is smaller than that of any other Austen protagonist.

This last claim is of course an interpretive judgment; it is based partly on the convergence of verbal style in Elizabeth and Austen, and we have no data on verbal style. The features of Elizabeth's personality, though, and the comparison with the features of the other characters, are matters of data.

In contrast to the patterns across all the novels in this study, Austen pairs Extraversion with Openness to Experience. All her extraverted protagonists score at or above average on Openness, and her most extraverted protagonist, Marianne, is also her most open. Her three introverted female protagonists score in the bottom three positions on Openness, and Fanny, the most introverted female protagonist, is also the least open to experience.[14] Fanny is timid and sensitive, but she holds a key position within the ultimately conservative ethos in Austen's fictive world. The conservative family in which Fanny lives comes apart under the anarchic influence of two characters, the Crawford siblings. Mary Crawford is in important ways very similar to Elizabeth Bennet—lively, clever, vivacious—but she and

her brother are both deficient in the moral seriousness with which Elizabeth tempers her own vivacity. Mary's liveliness leads her into an indulgent tolerance of libertine amorality—that is, of a sexual license that threatens the monogamous marital norm. Fanny's temperament would not be ideal for every occasion, clearly, but it turns out to be exactly the right temperament to deal with the charming solicitations of anarchic self-release in *Mansfield Park*.[15]

The pairing of Extraversion and Openness is a main element in the charm exercised by Austen's extraverted female protagonists, but that pairing depends in each case on the female protagonist being set off in complementary relationship to a more conservative counterpart. Marianne provides the most obvious instance of why the conservative temperament holds a central place in Austen's ethos. Marianne comes close to disaster. She is ultimately saved by two conservatives, her sister Elinor and Colonel Brandon. Though she cannot change her own temperament, she expresses contrition for her self-indulgent emotional extravagance. She is thus allowed to participate in the happy comedy resolution of *Sense and Sensibility*. In contrast to Marianne, neither of the Crawford siblings succeeds in forming a permanent bond with a more stable, conservative counterpart—Mary with Edmund or Henry with Fanny. Consequently, they are ultimately expelled from the inner protagonistic circle. So also with Wickham, Willoughby, and William Elliot.

In situation, setting, verbal style, and the ethos of the implied author, Austen's novels are all of a piece. And yet, each of the six novels has its own distinct artistic character. Austen's critics savor the fine shades of difference among the novels, often articulating formal or ideological reasons to vindicate their personal preferences. Our data suggest that the deeper source for these evaluative differences are variations in emotional response corresponding to variations in the personalities of the characters. It is variation in personality, more than anything else, that invests each novel with its own distinct identity as a work of art. Nonetheless, Austen's pervasive pairing of conservative and unconventional characters forms a larger pattern that points toward the dominant ethos, domestic and social, that governs her fictive universe.

Emotional Responses to the Major Character Sets

Our data indicate that the emotional tone of Austen's novels is considerably more positive than the emotional tone in the average

novel of the period. Across the whole body of novels, antagonists score below average in eliciting sorrow, and protagonists score above average. In Austen's novels, in contrast, protagonists and their consorts, along with antagonists, score below average in eliciting Sorrow (figure 6.6).

This too is a distinctive feature of Austen's imagined world. It no doubt accounts for a good deal of her extraordinary popularity. Everybody likes to be cheerful. But good cheer alone is not enough; we readily detect false cheer and find it jarring. Feminizing her male consorts makes it easier for Austen to maintain a positive emotional tone. Achieving a companionable marital bond is as much a need for the males as it is for the females. We have already observed that feminizing males reduces the tension of conflicting male/female reproductive interests. Male characters are also exceptionally well-integrated into the emotional fulfillment that the readers derive from the resolutions of the plot. In contrast to the pattern in the larger data set, Austen's male consorts score higher on Interest than either antagonistic set, though still not so high as female protagonists.

