COMPETITION AND COOPERATION: RELATIONSHIPS BETWEEN
WOMEN IN PRIDE AND PREJUDICE, THE MILL
ON THE FLOSS, AND JANE EYRE

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Brianne P. Epley
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# TABLE OF CONTENTS

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>PAGE</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Abstract</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>CHAPTER</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>I. Introduction</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>II. Competition Between Women in <em>Pride and Prejudice</em></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>III. Dying for Support: Criticism in <em>The Mill on the Floss</em></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>IV. Manipulation and Isolation: Female Relationships in <em>Jane Eyre</em></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>V. Conclusion</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Works Cited</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
ABSTRACT

COMPETITION AND COOPERATION: RELATIONSHIPS BETWEEN WOMEN IN PRIDE AND PREJUDICE, THE MILL ON THE FLOSS, AND JANE EYRE

by

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This thesis will analyze the relationships between female characters in three nineteenth-century novels: Jane Austen’s Pride and Prejudice (1813), George Eliot’s The Mill on the Floss (1860), and Charlotte Brontë’s Jane Eyre (1847). Analysis will focus on the ways that female characters compete with one other, primarily for the purposes of forming romantic relationships with male characters. Because these female characters are so reliant on men for financially secure futures, they tend to view other female characters as competitors. Furthermore, female characters who are related to one another often push each other to conform to gender norms as the reputation of one family remember reflects back upon the whole family. These dynamics, still partially around today, help maintain patriarchal authority by keeping women focused on men and at odds with each other.

iv
CHAPTER I
INTRODUCTION

Though the dynamics of relationships between female characters in nineteenth-century fiction have not escaped the eyes of literary critics, they have for the most part taken a backseat to discussions of male-female relationships, especially romantic relationships. What the relationships between women reveal, however, is integral to understanding and interpreting the female characters themselves, as well as how they navigate their positions in society. Examining male-female relationships tends to lead to discussion about the ways that female characters have either submitted to their socially constructed identity or attempted to subvert the status quo as well as the misogynistic actions of male characters. Examining female-female relationships, however, allows readers to see how women interact with those who occupy the same or similar level of power in nineteenth-century society, so long as the female characters are of the same class.

In examining relationships between female characters, several trends emerge. One possibility that frequently occurs is female characters competing with one another for the limited amounts of power offered them, usually in the form of competing for male attention or marriage. Another option is they sometimes misplace their own frustrations at their limited power back onto other women, thus assisting in the subjugation of their fellow female characters. This often occurs between female characters who are related to
one another, as they are reliant on the respectability of their family members to assure that they achieve a beneficial marriage. The stakes for these women and their futures are so high that they often end up pushing their female relations to conform to gender norms so as not to damage their chances at a beneficial marriage. Nineteenth-century fiction also presents readers with examples of supportive female relationships, but these are harder to come by and usually suffer at the hands of male-female relationships. Examining the relationships between female characters from a feminist perspective allows us to better understand the motives for these characters actions as related to the patriarchal power dynamics and gender roles of nineteenth-century England.

The trend of decentering female relationships branches far beyond the nineteenth-century. In her book *Inseparable: Desire Between Women in Literature*, Emma Donoghue discusses various types of female relationships in fiction. Though Donoghue traces female relationships in literature through time periods far beyond the scope of this study, her insights are key to examining the dynamics of female relationships. For instance, one major trend in literature has been to subvert relationships between women, thus centralizing and normalizing heterosexuality and gender roles. One particularly telling example Donoghue provides is “Fragment 31,” a fragment of a larger work which is supposed to have been written by Sappho (born 612 B.C.E.). This particular fragment tells the story of a woman watching a beloved female interact with a male rival, and it has been rewritten many times; “François Gacon in 1712 heterosexualized the poem itself, rewriting it—to make it ‘natural,’ he explained in a footnote—as a woman’s jealous denunciation of the woman who sits beside the man they both love” (Donoghue 81). In Gacon’s rewriting of the poem we can see a specific
attempt to naturalize female competition while attempting to denaturalize the notion that two women could have a romantic bond. The original is about a woman’s love for another woman, but it is through deliberate efforts like Gacon’s that we see these types of relationships being distorted into dynamics that place the male characters in a position of power while neutralizing the threat of a relationship between women.

The example of the Sappho fragment also highlights one major trend that I have noticed in female relationships: competition. Quite often, female characters in nineteenth-century fiction view their fellow women as rivals. The most prevalent reason comes down to competition over men for romantic relationships. In this particular scenario, the competition between women can be linked to the patriarchal gender roles that make it difficult for nineteenth-century women to be self-sufficient. Because there were few jobs that were socially acceptable for middle- to upper-class women, these women mostly relied on men for financial stability. What follows is the need for women to compete and focus on attaining a husband in order to increase their chances of a secure future. Alex Woloch discusses these dynamics in play in *Pride and Prejudice* in his book *The One vs. the Many: Minor Characters and the Space of the Protagonist in the Novel* when he states that Austen “represent[s] the disequilibrium of the new, dynamic competition which is emerging in her period through her depiction of a sphere of life that was typically understood as sheltered from . . . these economic structures” (60). In other words, though the designated feminine domestic sphere was understood to be separate from the male-dominated economic sphere, the fact that these two spheres were kept so rigidly separate pushed women to compete for men similarly to how men competed for jobs and economic success.
Themes in economic competition which were commonly discussed during the nineteenth-century can also be applied to competition between women. For instance, in *An Inquiry into the Nature and Causes of the Wealth of Nations*, written by Adam Smith and first published in 1776, Smith explains how competition functions in economics. Smith describes that when demand for something is higher than supply, “[a] competition will immediately begin among” those who desire that particular commodity. Furthermore, “[a]mong competitors of equal wealth and luxury the same deficiency will generally occasion a more or less eager competition, according as the acquisition of the commodity happens to be of more or less importance to them” (Smith 50). This economic concept can also be applied to competition between female characters in nineteenth-century fiction. Because of the extreme importance that men and marriage often hold in terms of these characters’ futures, the competition for men is often very eager. The number of eligible men in the area could potentially play a role in the intensity of competition, but quality also plays a role, as there are certainly always more eligible men than desirable men.

The roles that leave women competing with one another for men come to play in literature in many ways. Often female characters exhibit a general mistrust or dislike for the women around them, as we see in the Bennet family’s contempt for their neighbors in *Pride and Prejudice*. We also see the way that sisters and other female family members compete with each other, and also push each other to conform to gender norms, like the Dodson sisters do in George Eliot’s *The Mill on the Floss*. The aftermath of all this, is a lack of positive and supportive relationships between women, the detrimental effects of which can be seen in Charlotte Brontë’s *Jane Eyre*. 
While supportive loving relationships between female characters do exist, they are fairly few and far between. When these types of relationships do surface, they usually undergo their fair share of trials and tribulations, such as Maggie and Lucy’s relationship in *The Mill on the Floss*. Donoghue addresses this tendency when she states that for the most part, even feminist authors “cannot see female inseparability outside the traditional framework of endurance” (71). Therefore, even when female characters do form strong positive bonds with other female characters, their bonds will almost surely be tested. Often these strong relationships last, but end up competing with and suffering because of romantic heterosexual relationships, such as Jane and Elizabeth’s relationship in *Pride and Prejudice*. Rather, the types of relationships between women that seem to win out rely on competition and criticism.

In studying female relationships in literature, it is important to note that there is no such thing as a universal sisterhood. Though I claim that the female characters I study often exhibit a need for more supportive female relationships, that does not mean that there can or should be only positive relationships between women. In “There is No Friend Like a Sister: Sisterhood as Sexual Difference,” author Helena Michie states:

> In positing a place for sisterhood in Victorian literary tropology that allows for the expression of hostility among women, I want to insist first that such a place was historically necessary, and second that contemporary feminists need themselves to provide rhetorical and political room for the expression of female difference, for anger and mistrust between and among women. (407)

Certainly Michie is right that women should be free to dislike and disagree with other women. However, I would argue that much of the mistrust and dislike that we see between women in nineteenth-century literature does not come down to an active dislike resulting from a person who feels agency, but rather that many of the patriarchal
dynamics acting on these characters push them into competition and criticism of one another. Thus, their competition is often more the result of manipulation from male characters, such as through the purposeful creation of rivalry or through withholding love and support, than the result of a healthy level of difference between two individual characters.

