“I Will Have You If I Must”:

Mercenary Marriage in Jane Austen’s “The Three Sisters”

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Jane Austen uses subversive humor to satirize “mercenary” marriage in her juvenilia, painting a dark vision of the marriage market and in doing so critiquing the society which allows and encourages women to give themselves to the highest bidder. Austen’s presentation of the market in “The Three Sisters” reveals an implicit dialogue between her satirical treatment of mercenary marriage and the grim reality of women’s tenuous financial and social situation in the late eighteenth century. And though a number of studies have been written on Austen and marriage and considerable scholarly attention has been spent comparing the characters of Austen’s juvenilia to her later creations, further exploration is warranted of Austen’s dark depiction of the subject and of her motives for satire and critique, specifically as they appear in “The Three Sisters” (1792), a short story written when Austen was just seventeen years old.1 Critically the theme of the marriage market has been examined to a much lesser degree in the juvenilia than when it reappears in Austen’s later work, and though most critics concur that the juvenilia is invaluable in demonstrating the young author’s talents as a writer, “The Three Sisters” has been studied to a lesser extent than other early texts.2

Although Austen treats marriage seriously in her novels, she treats it irreverently in her juvenilia, often with a dash of black humor; the juvenilia also showcase some of her most impertinent characters. In Jane Austen’s Beginnings, Margaret Drabble examines what I believe
are some of the pleasures of reading the juvenilia as opposed to Austen’s more mature writing, pointing out that 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…” (xiv). She points to Austen’s “cynicism,” which “reveals a less humane, less polite talent than that with which she is usually credited…” (qtd. in Beer 239). As a young woman, Austen used this ruthlessness to attack the marriage market in “The Three Sisters,” an ironic, sometimes brutal feminist sketch, written with an atypical dark humor. A dark portrait of the marriage marketplace is a continuing theme in Austen’s juvenilia and “The Three Sisters,” like “Love and Freindship,” “Henry and Eliza,” and “Lesley Castle” shows women contemplating marrying men they scarcely know and exemplifies two major reasons a woman may be socially forced into making a mercenary marriage: because there is no male in the household to provide for the family and because she cannot be otherwise independent from her family.

In “The Three Sisters” Mrs. Stanhope, the sisters’ mother, is a middle-class widow who lacks support from the men in her family and is therefore ready to apply herself considerably in order to see one of her daughters married to their wealthy neighbor, Mr. Watts. Watts possesses six times the Stanhopes’ income and Mrs. Stanhope is “determined not to let such an opportunity escape of settling one of my Daughters so advantageously” (60) despite the fact that Watts is physically unattractive, miserly and much older than her daughters. Mrs. Stanhope’s eldest daughter, Mary is repulsed by this suitor’s coarse personality. On the other hand, she wishes to marry before any of her sisters and friends and desires to be established in her own household. Mary’s sisters encourage her to marry by pretending to be interested in Watts. They hope her jealousy will prompt her to accept him so that they need not. Mary’s sister Georgina makes excuses for him. He is plain, “but then what is Beauty in a man…They say he’s stingy; We’ll call
that Prudence” (61). Like the later Mr. Collins in Pride and Prejudice, Mr. Watts does not care which sister he marries: “It is equally the same to me which I marry of the three” (64); in fact, he vows to propose to Mary’s sisters or friends if she does not accept him, prompting Mary to finally agree: “I will have you if I must” (64).

In a letter to a still single Fanny Knight written towards the end of Austen’s life, Austen speaks of a mutual acquaintance whose parent recently passed away; she is concerned that this unmarried woman will perhaps be left with a straightened income, concluding that “Single women have a dreadful propensity for being poor, which is one very strong argument in favour of matrimony” (Letters 332). Though she qualifies this statement by assuring her niece that she is not attempting to further convince Fanny regarding the benefits of matrimony, since Fanny already greatly desires to marry, the declaration reminds us of the precarious position single women hold when they, like the Stanhope sisters, do not have the protection of both parents. The sisters are further disadvantaged because they do not have a male family member to guard them from the damaging actions of other men: “I wish I had a Father or a Brother, because then they should fight him” (60) says Mary regarding Watts’ possible decision to withdraw his proposal, a decision that would damage her reputation.