To maintain the cheerfulness of her imagined world, Austen must carefully control readers' emotional investment in the characters. Consider, for instance, the plot crisis in *Mansfield Park*. Fanny's married cousin Maria engages in sexual misconduct that brings ruin to herself and disgrace to her family. Austen gives the crisis its due
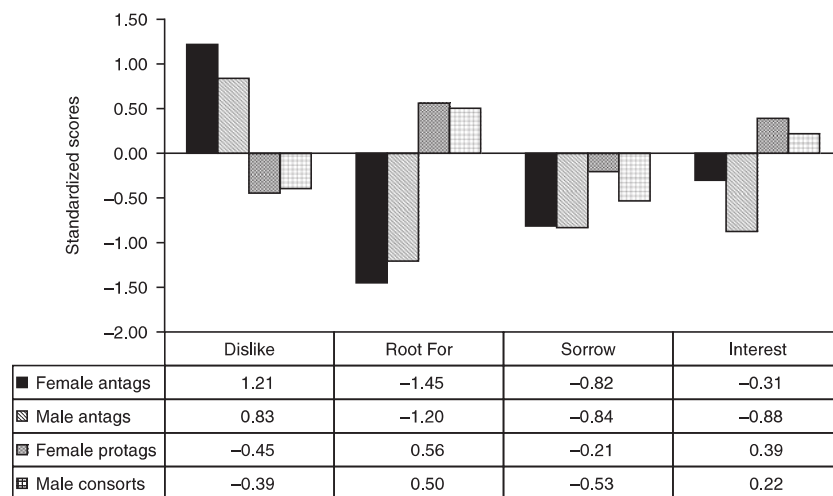
	Dislike	Root For	Sorrow	Interest
■ Female antags	1.21	−1.45	−0.82	−0.31
◩ Male antags	0.83	−1.20	−0.84	−0.88
▥ Female protags	−0.45	0.56	−0.21	0.39
⊞ Male consorts	−0.39	0.50	−0.53	0.22

Figure 6.6   Emotional responses to Austen's antagonists, female protagonists, and male consorts.

weight, but Maria's folly is freighted with good consequences for Fanny and Edmund, the protagonistic couple, and Austen keeps the central focus on their happiness. "Let other pens dwell on guilt and misery. I quit such odious subjects as soon as I can, impatient to restore everybody, not greatly in fault themselves, to tolerable comfort, and to have done with all the rest."[16] Those actually "in fault" are sacrificed to the affirmation of the principles that regulate conduct, and agonistic polarization easily brings emotional response into conformity with that sacrifice. Maria Bertram is selfish, arrogant, and vain, and Henry Crawford is vain and emotionally frivolous. Wounded by Crawford's failure to follow through on his many romantic promises to her, Maria marries a wealthy but mentally deficient young man, then abandons him and runs off with Crawford. She and Crawford are then segregated into an emotional out-group that leaves the resolution as serene as the resolutions in Austen's more purely comic novels. After Crawford abandons Maria, she is joined by her aunt Norris, the only character in the story who elicits strong and active dislike. The emotional world thus segregates itself into protagonistic and antagonistic spheres. "Misery" is shunted off into the antagonistic sphere, and "guilt" sanctions the elimination of empathy from that sphere.

Emotional Responses to Individual Female Protagonists

We can divide Austen's female protagonists into the four who produce little emotional ambivalence in readers and the three who are more problematic (figures 6.7 and 6.8).