In rejecting the idea of a universal political sisterhood, one must also reject the idea of a universal female identity. Judith Butler discusses this issue in her book *Gender Trouble: Feminism and the Subversion of Identity*. Butler states that “there is the political problem that feminism encounters in the assumption that the term *women* denotes a common identity . . . it becomes impossible to separate out ‘gender’ from the political and cultural intersections in which it is invariably produced and maintained” (emphasis in original, 4-5). The idea of a universal female identity unreasonably relies on essentialism, and as Butler points out, it can be damaging to feminism as well. In terms of this study, then, it is therefore important to note that what is true for one female character is by no means true for all female characters. Instead, when trends such as female competition emerge, it is important to trace those trends to the social and political forces acting on the characters, and not to assume that competition in itself is something innate in women.

Of course there is no way to completely leave out male interaction and influence when studying a patriarchal culture, and to do so would be to limit this study too much. In fact, the competition and cooperation we see from female characters is often directly the result of, or directly in opposition to, their interactions with men. For instance, the competition that emerges between the characters Jane and Blanche in *Jane Eyre* is the direct result of Mr. Rochester’s influence as he purposefully encourages
jealousy between the two women in order to manipulate their emotions. To ignore these types of dynamics would be to leave out key pieces of evidence in studying relationships between female characters, and thus leave us lacking the whole picture.

Ultimately the kinds of relationships between women that I have found in nineteenth-century literature are strikingly similar to the relationships between women that I see today. Though our cultural roles have changed and our futures are no longer quite as limited based on whether or not we find a man and marry, there is still a large amount of competition between women, especially over men. Some of this may be due to the fact that despite all the change we’ve seen between now and the nineteenth-century, we still live in a patriarchal culture. Thus, women still very often place extreme value on having a man in their life and feel pressure to marry. Furthermore, competition still plays a role in maintaining patriarchy as it puts women in a place where they view other women as their enemy and often fail to see a shared humanity. However, thanks to the strides we have made culturally, I like to think that we are closer to a healthy level of disagreement and dislike between women than the almost compulsory competition we see between women in nineteenth-century literature. Whether or not this is true, it is clear that the opportunity for a future where women can build supportive positive relationships with both women and men is reliant on our subjugated position to men. As we learn from the interactions between female characters in nineteenth-century fiction, the patriarchal roles that position men and women as unequal must be dropped in order for us to realize a future where relationships are built on desire instead of power dynamics. The three novels I will examine in order to reveal these dynamics are *Pride and Prejudice*, *The Mill on the Floss*, and *Jane Eyre*. 
In “Competition Between Women in *Pride and Prejudice*” I focus on the ways that competition drives relationships between women both in and out of the family. For instance, Mrs. Bennet competes with those around her by trying to find husbands for her daughters before her neighbors complete the same task for their own daughters. Mrs. Bennet’s attitude about competition with neighbors is not limited to herself, as her daughters mostly seem to share the notion that competition with others is the most viable option. Competition even comes out between the sisters, and Lydia’s actions show she cares more about men and marrying than about the future stability of her sisters. Even Elizabeth exhibits a tendency toward competition, as we see in her instant dislike and mistrust of the Bingley sisters. Jane’s friendship with the Bingley sisters serves to curb Elizabeth’s negativity slightly, but not enough to end their rivalry. Elizabeth and Jane prove to have a strong, loving relationship, and though they are able to maintain a strong bond, their relationship still takes a backseat to their romantic relationships.

In “Dying for Support: Criticism in *The Mill on the Floss*,” we get a clear glimpse of how female gender roles are passed into the next generation. This mostly plays out through the competition between the Dodson sisters. The relationships between the sisters consist mostly of criticism, and as they are central to Maggie’s life, she believes their behavior is the way that women naturally behave. Competing with her sisters also leads Mrs. Tulliver to try and push Maggie to conform to the feminine ideal and to criticize her when she falls short. The different treatment that Maggie and her brother receive also sheds light on the ways that gender ideologies are passed through generations, as Maggie is mostly criticized and her brother is mostly praised. The constant criticism between women in *The Mill on the Floss* also highlights a desire for
more loving supportive relationships. This desire further contributes to female subjugation as women are constantly searching for the love they deny each other. We do see a supportive relationship between Maggie and Lucy, though the characters around them are constantly pushing for the two to compete. Because their relationship withstands these pressures, the novel provides an example where the constant criticism between women and the push to competition do not succeed. Though all the pressure does lead Maggie to conform to the feminine ideal in many ways, she also ends up disobeying convention by sticking with Lucy, and proving that supportive female friendships are possible.

In “Manipulation and Isolation: Female Relationships in *Jane Eyre*” I discuss the ways that women tend to be isolated from each other, as well as the role that men, specifically Rochester, play in shaping relationships between women. Rochester purposefully sets up competition between Jane and Miss Ingram in order to maintain a level of power and control. However, though there are similar dynamics between Jane and Bertha, Bertha never attacks Jane like she does Rochester and Mason. Rochester also purposefully tries to keep Jane and Bertha separate from each other, and also separate from others around them, revealing a desire for total control over their lives. In some ways he ultimately achieves this, as the novel’s ending leaves Jane alone in the woods, in a life of isolation and servitude to Rochester. *Jane Eyre* also reveals the important role that supportive relationships between women can hold, as well as the ways they can shape characters, as we see in Jane’s relationship with Helen Burns. These supportive relationships can also allow female characters a much needed ability to speak, the lack of which can be disastrous, as is evident in Bertha’s death.
Though the novels *Pride and Prejudice*, *The Mill on the Floss*, and *Jane Eyre* all present different examples of female interactions, they allow readers to see the various ways that patriarchal gender roles and power dynamics are enacted between women.

“Competition Between Women in *Pride and Prejudice*” lays the foundation for the following chapters as it provides especially blatant examples of the push to competition. This following chapter, “Dying for Support: Criticism in *The Mill on the Floss*” provides an interesting contrast to the competition in *Pride and Prejudice* via the ways that the character Maggie Tulliver resists competition. Lastly, “Manipulation and Isolation: Female Relationships in *Jane Eyre*” caps off the two previous chapters by providing an extreme example of what can happen when female characters’ lives become isolated through excesses focus on male characters. Examining these relationships reveals the patterns that female characters often fell into in order to survive and thrive in nineteenth-century British society.
CHAPTER II

COMPETITION BETWEEN WOMEN

IN PRIDE AND PREJUDICE

The main dynamics that we see between women in Jane Austen’s *Pride and Prejudice* come down to competition aimed at acquiring a husband. We see this come out most strongly in the actions of Mrs. Bennet, but she is far from alone. A tendency towards competition is evident in most of the novel’s female characters, and even Elizabeth and Jane, who are rather unlike their mother, have their relationships with other women suffer as relationships with men take center stage. In her discussion of *Pride and Prejudice*, Judith Lowder Newton notes the different economic status of middle-class men and middle-class women, and claims that *Pride and Prejudice* makes “subtle and ironic point of that distinction and suggest[s] the weight of it in shaping male and female life” (28). The different economic position of men and women certainly shaped them as these dynamics kept most women reliant on men, and pushed women into marriage. Furthermore, these circumstances often prevented women from forming supportive relationships with each other. Because they are not on even ground with men, the women of *Pride and Prejudice* remain totally reliant on men for a secure future. This reliance on men pushes them toward competition and an overall mania for male attention as we witness in characters like Lydia. It is through exploring the interactions between female characters that we can better understand the dynamics of the female relationships that so
often remain unacknowledged.

One thing literary critics who study *Pride and Prejudice* have in common is that they focus on the relationships between men and women, most notably the relationship between Elizabeth and Darcy, but they differ in their varying approaches to the topic. Laura Mooneyham White certainly keeps with this theme in her article, “Jane Austen and the Marriage Plot: Questions of Persistence.” White states that “the clashes and conjoining between lovers constitutes the royal road to the only acceptable closure for Austen’s imaginative world: marriage” (78). She sees marriage as the central story, and education as the means by which it is attained. In “Community and Cognition in *Pride and Prejudice*” author William Deresiewicz takes a different route, and discusses the ways that community affects thought and action in *Pride and Prejudice*. However, Deresiewicz always comes back to and focuses specifically on the ways that Elizabeth’s relationship and interactions with Mr. Darcy are influenced by her community.¹ Authors Michael Stasio and Kathryn Duncan explore the psychological motivations behind marriage and courtship choices in *Pride and Prejudice* in their article: “An Evolutionary Approach to Jane Austen: Prehistoric Preferences in *Pride and Prejudice*.” Though Stasio and Duncan mention competition between female characters, they downplay its importance. Contrary to the implications of her title, Susan Greenfield seems to talk mostly about romantic relationships in her article “The Absent-Minded Heroine: Or, Elizabeth Bennet has a Thought.” Greenfield’s misleading title points to an issue present in most of these articles: they take for granted that relationships between men and women

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¹ Though Deresiewicz does break down his argument by looking at different characters and different situations, he leaves a hole in his argument by failing to significantly explore the role that gender plays in his ideas.
are central in *Pride and Prejudice*, thereby missing the fact that the relationships between female characters are of equal importance. Because all these authors remain too focused on finding new ways to look at romantic relationships, they end up neglecting to fully realize the importance of competition and relationships between women in the novel.