The desperate circumstances in the form of a desire not to marry Watts force sister against sister; in their defense, Georgiana and especially Sophy are sorry to be compelled to deceive Mary. Georgiana implores her correspondent and thereby the reader not to “condemn” them for their behavior (63). The fact that Austen changes letter writers from Mary to Georgiana points to an important connection between the marriage issues “The Three Sisters” explores and Austen's narrative technique. Initially, we are confronted with Mary unmediated point of view, as the first part of the story is comprised of two letters from Mary to her (married) confidant Fanny.
Halfway through the story, Austen changes letter writers from Mary to Georgiana, changing the reader's perspective in the process. The next two letters are from Georgiana to her (unmarried) friend Anne. After Georgiana takes over, she in effect doubly controls her sister's story, both as writer and therefore narrator and as conspirator with Sophy to compel Mary to make a marriage choice the sisters know she will lament.

Overall, Georgiana seems to possess greater understanding than Mary: while Mary is fooled by her younger sisters’ ruse and cannot perceive jokes made at her expense, Georgiana is witty, making Sophy laugh with quips about Watts. Furthermore, once the narrative changes to Georgiana’s point of view, the reader is made aware how hypocritically Mary behaves at her friends’ the Duttons’ home when she brags about her upcoming marriage, prompting Georgiana to state that “Sophy and I were heartily ashamed of our Sister” (69). Mary is further found “very ridiculous” by Sir Henry Brudenell, a handsome, eligible young man, who is “disgusted” by her materialistic attitude towards marriage (69).

Yet even those women Austen portrays as grasping and mercenary are often shown to face daunting social problems. For example, a secondary critique inherent in Austen’s deprecation of mercenary marriage in “The Three Sisters” is the great social divide between a woman’s unmarried and married life. Many social constraints are placed on single women, especially if they are not wealthy. Mary is eager to become a married woman at any cost because of the personal and financial freedom it will afford her. Instead of requiring an escort in public, she anticipates escorting her unmarried sisters and friends socially. Instead of needing to ask her mother for money, she hopes that her husband will provide her with an allowance that will allow her a modicum of independence. In addition, it is only through marriage that a woman could live independent of her family. Mary looks forward to entertaining in her own home and riding in her
own carriage, activities she cannot perform as a single woman. On the other hand, there is a world of difference between young women’s fantasies of married freedom and reality. In the story she hopes that her future husband will “…always let me do just as I please…” unfortunately, “…he talks a great deal of Women’s staying at home and such stuff” (59).

Before marriage, mother, daughter, and suitor spend much time haggling over settlements and pin-money. After marriage, Mary expects to lead a very fashionable life. Her main concern is to have a carriage as fine as that of her friends. Once the marriage date is set, Mary’s later “conversation entirely consisted in abusing the man she is so soon to marry” (67). The couple is off to an unpromising start, he calling her a “vixen” and she calling him a “blackguard” (70). To society, Mary styles herself “the happiest creature in the world,” but admits that although Watts, at thirty-two, is “an old man” he is unfortunately “very healthy” and unlikely to die soon (58). In such a way, Austen portrays Mary Stanhope as a weak woman, one who values luxury over love, but also one whose views what is important in a marriage are partly formed by her society, which consists of her mother and sisters, who encourage her to wed for stability. Here we find the darkest vision of the marriage market in Austen’s juvenilia: if young women are pieces of flesh, desirable only for social ornamentation and producing an heir, men who are searching for a wife are seen by marriage market mothers such as Mrs. Stanhope as “meal tickets” for their daughters and a person’s worth becomes defined by the marketplace. Like most women in the late eighteenth century, Mary must wed in order to be provided for, meanwhile, her mother is not only concerned with promoting her daughter’s interests, but her own as well: having a child make a wealthy marriage was the most rapid means by which a middle-aged wife could rise up the socioeconomic ladder.
Austen certainly does not originate these concerns about women's restricted social choices. Her ideas regarding young women’s problematic marriage prospects, as well as her epistolary style have historical precedents in Samuel Richardson and Frances Burney. These authors reveal and investigate the problems young women face regarding romance and marriage in a more sentimental fashion than Austen, who later builds on their tradition in a more outrageously satirical manner. Both Richardson and Burney deliberately explore young women’s lives through the women’s own voices.