In respect to emotional response, as in other respects, Elizabeth Bennet is the paradigmatic Austen protagonist. She receives very low scores on Dislike and high scores on both Interest and Root For; and she is at the low end of the scale on Sorrow. Readers are emotionally absorbed in her story; they like her, wish her to succeed, and rejoice in her success. Catherine Morland of *Northanger Abbey* receives scores on emotional response very similar to those received by Elizabeth, but readers are less interested in her. She is the least developed of Austen's protagonists. She is an ingénue, a straight man (or woman) for Austen's satire on gothic fiction. Anne Elliot has a sweet and gentle nature, quiet, affectionate, and calm, intelligent but not assertive. She is the most sympathetic listener among Austen's protagonists, thus giving occasion for fine comic scenes in which all the members of her extended family bring to her their querulous complaints about
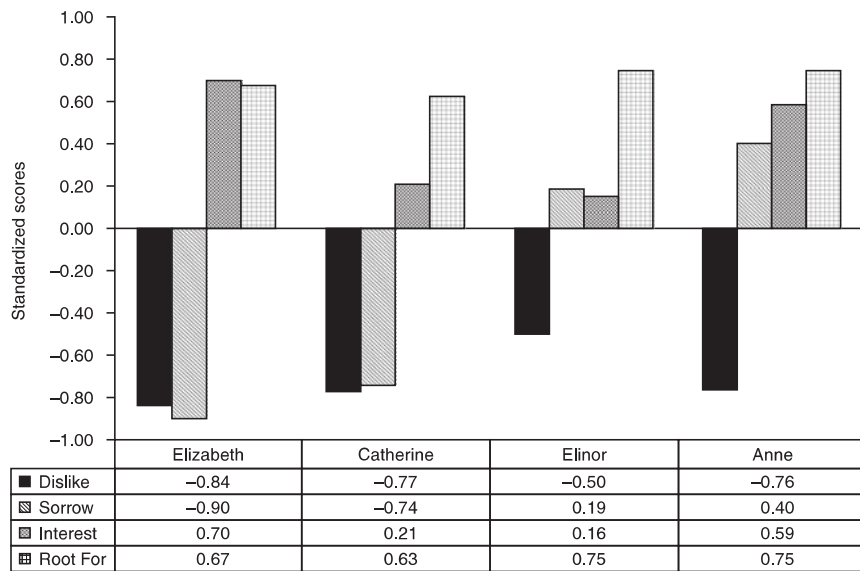
	Elizabeth	Catherine	Elinor	Anne
■ Dislike	−0.84	−0.77	−0.50	−0.76
▨ Sorrow	−0.90	−0.74	0.19	0.40
▦ Interest	0.70	0.21	0.16	0.59
⊞ Root For	0.67	0.63	0.75	0.75

Figure 6.7 Emotional responses to Austen's less agonistically problematic female protagonists.

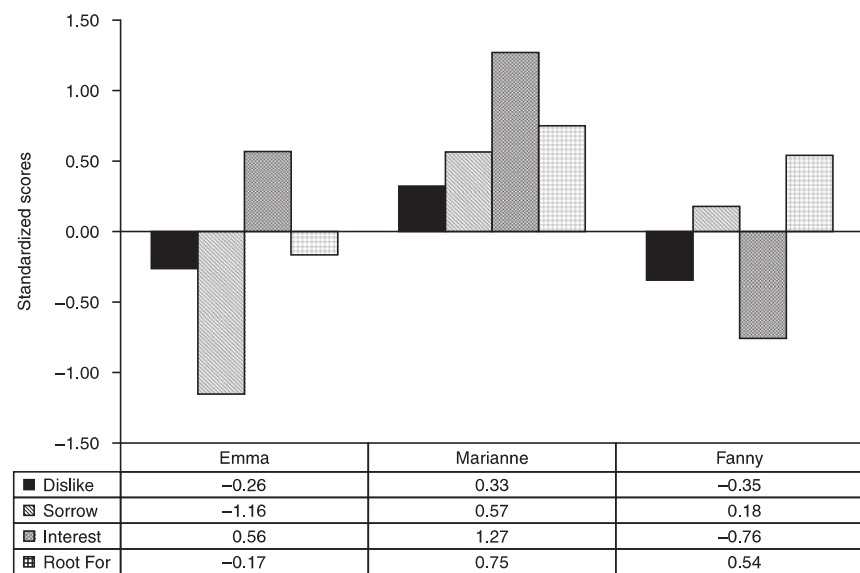|	Emma	Marianne	Fanny
■ Dislike	−0.26	0.33	−0.35
▨ Sorrow	−1.16	0.57	0.18
▦ Interest	0.56	1.27	−0.76
⊞ Root For	−0.17	0.75	0.54

Figure 6.8 Emotional responses to Austen's more agonistically problematic female protagonists.

each other. As an introvert, though, she is a less dynamic and engaging character than Elizabeth.