One of the main places that we see competition in *Pride and Prejudice* is through the ways that Mrs. Bennet always seems to compete via her daughters. This most notably comes to light in her relationship with Mrs. Lucas. Though the two are friends, they are constantly competing to achieve husbands for their daughters. To further this competition, Mrs. Bennet often compares her daughters favorably to Mrs. Lucas’ daughters while in the company of others: “the Lucases are a very good sort of girls, I assure you. It is a pity they are not handsome! . . . [Charlotte Lucas] is very plain. Lady Lucas herself has often said so, and envied me Jane’s beauty” (Austen 81). It is through comments such as this that Mrs. Bennet frequently brags about her own daughters while simultaneously insulting someone else. Mrs. Bennet is not alone in this rivalry, and when Charlotte Lucas marries before any of the Bennet daughters, Lady Lucas does not miss her opportunity to make Mrs. Bennet feel the loss: “Lady Lucas could not be insensible of triumph on being able to retort on Mrs. Bennet the comfort of having a daughter well married; and she called at Longbourn rather oftener than usual to say how happy she was” (157). Interactions such as these are the only type we see between Mrs. Bennet and Lady Lucas, making it difficult to ascertain if there is any genuine affection there beyond the drive to compete. Furthermore, Lady Lucas is not the only friend with whom Mrs. Bennet competes. At one point she states: “I do think Mrs. Long is as good a creature as ever lived—and her nieces are very pretty behaved girls, and not at all handsome: I like
them prodigiously” (345). It seems the objects of the rivalry need not be daughters, and that even nieces will do. Again we are left to wonder about the nature of Mrs. Bennet’s ties to Mrs. Long and whether or not they reach beyond the dynamics of competition. However, it is key that Mrs. Bennet presumably likes the nieces based on the fact that they aren’t handsome. This may point to a desire in Mrs. Bennet for a stronger friendship where rivalry is not necessary, as she revels in the fact that she presumably won’t have to worry about that type of competition with Mrs. Long. We can see further indication that competition with neighbors is the norm when Elizabeth states “under such misfortune as this, one cannot see too little of one’s neighbours. Assistance is impossible; condolence, insufferable. Let them triumph over us at a distance, and be satisfied” (301). Clearly Elizabeth has bought into the attitude of her mother, and through her words it becomes apparent that competition is the main option the Bennet family sees. Competition is further evident in the fact that Elizabeth describes her neighbors as having triumphed over her family, as if their relationships have winners and losers.

Competing with other women to try and claim that her daughters are the most ideal women and marriage candidates often leads Mrs. Bennet to act inappropriately herself, thus actually harming her daughters’ chances at marriage. The aforementioned instances where she brags about her daughters in comparison to the Lucas girls and Mrs. Long’s nieces are examples of such behavior, as they constitute merely poorly veiled attempts to pass off bad manners for indifferent conversation. Mrs. Bennet focuses her life on getting her daughters married (i.e. making them fit the ideal feminine role) but her actions make her appear silly and reflect negatively on her daughters, thus making them less desirable potential wives. This reveals one of the negative consequences of taking
feminine roles and gender ideology to the extreme as Mrs. Bennet’s behavior makes her appear ignorant of how to properly behave. It would have been expected that Mrs. Bennet care about whether or not her daughters marry, and that she attempt to help them toward that goal. However, devoting herself wholeheartedly to that cause to the point where she loses sight of social decency actually leads her to do more harm than good in terms of helping her daughters toward marriage.

Aside from competing with her neighbors, Mrs. Bennet also encourages competition between her daughters. In one particular instance where Mrs. Bennet inappropriately brags about Jane in public, she states: “I often tell my other girls they are nothing to her” (79). There can be no question that comments like this one encourage competition between the Bennet sisters. Mrs. Bennet frequently focuses on Jane and her beauty, and these attentions increase as Jane’s relationship with Bingley blossoms. Once Jane and Bingley become engaged, we learn that “Jane was beyond competition her favourite child. At that moment, she cared for no other” (350). To be so open about her favoritism cannot be good for her other daughters and their emotional wellbeing. We know that Elizabeth does not approve of sibling rivalry based on the comments she makes to Lady Catherine. When Lady Catherine expresses disapproval because Elizabeth’s younger sisters are out before the oldest is married, Elizabeth replies: “to be kept back on such a motive!—I think it would not be very likely to promote sisterly affection” (emphasis in original 191). It appears that positive relationships between sisters are important to Elizabeth at least, and thus, despite her mother’s opinion, competition is not the most desirable option.
Mr. Bennet behaves similarly to Mrs. Bennet in that he openly expresses favoritism for Elizabeth over his other daughters, and this favoritism reveals another aspect of competition between the Bennet sisters. From the very first chapter, Mr. Bennet continually singles Elizabeth out as his favorite daughter via comments like: “Lizzy has something more of quickness than her sisters” (45). Directly ranking his daughters in this way undoubtedly pushes them to compete for affection, but it also serves to highlight competition between the Bennet sisters for the position as the protagonist. Woloch brings this dynamic to light when he notes the way that Mr. and Mrs. Bennet compare their daughters to each other, and explains that this comparison “makes being the protagonist a position defined only in juxtaposition with [Elizabeth’s] sisters” (emphasis in original 58). In other words, the fact that Elizabeth is specifically singled out by her father serves to explain and justify why she holds the role of main character instead of one of her sisters. Thus we see that in some ways the Bennet sisters are even in competition with each other for the position of protagonist, and this competition is highlighted in the openly expressed favoritism from Mr. and Mrs. Bennet.

Mrs. Bennet’s zeal for competing with the neighbors and finding husbands for her daughters often reaches a level where she appears to care only about that goal, and not about the wellbeing of her daughters, thus further pushing them to compete and conform in order to gain her love. One such example comes when Elizabeth refuses to marry Mr. Collins, whom she does not love. Once Mrs. Bennet hears of Elizabeth’s decision she tells Mr. Collins: “She is a very headstrong foolish girl, and does not know her own interest; but I will make her know it” (emphasis in original, Austen 141). Marrying Mr. Collins would make Elizabeth very unhappy as the two are not at all
suitable for each other. However, if Elizabeth were to marry Mr. Collins then she would inherit her family estate and gain a secure future for herself and her sisters, as well as provide a way for Mrs. Bennet to brag and feel superior to her neighbors. Mrs. Bennet only thinks about this aspect of things, and never stops to question Elizabeth’s happiness in the matter. It should be noted, however, that one could argue that choosing to reject Mr. Collins and thus lose the family estate is a selfish move on Elizabeth’s part. However, the main point I wish to assert is that Mrs. Bennet doesn’t give a second thought to the fact that Elizabeth would have to sacrifice her happiness in order to gain the estate; she simply takes it for granted that Elizabeth should marry Mr. Collins, and she will do whatever she has to do to make this happen, including withholding affection from Elizabeth. This is an instance where we see Mrs. Bennet putting competition in a place of importance above her daughter’s happiness. As we will see via the similar actions of Mrs. Tulliver’s in the next chapter, Mrs. Bennet’s attitude here is a part of the pattern of female competition taking precedence.

We as readers can gain further perspective on Elizabeth’s rejection of Mr. Collins through the different reactions expressed by her mother and father. When Mr. Bennet is alerted to Elizabeth’s decision he states: “Your mother will never see you again if you do not marry Mr. Collins, and I will never see you again if you do” (emphasis in original 142). This reveals the different motivations of Elizabeth’s mother and father, as both are equally aware of the fact that Elizabeth’s decision determines whether or not their family will maintain their estate. Mrs. Bennet wants Elizabeth to marry regardless of Elizabeth’s feelings and is convinced (in accordance with social convention) that marriage is the ultimate goal and that it will make Elizabeth happy as well as satisfy her
own competitive urges. Mr. Bennet thinks marriage for love is what will make Elizabeth happy, and thus does not desire the union, regardless of the potential future consequences and the opinions of the neighbors. Some of Mrs. Bennet’s motives are probably genuinely from a place of concern and love for Elizabeth, as we see when she states: “if you take it into your head to go on refusing every offer of marriage in this way, you will never get a husband at all—and I am sure I do not know who is to maintain you when your father is dead” (143). Clearly Mrs. Bennet is concerned for Elizabeth’s future happiness relating to the security a husband would provide, and not the happiness that comes from a marriage based on a loving relationship. It seems, then, that Mrs. Bennet’s role is to push Elizabeth to maintain societal standards of what should make a woman happy, and Mr. Bennet is teaching Elizabeth to go against those standards to a certain extent, and to seek her own personal happiness.