Though of her grandfather’s generation, Richardson was Austen’s favorite author and well-known as an important stylistic influence. In a review of Brian Southam’s *Jane Austen’s ‘Sir Charles Grandison,’* Marilyn Butler asserts that “*Sir Charles Grandison* contributed more than any other single book to the tradition of social comedy… which Jane Austen inherited” (9). Shortly after her death, Austen’s brother Henry wrote in his “Biographical Notice” of Austen that with regard to her reading, “Richardson's power of creating, and preserving the consistency of his characters, as particularly exemplified in *Sir Charles Grandison,* gratified the natural discrimination of her mind…” (Austen-Leigh, 141).³ Henry Austen and Butler refer to Austen’s later work, though both comments may be applied to “The Three Sisters,” which like *Grandison* deals with themes of marriage and parent-child relations, though in a much truncated form. In addition, like Richardson’s *Clarissa,* “The Three Sisters” has two correspondences, each writing to a close friend.

The young Austen also much admired the comic style of her contemporary, Frances Burney, who was likewise influenced by Richardson. In later years, Austen is known to have called Burney “the first female English writer,” with “first” signifying “best.” Burney wrote social satire concerning female identity politics surrounding marriage issues and was key in the
development of the “novel of manners;” she was also concerned about the public lives and problems of women in a predominantly male-dominated culture. Burney satirized patriarchal values and the social hypocrisy that strongly influenced unwed young women at the time. 4

In “The Three Sisters,” slyly styled an “unfinished novel,” Austen builds both on Richardson’s and Burney’s epistolary style and on their practice of incorporating women’s daily life experience into their work. As described by her favorite authors, the topics of love and matrimony would have resonated with the young Austen, who was at the time of writing “The Three Sisters” was just entering the marriage market. Like her predecessors, Austen places female letter writers as narrators who tell their own stories, often relating entire conversations within a letter. Richardson displayed concern regarding women’s limited social options with the idea of providing readers moral education based on the hero or heroine’s actions. His heroines, such as the commonly termed “divine Clarissa” almost always acted in a perfect manner and with great propriety; Burney’s heroines have more character flaws, but still behave very well, while the main characters of “The Three Sisters,” for Mary and Georgiana are not quite “heroines,” display a many faults to great comic effect, though like Richardson and Burney’s female protagonists, Austen’s young women must make their way in a world inhospitable to them.

Austen believes that it is socially naïve to think that one should marry solely for love, especially when it opposes practical happiness, but her work warns that if one marries only for money, one cannot expect a love match. Georgia’s narrative reveals the difference between mercenary Mary, who makes a catalog of material goods that are necessary for her to be “well pleased,” and Sophy whose fantasy of an ideal husband is unfortunately promptly deflated by her suitor, more experienced in the ways of the world:
“I expect my husband to be good-tempered and cheerful; to consult my happiness in all his actions, and to love me with constancy and sincerity.” Mr. Watts stared.

“These are very odd ideas young Lady. You had better discard them before you marry, or you will be obliged to do it afterwards” (66).

Mary has heretofore been primarily concerned with the material benefits of married life; Austen reminds us that the ideals Sophy describes are possible for non-mercenary heroines only. And although she criticizes mercenary marriage, Austen does not denigrate the institution itself. Instead, she sets Mary Stanhope and her mother as characters that cannot exist in reality.

Though a manipulator, Mrs. Stanhope does not have too high a position in society because she lacks money and social support. She and Mary are meant to be shocking characters and are presented as women lacking social graces who have little power beyond the small amount they exert within their immediate family. Through Georgiana we see that by making a mercenary marriage, Mary, instead of playing a greater role in her small society, becomes the laughing-stock of her sisters, friends and potential eligible bachelors, as represented by Sir Henry Brudenell. Furthermore, in portraying Mary unhappy in her choice, Austen reveals her optimistic belief that Mrs. Stanhope and her daughter’s mercenary match-making would not be acceptable in the real world of Austen’s society. In a letter to her niece, advising her on the subject of potential marriage to a man Fanny Knight considers financially suitable, if personally unexciting, a mature Austen writes that “Anything is to be preferred or endured rather than marrying without affection” (Letters 280). This same sentiment is implied by the writer throughout “The Three Sisters.”

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Notes

1 Austen wrote most of her juvenilia from 1787 to 1793, when she was between the ages of eleven and seventeen.

2 Frances Beer’s study of “The Three Sisters” is one notable exception.

3 See Margaret Doody on the young Austen’s reading.

4 See Audrey Bilger’s study of Burney and Austen’s feminist comedy with relation to Burney’s comic influence.
Works Cited