Marianne Dashwood and Anne Elliot excite the most Sorrow, but Marianne also scores unusually high, for a protagonist, on Dislike, almost within the antagonistic range. Her score on Dislike is counterbalanced by her extremely high score on Interest. She is a figure of romantic passion, and readers are excited by her, even though they do not like her. (The same scoring pattern appears in emotional responses to Catherine Earnshaw in *Wuthering Heights*.) The contrast between the kind of emotional appeal exercised by Elinor and Marianne is exaggerated in the contrast between Fanny and Marianne. Fanny receives a low score on Dislike, but she also receives a very low score—the lowest in the group—on Interest. Many readers have been frustrated by the discrepancy between the interest she excites and the moral authority with which she is ultimately invested. Readers who relish the frank assertiveness of Austen's extraverted protagonists often react with irritated impatience at Fanny's timid and conventional disposition. They seem annoyed that she gradually assumes a position of commanding influence on all the people who surround her.[17] Other readers, though, have felt that *Mansfield Park* displays a depth of feeling and a seriousness of ethical vision nowhere else equaled in Austen's work.[18] Again, such differences in evaluative response, though often rationalized on formal or ideological grounds, seem at bottom to reflect differences in the personality and temperament of the critics. It might be true that there is no disputing matters of taste. Empirical study can nonetheless illuminate the reasons for evaluative judgments.

Six of the seven protagonists score well above average on Root For. Emma is the one exception. Most of her actions in the course of the story are ill-judged and inadvertently destructive, and she is less agreeable than any other female protagonist except Marianne. Austen anticipated that many of her readers would not like Emma, and indeed she scores higher on Dislike than any female protagonist except Marianne.

If readers tend not to like Emma so much as they like other Austen protagonists, and if they do not, through most of the novel, wish her to succeed, why is it that *Emma* runs a close second to *Pride and Prejudice* in popularity with Austen's readers? We think that the popularity can be accounted for, in good measure, by the quality of the relationship between Emma and Knightley. It is in important ways the least romantic, most purely companionable of all Austen's protagonistic relationships. All the other female protagonists marry men

reasonably close to their own age. Emma marries a man 16 years older than she is—old enough biologically, if not socially, to be her father. Knightley recalls holding Emma when she was a baby. In important ways, psychologically, he replaces her father, an infantile valetudinarian. Throughout the novel, even when they are most at odds, Emma and Knightley conspire to coddle Mr. Woodhouse as if he were their baby. Their understanding on this point forms a companionable bond like that shared by parents. Emma scores relatively high on Nurture (.52), but Knightley scores even higher (.93). By marrying Emma, Knightley gives a permanent legal sanction to his role as her surrogate father. He is thus doubly a parent, both a surrogate father to Emma, and as her consort, a father to her infantile father. Emma too occupies a dual family role. She is a daughter to her husband and a mother to her father. By occupying these two roles, she achieves family intimacy while avoiding a specifically sexual relationship. Through her filial relation to Knightley and her maternal relation to her father, she occupies both ends of the reproductive cycle, completing the cycle from daughter to mother while skipping the sexual middle link—enacting thus a sort of imaginative virgin birth. The scores on motives and mating across the whole body of Austen's novels point in this direction: family intimacy without specifically sexual interest. *Emma* goes farthest in that direction.

Conclusion: Reader Response in the Circle of Privilege

Austen's novels are all love stories, but love stories of a peculiar kind. They are romances devoid of sex. The scenes in which female protagonists and their male consorts achieve intimacy are not scenes of passion. They are conversations, civil, lucid, poised, even when heated by underlying indignation or transient distress. The male consorts are less motivated by erotic passion than by the need for companionable society and family partnership. In this crucial respect, they are scarcely distinguishable from the female protagonists.