Another example of the ways that Mrs. Bennet’s total focus on competing for marriage blinds her to her daughters’ feelings and life circumstances comes when Lydia runs away with Wickham. Lydia’s behavior has put her entire family through emotional turmoil, but for Mrs. Bennet: “To know that her daughter would be married was enough. She was disturbed by no fear for her felicity, nor humbled by any remembrance of her misconduct” (312-313). So long as Mrs. Bennet’s goal of marrying off her daughters is accomplished, she is oblivious to all else, including the fact that Lydia is competing with her sisters. Key here is the fact that she appears to have no concern for Lydia’s happiness in the future. This either stems from Mrs. Bennet holding to the notion that marriage is happiness for women (and thus she need not concern herself with worrying about it), or from a genuine lack of concern for her daughter’s future. Though the extent to which
Mrs. Bennet cares about her daughters is debatable, her complete devotion to what she sees as the best future for them does seem to point to some level of love and concern, regardless of the misconceptions she holds about competition and happiness. It does not seem likely that Mrs. Bennet would care so little about her daughters, and therefore it is most likely that she believes marriage, regardless of whether or not the pairing is prudent, will be the key to her daughters’ happiness. In Lydia’s case, both the marriage and the way in which she enters it are not ideal, but these are only a few of the consequences Lydia faces due to her mother’s actions.

Through only having competitive relationships with those around her, and by encouraging competition between her daughters, Mrs. Bennet may be setting the example that leads to Lydia having so little concern for the wellbeing of her sisters. Lydia buys wholeheartedly into her mother’s point of view, and is therefore constantly focused on men and flirting. Thus, even though she is perfectly aware that elopement is frowned upon and will bring disgrace on her family, she doesn’t give this side of the situation a second thought. As Judith Lowder Newton puts it: “Some young women, like Lydia and Kitty, are so engrossed with male regard in general, that they lose sight of their reason for securing it, which is to marry, and make the attention of men—any men—an end in itself” (33). It is here that we can see Mrs. Bennet’s ideas about life and competition being continued into the next generation. Lydia’s focus is on male attention, and it is this that allows her to ignore the negative repercussions of her actions. The damage Lydia is potentially causing to her family’s reputation is so severe that Mr. Collins even proclaims “The death of your daughter would have been a blessing in comparison of this” (Austen 304). As this sentiment comes from the always extreme Mr. Collins, his words are
certainly more severe than the actual situation. However, they are grounded in the frightening fact that Lydia’s actions have the potential to be extremely detrimental to the rest of her family. Despite this fact, Lydia’s focus remains on how much fun it will be to get married, and she chooses to only think of this and not about the consequences her actions have on her sisters and her family at large.

Rather than seeing the disgrace she has brought upon her family, Lydia appears to see her marriage as a triumph over her sisters. For instance, she tells Jane: “I take your place now, and you must go lower, because I am a married woman” (322). Instead of seeing the shame that her elopement has caused, Lydia sees it as a source of pride for herself, and brags about taking the place her oldest sister used to hold. She also boasts of her wedding to anyone who will listen and tells Mrs. Bennet: “I am sure my sisters must all envy me” (322). It is this attitude that reveals the dangers of completely buying into the attitude that men and marriage are the sole focus of a woman’s life. Jan Fergus comments on this tendency toward sisterly competition in her article “‘Rivalry, Treachery between sisters!’ Tensions between Brothers and Sisters in Austen's Novels” where she states: “sisters will be worse rivals to each other than brothers, in part because their only possible means to amass a fortune . . . is marriage.” Because that is all she cares about, Lydia nearly destroys her sisters’ chances at marriage, and does not give a second thought to the damage her actions have done to her relationships with her sisters. Instead, she feels as though she has triumphed in a form of sisterly competition, and Mrs. Bennet’s attitude only serves to reinforce this aspect of Lydia’s character.

Interestingly, it is the two sisters who don’t buy so completely into Mrs. Bennet’s way of thinking who maintain a level of sisterly devotion. Due to Lydia’s total
want of judgment and concern for her family, Mr. Bennet wants to banish her and Wickham from the family home. However, “Jane and Elizabeth, who agreed in wishing, for the sake of their sister’s feelings and consequences, that she should be noticed on her marriage by her parents, urged him so earnestly . . . to receive her and her husband at Longbourn . . . that [Mr. Bennet] was prevailed on to think as they thought” (Austen 319-320). Jane and Elizabeth come to their sister’s defense even though she nearly ruined their chances at a secure future by almost making them unfit for marriage. This supports the idea that Mrs. Bennet’s attitude about marriage as the only goal in a woman’s life is detrimental to female relationships. We see that Lydia, who buys into this notion, has no concern for the women in her life, and only wishes to show them up by getting married. In contrast, Elizabeth and Jane, however angry they are with their sister, still stand up for her. This is mostly due to their rejection of the tendency toward competition between sisters that Mrs. Bennet pushes on them. Because Jane and Elizabeth are not focused on competing with their sisters, they are selective about the men they fall in love with. They don’t see marriage as a race to the finish with their sisters, and thus are slightly less focused on attaining a husband. While they do both desire to marry the men they fall in love with, they do not follow in their mother’s footsteps in terms of being totally men and marriage focused. Author Sylvia H. Myers takes this a step further in the article “Womanhood in Jane Austen’s Novels” when she states: “for Elizabeth the threats of age, poverty and spinsterhood do not seem to exist” (228). Myers seems to think that Elizabeth is not concerned with gaining a husband in order to achieve future stability, and it is true that we do not see Elizabeth express such concerns. It is this difference which
allows both Elizabeth and Jane to ignore the push to compete and to still stand up for a sister, even when she does not stand up for them.

Elizabeth maintains this support of Lydia throughout her life, even after having seen Lydia’s unapologetic attitude. Lydia and Wickham never gain financial stability, and therefore Lydia often reaches out to Elizabeth for assistance. While Elizabeth does not provide Lydia with a job for Wickham as Lydia desires, “[s]uch relief, however, as it was in her power to afford, by the practice of what might be called economy in her own private expenses, she frequently sent them” (Austen 384). It seems that Elizabeth’s sense of sisterly devotion does not die, even in the face of all Lydia has done to show her own inconsideration for Elizabeth. However, despite the fact that Elizabeth and Jane come to their sister’s defense, the dynamics of their relationships as sisters are complex, and their motives in helping Lydia may reach beyond the call of sisterly affection.

Part of the reason that relationships between sisters seem to hold such a place of importance in *Pride and Prejudice* may have to do with the ways that sisters are reliant on one another, and this reliance may actually prove harmful to their ability to form supportive relationships. In the nineteenth-century, whether or not a woman were to marry and to whom determined her future, but the possibility of marriage was contingent on many factors, including the respectability of the woman’s family. Ultimately, then, reliance on a sister originated from a reliance on men for a financially secure future, as the actions of a sister could affect a woman’s quest to find a husband. Marriage was almost necessary for a woman to have any kind of stable future, thus, there was much at stake for women in their quest for marriage. However, their marriage prospects depended
partially on the actions and reputations of their family members. It would matter to women, then, that their sisters conformed to the feminine ideal, and thus did not damage their chances at a secure future.

We can clearly see these dynamics in action in the previously discussed part of *Pride and Prejudice* where Lydia runs away with Wickham. The novel makes it clear that in this situation, “[n]ot Lydia only, but all were concerned in it” (290). The actions of one sister reflect back on all the sisters; thus, it becomes important to try and regulate the behavior of one’s siblings. We can even see Lydia’s behavior reflecting back on Elizabeth and affecting her standing with Darcy when the text states: “Her power was sinking; every thing *must* sink under such a proof of family weakness, such an assurance of the deepest disgrace” (emphasis in original 287-288). In this case, the power being referred to is Elizabeth’s power over Darcy. It is key to note that it is not merely stated that her power may sink, but that it “must” sink, revealing that there is no getting around the effects that Lydia’s actions have on Elizabeth’s life. With so much relying on the actions of a sister, we are left to wonder how much of Elizabeth’s kind treatment of Lydia has to do with sisterly affection, and how much has to do pacifying Lydia and/or attempting to control her actions. This also sheds light on the possibility of relationships between sisters becoming a place where gender ideologies are reinforced. If a sister’s social acceptability can affect another sister’s ability to find a husband and secure a stable future, odds are that sisters are going to try to regulate one another’s behavior, just as we see Elizabeth doing when she attempts to prevent Lydia from going to Brighton. It seems that in order for these women to truly form supportive relationships with each other as sisters, the element of dependence on one another based on marriage qualifications would
have to be removed from the picture. We can see an example of this kind of bond between Elizabeth and her best friend Charlotte, though the role of men and marriage in their lives ends up hampering their relationship as well.

Aside from Jane, Elizabeth’s best female friend is Charlotte Lucas, and despite their closeness, a man still manages to ruin their intimacy. When Charlotte agrees to marry Mr. Collins, her thoughts go to how that will affect her relationship with Elizabeth: “The least agreeable circumstance in the business, was the surprise it must occasion to Elizabeth Bennet . . . Elizabeth would wonder and probably would blame her” (152). Charlotte recognizes that the relationship she is entering into with Mr. Collins will damage the one she has with Elizabeth, but she proceeds in the transaction in order to ensure a secure future for herself. In this way, we see Charlotte trading an emotional bond with Elizabeth for a business-like bond with Mr. Collins. Though this may not be what Charlotte ideally desires for her life, it is what is necessary for her to free herself from the looming possibility of remaining an unmarried woman without the prospect of a secure future. In this competition between female friendship and a secure future with a man she does not love, the man remains the victor, and we once again see a woman’s social circumstances playing a damaging role in her ability to form and maintain female friendships.

Even the extremely strong relationship between Elizabeth and Jane ends up competing with and suffering slightly due to their relationships with men. Instead of actively participating in this competition, however, Elizabeth chooses inaction and neither helps nor hurts Jane’s chances with Bingley. Juliet McMaster discusses Elizabeth’s actions in her article “If you don't marry my sister you will mortally offend
me’: Sibling Matchmakers.” Elizabeth neither helps nor hurts Jane’s chances with Bingley, as McMasters notes, saying that Elizabeth “is delighted at the initially swift progress of Jane’s relation with Bingley and furious when others interfere, but she doesn’t do any pushing herself.” This inaction may point to Elizabeth’s understanding that she will be replaced by a man, a process which she recognizes as inevitable, but may not necessarily wish to help advance. We cannot, however, mistakenly see Elizabeth’s inaction as an indication that she does not want Jane to find happiness. Certainly Jane feels the same about Elizabeth, yet their relationship can’t help but suffer some once Jane becomes engaged to Bingley: “Elizabeth had not but little time for conversation with her sister; for while [Bingley] was present, Jane had no attention to bestow on any one else” (Austen 350-351). Though certainly their relationship remains strong and is not damaged to the extent that Elizabeth’s relationship with Charlotte is damaged, Elizabeth must still take a back seat now that Jane is engaged, and Elizabeth calmly and happily accepts this new position.

Interestingly, the way that Jane changes her priorities and attention from Elizabeth to Bingley is perhaps the same reaction we would expect to see today. This indicates that actions that originated in a dependence on men for financial stability may have evolved into something that appears innate. Butler explains that the sources of relationship dynamics and gender ideologies are often obscured in her book Gender Trouble: Feminism and the Subversion of Identity. Butler argues that “If the ‘cause’ of desire, gesture, and act can be localized within the ‘self’ of the actor, then the political regulations and disciplinary practices which produce that ostensibly coherent gender are effectively displaced from view” (186). Thus, though it is clear to modern readers that
there was a political purpose behind interactions between nineteenth-century men and women, many of their relationship dynamics persist today as the political purposes behind them are obscured and appear to originate in the individual. Therefore, modern readers see that Charlotte is marrying for financial reasons, but we are less apt to see the motivations behind Jane’s prioritization of Bingley over Elizabeth. Instead, we take it for granted that when female-female relationships compete with male-female relationships, male-female relationships tend to take precedence. However, the strength of Elizabeth’s relationship with Jane also reveals some positive aspects of female bonds, and this comes out in their rivalry with the Bingley sisters.

One major female rivalry that occurs in *Pride and Prejudice* erupts between the Bingley sisters and the Bennet sisters, and this rivalry sheds light on some of the complications that can arise in female relationships. The Bingley sisters are proud, and therefore turn up their noses at the often inappropriate actions of the flirtatious younger Bennet sisters. Caroline Bingley has an especially strong dislike for Elizabeth as Caroline has feelings for Mr. Darcy and is therefore jealous of his growing affection for Elizabeth. It is for this reason that the interactions between Elizabeth and Caroline almost always come down to a competition of some sort, such as when Caroline invites Elizabeth to walk with her about the room so that Darcy can see and compare their figures (Austen 91). She also acts coldly towards Elizabeth, and often speaks ill of her to Darcy in hopes of swaying his good opinion. Ordinarily this would call for Elizabeth to simply reciprocate Caroline’s disaffection and not give it a second thought, but the situation is complicated by the fact that Jane has feelings for Mr. Bingley. Because of this, Elizabeth “felt capable under such circumstances, of endeavouring even to like Bingley’s two
sisters” (130). If Jane marries Bingley, Elizabeth will try to like the Bingley sisters for Jane’s sake. This is an example of a positive female relationship overriding negative relationships. It seems that the bond she has with Jane is enough to overshadow the competitive feelings and interactions that Elizabeth has had with the Bingley sisters, at least to a certain degree. We further see the pull between positive and negative relationships that Elizabeth experiences when Caroline writes to tell Jane that Bingley will not be returning to her neighborhood. At that point, Elizabeth’s “heart was divided between concern for her sister, and resentment against all the others” (163). Elizabeth is angry with Caroline, but also feels concern for her sister, and thus she is torn between her feelings of rivalry and her feelings of sisterly devotion.

Despite her attempt at forming positive relationships, Elizabeth chooses to focus on a negative view of the Bingley sisters, revealing the extent to which the notion of competition between women is engrained in her mind. When Bingley leaves the neighborhood, Elizabeth begins “to fear—not that Bingley was indifferent—but that his sisters would be successful in keeping him away” (158). Though we later learn that Bingley’s sisters do have a hand in keeping Jane and Bingley apart, we at first cannot be sure of their involvement as Elizabeth is a biased source who is certainly predisposed to think ill of the Bingley sisters. Elizabeth instantly assumes the worst from these women, to the point where she feels certain that Bingley leaving for London is part of an evil plan concocted solely by his sisters (147-149). By instantly jumping to this conclusion, Elizabeth is making false accusations without realizing that Darcy is actually mostly accountable for the separation of Jane and Bingley. Elizabeth’s thoughts on this matter are telling about the type of behavior and interaction she expects from women. She is
blinded to the affection that Caroline has for Jane, and her mind instantly jumps to an elaborate plot designed purely to harm Jane and Bingley without stopping to consider the possibility of inaccuracy in her assumptions. The attitude of the narrator echoes Elizabeth’s negative feelings about the Bingley sisters, usually persuading readers to be of the same opinion. However, regardless of how we as readers are supposed to feel about the Bingley sisters, the way that Elizabeth instantly jumps to the worst possibility is telling about what she expects from her relationships with these women. Elizabeth has undoubtedly been greatly influenced by her mother’s example relating to rivalry in relationships with other families. This can partially explain why Elizabeth maintains a tendency to think of the Bingley sisters as rivals even when her love for Jane pushes her to think of them in a positive light.