By muting sexual passion while also eliminating Sorrow from her emotional register, Austen runs a serious risk of being bland. By so successfully evading this danger, she demonstrates how much dramatic interest can be vested in agonistic structure even when it is isolated from other sources of emotional power. Sex and death, it would seem, are unnecessary.

In all of Austen's novels, antagonists who value only Social Dominance are placed in conflict with protagonists who value the

qualities of mind and character that evoke admiration and liking in readers. In *Northanger Abbey*, *Pride and Prejudice*, *Sense and Sensibility*, and *Mansfield Park*, protagonists who embody personal merit are set at a disadvantage in relation to antagonists who possess greater wealth and power. In *Emma*, this basic conflict is displaced onto Jane Fairfax, who is in important ways more like a standard protagonist than is Emma herself. The central problem situation in *Persuasion* is that Anne Elliot is pressing toward the end of the nubile age range, but she finds herself in this precarious position precisely because early in life she had rejected a suitor who was not sufficiently wealthy. In all the novels, merit and privilege are set in tension with one another, and in all the novels, the resolutions of the plot resolve this tension.

If the political views of our respondents are at all representative of contemporary students and teachers of literature—and we have no reason to suppose they are not—they are probably to the left of the center point in the political spectrum. Nonetheless, when the respondents read Jane Austen, they slip easily and comfortably into the ideological norms that characterize the stance of a privileged elite. Whatever political theses our respondents might formulate about the novels, their scores on Root For and Dislike reveal that they participate vicariously in the emotional resolutions that Austen provides for her characters.

The ease with which most readers accept social privilege in Austen's novels can be explained, we think, by the closed social circle in which her characters live. In the novels of Dickens and Eliot, the egalitarian ethos manifests itself in a scathing critique of class differences. In Austen's novels, the same ethos operates by suppressing dominance within the single class to which she devotes her attention. Austen defines that class primarily through "manners," a word that denotes a personal style distinguished by intelligence, poise, cultivation, and a courteous regard for the feelings of others. People who exemplify that style belong to the "gentry." Whether or not they possess a country estate, they are "ladies" and "gentlemen." When Lady Catherine de Bourgh is trying to persuade Elizabeth not to marry Darcy, she says, "If you were sensible of your own good, you would not wish to quit the sphere, in which you have been brought up." Elizabeth responds, "In marrying your nephew, I should not consider myself as quitting that sphere. He is a gentleman; I am a gentleman's daughter; so far we are equal" (3:14).

In Austen's world, possessing gentle manners depends heavily on birth and wealth, but Austen discriminates sharply between two

possible attitudes toward birth and wealth. Her antagonists typically regard birth and wealth as necessary, sufficient, and exclusive criteria for status as gentlefolk. Her protagonists and their consorts, in contrast, regard manners as the decisive criterion. One crucial test for Darcy is whether he can make that distinction. Austen's uncle and aunt Gardiner live on Mr. Gardiner's income as a merchant. Their class identity is thus borderline. They nonetheless pass the test of manners. By recognizing that the Gardiners pass this test, Darcy himself passes a crucial test. He moves decisively into the protagonistic field. Lady Catherine, of course, despite her birth and wealth, fails the test of manners. The climactic scene in which Elizabeth trounces Lady Catherine in debate provides readers the kind of pleasure that is specific to suppressing dominance. By identifying with Elizabeth, modern readers participate vicariously in a world of high social rank while nonetheless remaining true to the egalitarian ethos.

It is little wonder, then, that Austen is so perennial a favorite. She is a shrewd, penetrating psychologist, and she is caustic enough to gratify malice, but her tonal trajectory remains resolutely focused on an ultimate felicity. She invites her readers to participate vicariously in the satisfactions of a companionable pair bond untroubled by conflicting male and female sexual needs. If they follow her prompts, Austen's readers also join a fictional community populated exclusively by members of a privileged elite but governed internally by an egalitarian ethos. With sexual and social conflict thus contained, readers need fear no distressing appeals to their compassion, their tolerance, or their powers of endurance. They need only luxuriate in an imaginary world regulated by high qualities of character, illuminated by wit, graced by elegance of style, and blessed by good fortune.