Just as Jane nearly proves the means of bringing a positive relationship between the Bingley sisters and Elizabeth, Mr. Darcy’s sister Georgiana ends up acting as a means of keeping that competition active. Caroline is jealous of Elizabeth because she fears the budding relationship that is forming between Elizabeth and Darcy. However, Caroline goes beyond her attempts at manipulating Mr. Darcy and also reaches out to Georgiana. While both Caroline and Elizabeth are visiting Georgiana at Pemberley, “Miss Bingley [vent]s her feelings in criticisms on Elizabeth’s person, behavior, and dress” to Georgiana (Austen 281). It is as though Georgiana is a tool in their rivalry. It is difficult to say for sure why Caroline chooses to reach out to Georgiana in her attempts to

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2 In her article “Intelligence in Pride and Prejudice” Susan Morgan attributes Elizabeth’s attitude in this scene to her desire for certainty over ambiguity. Morgan states: “Elizabeth does not allow for her own ignorance and prefers the certainty of deciding the worst” (65). While it is true that Elizabeth exhibits a pattern of jumping to conclusions, this scene tells us more about the dynamics that Elizabeth has been taught to expect than her own desire for certainty.
take Elizabeth out of the picture. She of course knows that Mr. Darcy and Georgiana are very close, and may therefore simply be trying to sway the opinion of someone close to Mr. Darcy in hopes that that will increase her chances of swaying his opinion as well. However, “[p]ersuaded as Miss Bingley was that Darcy admired Elizabeth, this was not the best method of recommending herself” (282). It may be then, that in addition to revealing the strong relationship between Darcy and Georgiana, Caroline’s actions may also be saying something about the nature of Elizabeth and Georgiana’s relationship. Should Elizabeth and Darcy marry, Elizabeth would become Georgiana’s sister. By attempting to destroy Elizabeth in Georgiana’s eyes, Caroline may be revealing the importance of a strong relationship between sisters. It may be that, realizing how important it is for sisters to love and support one another, Caroline hopes to destroy the chances of a relationship between Elizabeth and Darcy by eliminating the possibility for a positive sisterly affection between Elizabeth and Georgiana. After Elizabeth and Darcy marry, “Miss Bingley was very deeply mortified by Darcy’s marriage, but . . . dropt all her resentment; was fonder than ever of Georgiana, almost as attentive to Darcy as heretofore, and paid off every arrear of civility to Elizabeth” (384). The text states the Caroline drops her resentment, but then makes it clear that she simply fulfills her societal obligations toward Elizabeth, whereas she becomes fonder of Georgiana, and also clearly still holds feelings for Darcy. It sounds as if the negative relationship between Elizabeth and Caroline lives on, but merely in hushed tones due to societal obligations and a change in circumstances.

In *Pride and Prejudice*, many aspects of the female characters’ lives are impacted by a tendency toward competition relating from their societal reliance on men.
We see this clearly in Mrs. Bennet and her extreme focus on finding husbands for her daughters as she is constantly competing with the neighbors and even encourages competition between her own daughters. Her actions also reveal the ways that these attitudes are continued into the next generation. Lydia clearly takes after her mother’s example and doesn’t give a second thought to her sisters’ futures when she runs off with Wickham, and instead views it as a triumph over her sisters to be the first to marry. Even Jane and Elizabeth, who are very unlike their mother, still must deal with rivalries and damage to their relationships with other women because of the role that men and marriage play in their lives. It seems that until women and men are on an equal footing, thus giving women less of a need to compete with each other for a secure future, we will continue to see relationships that fit the dynamics of those in *Pride and Prejudice*. 
CHAPTER III

DYING FOR SUPPORT: CRITICISM

IN THE MILL ON THE FLOSS

In George Eliot’s *The Mill on the Floss*, the female characters’ tendencies toward competition and criticism clearly reveal some of the networks through which the culturally ideal female identity is enforced and perpetuated. These actions also serve to help keep women subservient to men in that internalizing the frequent criticism and rules of the gender divide leave women striving for love above all else, including the possibility of change. Maggie is certainly not exempt from these outward forces, and in many ways comes to fulfill her role as a nineteenth-century woman. However, her interactions with Lucy reveal both the possibility and the consequences of leaving the cycle of criticism and competition. It is through examining these relationships that Maggie’s death, often read as a testament to her relationship with Tom, becomes a testament to her relationship with Lucy.

*The Mill on the Floss* is filled with sacrifice as the main character, Maggie Tulliver, is constantly sacrificing her own needs for the needs of those around her, and ultimately dies with her brother Tom while trying to save him from the flood. However, critics tend to disagree about the nature of Maggie’s sacrifices and what they tell us about the larger picture. Paul Yeoh, as expressed in “Saints’ Everlasting Rest: The Martyrdom of Maggie Tulliver,” sees the novel as a nineteenth-century take on martyrdom. Yeoh
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claims that “[r]eviving the hagiographic dimensions of the text enables us to admire
Maggie as a moral agent . . . instead of merely pitying her as the hapless victim of unjust
ideological formations” (3). The significance of religion in *The Mill on the Floss* is
perhaps more in accordance to what Missy Dehn Kubitschek claims in “Where No Role
Fits: Maggie’s Predicament in George Eliot’s *The Mill on the Floss* (1860)” where she
states that “misconstrued religion reinforces the social ideal of womanly self-sacrifice”
(198). For Kubitschek, Maggie’s sacrifice does not make her a martyr, but instead points
to problems with nineteenth-century female roles. Author Steven Dillon discusses
networks of power in his article “George Eliot and the Feminine Gift,” but he views the
central sacrifice in *The Mill on the Floss* as Maggie’s rejection of a network of gift giving
and debt that reveals a web of power, claiming that death is the only escape. Katherine
N. Hayles takes a different angle on the deaths of Maggie and Tom in her article “Anger
in Different Voices: Carol Gilligan and *The Mill on the Floss.*” She claims that the deaths
“seal the reconciliation between the man and woman, so that affection cannot decay again
into alienation” (30). Hayles points us to one common thread that all these critics have in
common; though they take different angles on sacrifice and power, they all seem to take
for granted that the central and most important relationship in *The Mill on the Floss* is the
relationship between Maggie and Tom. In doing so, however, they are overlooking the
extreme importance of Maggie’s relationship with her cousin Lucy and the importance of
female relationships in general.

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3 While Yeoh is right to encourage readers to look beyond the veil of victim when studying
Maggie’s sacrifices, dismissing the ideological functions of the novel does a disservice to Eliot
and her message.

4 Dillon claims that “Maggie responds to these social forms by *giving up,* but it seems that there is
no real escape from this world except into death” (emphasis in original, 712).
One of the more exaggerated examples of female competition that we see in *The Mill on the Floss* is between Mrs. Tulliver and her sisters: Mrs. Deane, Mrs. Pullet, and Mrs. Glegg, or the former Dodson sisters. The rivalry here is not romantic in nature, but rather a rivalry relating to success as a woman. This proves to be a competition in which the sisters act as both participants and judges, constantly seeking advice from each other and giving it even when it has not been requested. When we first hear of the Dodson sisters, the Tullivers are discussing sending Tom to school and Mrs. Tulliver states: “hadn’t I better kill a couple o’ fowl and have th’ aunts and uncles to dinner next week, so as you may hear what sister Glegg and sister Pullet have got to say about it? There’s a couple o’ fowl wants killing!” (emphasis in original, Eliot 14). This clearly reveals the complexities of the relationships between the sisters. Mrs. Tulliver wants advice from her sisters, but we also see that she resents them for it as she derogatorily refers to them as fowl. This is because the relationships between the sisters act as a place where gender ideology is reified, similarly to how we saw Mrs. Bennet enforcing gender norms on her daughters. Mrs. Tulliver needs the advice of her sisters in order to succeed within rigid nineteenth-century ideology, but the nature of this need also serves to keep the sisters from having supportive relationships. Partly because of their sisterly affection toward each other, the sisters work to make sure each of them is up to their standards for success, but what that mostly means is the sisters are constantly tearing each other down. This continuous criticism has been going on for their entire lives and we learn that Mrs. Tulliver “had groaned a little in her youth under the yoke of her elder sisters and still shed occasional tears at their sisterly reproaches” (51). The sisters are not able to go to
each other and expect indiscriminate familial compassion, but instead expect advice
shrouded in a thick layer of judgment and criticism.

A particular area about which the sisters love to pass judgment is Mrs.
Tulliver’s children, and this also serves as a clear example of how ideology is passed
through generations. The sisters love criticizing Mrs. Tulliver about her children, as we
see when Mrs. Pullet says: “I doubt they’ll outgrow their strength,” she added, looking
over their heads with a melancholy expression at their mother. ‘I think the gell has too
much hair. I’d have it thinned and cut shorter, sister, if I was you; it isn’t good for her
health’” (70). Mrs. Pullet is critiquing Maggie for her less than ideal hair, but aiming the
criticism specifically at Mrs. Tulliver. We know that these comments prove damaging to
Mrs. Tulliver as she “had shed tears several times at sister Glegg’s unkindness on the
subject of these unmatronly curls” (emphasis mine, 61). As the particular usage of the
word “unmatronly” reveals, Maggie’s hair is not up to feminine standards, so both
Maggie and her mother answer for it at the hands of the sisters. This type of criticism is
then disseminated to the next generation in two ways. First, these comments push Mrs.
Tulliver to give the same level of criticism to Maggie in order to win her sisters’ approval
and affection. Second, Maggie is often around and hears the comments themselves. When
she hears one of her aunts criticize her hair, she doesn’t need to wait for her mother’s re-
emphasis on the matter; Maggie is already made aware that something about her is not
quite up to feminine code.

While part of the constant sisterly criticism does come down to love, there is a
selfish aspect about it which serves to make the relationships between the sisters appear
shallow. It is important to note that the sisters are not wholly cruel to one another; while
they may not do as much as Mrs. Tulliver would like, her sisters do come to her aid when Mr. Tulliver loses his lawsuit. Certainly some of this must come from genuine sisterly love, but because of the nature of their connections, there is probably also a great deal of self-interest behind the sisters’ actions. Because they are family, the actions and life situation of one sister reflects upon them all, just as it does with the Bennet sisters. We see the urgency of this when Mrs. Glegg says “if I understand right, we’ve come together this morning to advise and consult about what’s to be done in this disgrace as had fallen upon the family, and not to talk o’ people as don’t belong to us” (221). There is no point in discussing the happenings in other families if they themselves are not directly affected, especially as the happenings in the Tulliver family have the potential to bring disgrace upon them all. Maggie is clearly aware of the superficiality of the Dodson sisters’ concerns for one another, and therefore exclaims: “Why do you come, then, . . . talking and interfering with us and scolding us if you don’t mean to do anything to help my poor mother—your own sister—if you’ve no feeling for her when she’s in trouble, and won’t part with anything . . . to save her from pain?” (228). Maggie has seen the constant criticism between her aunts her entire life, and it frustrates her that there is not clear love and support behind it. Maggie sees the need for more supportive and accepting relationships between the sisters, but does not see that they are often truly looking out for each other within their rigid social structure. If so much of their relationship is built off of personal concern and the desire to appear respectable in society, it is difficult for the sisters to form supportive emotional bonds. That does not mean that it is not possible, or that there is no genuine love between the sisters, merely that it is hard to find a truly
accepting connection when their relationships have possible personal ramifications and their interactions consist largely of criticism.

The behavior Maggie witnesses further leads her to believe and internalize the idea that men and women are innately different. We see this through comments from Maggie such as: “I think all women are crosser than men . . . Aunt Glegg’s a great deal crosser than Uncle Glegg, and mother scolds me more than father does” (158). Because this is the only type of behavior that Maggie has seen, she believes it to be universal. Constantly witnessing the nagging and over dramatics from her mother and aunts has lead Maggie to believe that this is simply the way that women are by nature. Because this behavior is in contrast to how the men in her life behave, she assumes that this is one way that men and women are different. Without any evidence to speak to the contrary, the behaviors of Maggie’s aunts and mother serve to reinforce gender stereotypes and pass them on to the next generation.

Mrs. Tulliver’s relationships with her sisters are strikingly similar to the relationship she creates with Maggie, further revealing the ways that feminine ideology is passed to the next generation. Mrs. Tulliver is constantly criticizing Maggie and pushing her to be more feminine through comments like: “let your hair be brushed, an’ put your other pinafore on, an’ change your shoes—do, for shame; an’ come an’ go on with your patchwork, like a little lady” (18). We can even clearly see a link between Mrs. Tulliver’s behavior and her relationships with her sisters when she says: “what is to become of you if you’re so naughty? I’ll tell your aunt Glegg and your aunt Pullet when they come next week, and they’ll never love you any more . . . Folks ’ull think it’s a judgment on me as I’ve got such a child” (33). Again, Mrs. Tulliver is policing Maggie, but using her sisters
and their judgment as tools. This also reveals her insecurity and her own personal concern in the matter, leaving room to question how much of her actions have anything to do with genuine concern for Maggie. Here, Mrs. Tulliver’s sibling rivalry and her relationship with her daughter overlap to reveal how competition between females continues through generations.

Later in the novel Mrs. Tulliver’s attitude toward her daughter softens, but this change corresponds with Maggie’s change from an unfeminine child to an exceptionally beautiful woman, further revealing her desire for Maggie to fit the nineteenth-century ideal. We can see Mrs. Tulliver’s true motivation through comments such as:

“Let it alone, my dear; your hands ’ull get as hard as hard . . . it’s your mother’s place to do that.” . . . And she would still brush and carefully tend Maggie’s hair, which she had become reconciled to . . . yet the woman’s heart, so bruised in its small personal desire, found a future to rest on in the life of this young thing, and the mother pleased herself with wearing out her own hands to save the hands that had so much more life in them. (292)

It is clear in her desire to preserve Maggie’s hands and hair that even when Mrs. Tulliver is kind to Maggie, she is still acting to preserve and cultivate Maggie’s feminine qualities. She does this not only to shape a more secure future for Maggie, but also to have Maggie’s successes reflect back upon herself.

The severity of Mrs. Tulliver’s treatment of Maggie is further highlighted by the differences between Maggie and Mrs. Tulliver’s relationships with the men in their lives. When Mr. Tulliver talks about Maggie he says: “She’s a straight black-eyed wench as anybody need wish to see. I don’t know i’ what she’s behind other folks’s children, and she can read almost as well as the parson” (18). When Mrs. Tulliver talks of her, however, she says things like: “But her hair won’t curl all I can do with it, and she’s so
franzy about having it put i’ paper, and I’ve such work as never was to make her stand and have it pinched with th’ irons” (18). Though he reveals in other scenes that he feels Maggie’s intelligence is wasted on a woman, Mr. Tulliver shows in this scene that he at least somewhat supports her intelligence, and this is only one of many scenes in which he shows genuine support for her. Here we see interactions between women again becoming the place where gender ideology is reinforced as it is Mrs. Tulliver who is concerned with whether or not Maggie is following the guidelines for what a woman is supposed to be and therefore gives criticism instead of praise, further reinforcing criticism and competition as the norm in female relationships. In fact, the Dodson sisters view Mr. Tulliver’s acceptance of Maggie as extremely detrimental to her character. When Mr. Tulliver stands up for Maggie in front of the sisters, Mrs. Glegg says: “How your husband does spoil that child, Bessy! . . . It’ll be the ruin of her if you don’t take care” (77). Any sort of kindness or acceptance risks Maggie being happy with herself, and if she is happy with herself then there would be no need to try and attain the feminine ideal.

The way that Mrs. Tulliver treats Tom is completely different than how she treats Maggie, and this also serves to teach Maggie her place in society. When it comes to Tom, Mrs. Tulliver is all praise and we learn that “if Mrs. Tulliver had a strong feeling, it was fondness for her boy” (38). For Mrs. Tulliver, strong feelings are reserved for the men in her life, not for forming close bonds with her sisters or her daughter. We even learn that, “[i]t was Mrs. Tulliver’s way, if she blamed Tom, to refer his misdemeanour, somehow or other, to Maggie” (114). Even when Tom is bad, she does not criticize him the way she does Maggie, but instead gives Maggie the criticism that is rightly Tom’s. This further teaches Maggie about her role in society as she learns at an early age through
her parents’ actions that males are more valued than females. It doesn’t matter when her brother has faults, but hers are constantly on display.

Maggie inherits her mother’s devotion to Tom, and through his withholding of love in return we are able to see more clearly the social function served by a lack of love in both male and female relationships. As a child, Maggie learns Tom’s worth while simultaneously learning her own worthlessness, possibly pushing her to desire a close relationship with the intensely valuable Tom. Unfortunately for Maggie, Tom’s love proves difficult for her to garner. Tom is often withholding, and when she disappoints him by accidentally forgetting to feed his rabbits he says: “I don’t love you, Maggie. You shan’t go fishing with me tomorrow” (42). This statement proves truly devastating to Maggie who then obsesses about it for the rest of the day while Tom is able to quickly move on to other things. This is because “the need of being loved, [is] the strongest need in poor Maggie’s nature” (44). We gain more insight into the function this dynamic serves when the narrator states: “It is a wonderful subduer, this need of love—this hunger of the heart—as peremptory as that other hunger by which nature forces us to submit to yoke and change the face of the world (45). Thus, the women in The Mill on the Floss are contributing to this subduing when they constantly criticize instead of acting as a place where love and support can be found. As the narrator assures us, Maggie needs love, and surely the other women do too. However, the constant criticism ends with these women withholding love from each other, pushing them to focus their efforts on striving to find love. By denying each other love, the women in The Mill on the Floss are therefore contributing to their own subjugation and further strengthening the power men already hold over them.
We get a sense of the futility of trying to escape this cycle in the scene where Maggie cuts her own hair. Because her hair is not the ideal hair for a girl, it serves as a constant source of criticism from her aunts and her mother. The answer that comes to her young mind is to cut it off and thus end the criticism. Her motives are certainly clear: “her own deliverance from her teasing hair and teasing remarks about it . . . she didn’t want her hair to look pretty—that was out of the question—she only wanted people to think her a clever little girl and not to find fault with her” (72). Maggie wants to be accepted for who she is, not constantly pushed to be something she isn’t. Initially it works for her: “One delicious grinding snip, and then another and another, . . . and Maggie stood cropped in a jagged, uneven manner, but with a sense of clearness and freedom, as if she had emerged from wood into the open plain” (72). Unfortunately, however, this feeling of freedom is fleeting. As soon as her family finds out, Maggie is scolded by her aunts and her mother: “‘Fie, for shame!’ said aunt Glegg in her loudest, severest tone of reproof. ‘Little gells as cut their own hair should be whipped an fed on bread and water’” (76). While Maggie’s father stands by her, the women in the room are appalled with her actions. Maggie’s attempts to force them to focus on who she is rather than who she is not prove futile. By attempting to defy the norms placed upon her, Maggie only ends up being even further ridiculed. Though Maggie tries to take the situation into her own hands to end the constant criticism, this incident seems to show that there is no escape. However, if there is no escape for Maggie then surely there is no escape for Mrs. Tulliver and her sisters either. It is clear then, that these women are not necessarily vindictive, but are merely pieces in a much larger game, just like Maggie.
While Maggie’s haircut seems to show that she cannot escape her social role, the scene where she sulks in the attic provides insight into some of the reasons criticism is so prevalent from mother to daughter. When Maggie is upset by the way her family treats her, she goes into the attic; “here she kept a fetish, which she punished for all her misfortunes . . . Three nails driven into the head commemorated as many crises in Maggie’s nine years of earthly struggle” (34). Maggie has to take her frustrations out somewhere, so she releases them by abusing a doll. We know that Mrs. Tulliver has spent her whole life being criticized by the women in her family, and it may be that part of why she does it to Maggie is because it was done to her; Maggie is simply the only person she has enough power over to be able to push around, just as Maggie only has power over the doll. The frustration and anger that would normally be misplaced upon other women is instead taken out upon the doll. The way Maggie mistreats her doll is similar to how her mother has mistreated her, revealing the way anger can be misplaced when characters feel powerless to change their circumstances.

While taking out her frustrations on Maggie, Mrs. Tulliver often makes comments that seem to encourage competition between Maggie and Lucy, and Mrs. Tulliver is not the only one who does this. Maggie is compared to Lucy so often that it seems the other characters are pushing for the two to be in competition. Mrs. Tulliver is one of the biggest contributors to this competition as she is constantly wishing out loud that Maggie would be more like Lucy though comments like: “an’ there’s her cousin Lucy’s got a row o’ curls round her head, an’ not a hair out o’ place. It seems hard as my sister Deane should have that pretty child” (18). In this case it is clear that Mrs. Tulliver’s comments are part of her own competition with her sisters; it is as though Mrs. Tulliver is
setting up a competition within a competition, ensuring that competition between women will live on into the next generation.

Even Tom pits Maggie and Lucy against each other, and though his comments are not as frequent as Mrs. Tulliver’s, they appear to carry more weight with Maggie. When Tom is unhappy with Maggie he tells her: “I like Lucy better than you; I wish Lucy was my sister” (emphasis in original, 96). We know how important Tom is to Maggie, so these comments cut her to the heart, and lead her to act out against Lucy: “As long as Tom seemed to prefer Lucy to her, Lucy made part of his unkindness. Maggie would have thought a little while ago that she could never be cross with pretty little Lucy . . . As it was, she was actually beginning to think that she should like to make Lucy cry . . . especially as it might vex Tom” (110). The constant criticism and comparison leads Maggie to act out against the subject she is pitted against as opposed to those doing the pitting, and she pushes Lucy into the mud. Though Lucy is not one of the forces acting against Maggie, and despite all of Lucy’s kindnesses, she ends up being the place where Maggie releases her anger and frustration. This is a key example that shows how hard it is for the women in this novel to form supportive relationships. Maggie has already internalized the notion that women are mean to each other, and she does not have enough power in her social and family environments to take out her anger on those who actually wrong her. Thus we see the factors surrounding Maggie coming together to create a situation where she turns against her cousin. Fortunately, Maggie and Lucy’s relationship recovers and actually turns out to be one of the strongest relationships between women in the novel.
Both Lucy and Maggie are able to move on from the mud incident in their childhood, and as a young adult, Lucy expresses true love and admiration for Maggie. In one particularly strong statement of love, Lucy tells Maggie: “you enjoy other people’s happiness so much, I believe you would do without any of your own. I wish I were like you” (389). Maggie’s constant torrent of criticism and the manipulation of love she has experienced have succeeded in pushing her towards the feminine ideal in that they put her in a place where she is totally self-sacrificing. Lucy, also aspiring towards the ideal, admires this quality in Maggie, particularly as Lucy has also witnessed and internalized the notion that women are cruel to one another. Lucy loves and trusts Maggie so much that she is able to go against the trend of female cruelty and competition, and feels no jealousy when her fiancé Stephen spends time with Maggie. Lucy’s genuine love for Maggie places Maggie above suspicion, and as the narrator points out, these feelings are very much unusual:

Is it an inexplicable thing that a girl should enjoy her lover’s society the more for the presence of a third person and be without the slightest spasm of jealousy that the third person had the conversation habitually directed to her? Not when that girl is as tranquil-hearted as Lucy, thoroughly possessed with a belief that she knows the state of her companions’ affections and not prone to the feelings which shake such a belief in the absence of positive evidence against it. (421)

The text here reveals that such an attitude as Lucy’s is very rare, to the point where one would ask if her actions are inexplicable. Fortunately for Lucy, Maggie is just as devoted to her as she is to Maggie. Unfortunately for Lucy, her blind affection leaves her oblivious to the budding relationship between Maggie and Stephen as well as the inner turmoil it causes Maggie.
Maggie admires Lucy just as much as she herself is admired by Lucy, but it is difficult for her to fully ignore the push to compete with Lucy. Maggie has developed strong feelings for Stephen, but is determined to put them aside, and feels insulted when he boldly kisses her arm (463). This scene partly revives the competition of their childhood in that Maggie is bothered by the fact that Stephen has taken liberties with her that he has not taken with Lucy. Maggie, in her own inner turmoil, sees this as what she deserves: “A horrible punishment was come upon her for the sin of allowing a moment’s happiness that was treachery to Lucy, to Philip, to her own better soul. That momentary happiness had been smitten with a blight, a leprosy: Stephen thought more lightly of her than he did of Lucy” (emphasis in original, 463). Here, the narrator’s quick glimpse into Maggie’s mind reveals that while she is disturbed for having hurt others, she is also disturbed by the thought that Stephen thinks less of her than he does of Lucy. Maggie knows she has done wrong and feels she should pay for it, but also cannot help bringing up the old feelings of competition that have been so deeply ingrained in her.

Despite her slight relapse into competitive thoughts, Maggie denies Stephen because she is afraid of losing her relationship with Lucy as it is one of the very few supportive relationships in her life. Maggie’s denial of Stephen proves a huge testament to Maggie’s love for Lucy as not only does she love Stephen, but her economic situation makes is highly unlikely that she will have any similar marriage offers. Nevertheless, when Stephen proposes she staggers under the emotional turmoil it brings her, but her thoughts remain with her love for Lucy, and that is how she is able to push through the pain and deny Stephen. It is evident that Maggie is afraid of losing the love she has with Lucy as their relationship is the only one Maggie has where she is not judged, but merely
loved. In Maggie’s world, where female relationships tend to consist solely of criticism and competition, a supportive relationship like the one she has with Lucy is priceless, and damaging it would therefore be a huge loss for Maggie.

The criticism that Maggie receives after her boat trip with Stephen reveals the ways that the larger social structure incorporates female identity into criticism and public opinion. Though Maggie in the end regained her strength and denied Stephen for good, the damage is already done as she is now viewed as a fallen woman. In this incident, the narrator specifically designates the public’s eruption into gossip as a female response: “Public opinion in these cases is always of the feminine gender” (512-513). The town in general is a flurry of gossip and criticism of Maggie and her actions, and it appears that this gossip is the act of the women. The narrator asserts that this does not mean that all women shun Maggie, but explains that “we must expect to find many good women timid, too timid even to believe in the correctness of their own best promptings when these would place them in a minority” (529-530). The clear assertion here is that women will not stand up to each other, and instead will join in the torrent of judgment and criticism thus keeping themselves and other women in line. However, Mrs. Tulliver takes a different route and stands by Maggie: “the poor frightened mother’s love leaped out now stronger than all dread” (507). She may not have been there for Maggie earlier on, but she is there when Maggie needs her the most. This is a particularly telling gesture as throughout the novel Mrs. Tulliver expresses an intense concern for appearances and reputation. Mrs. Tulliver’s final stand is a testament to the love that she had for her daughter all along, but, significantly, in order to finally openly express that love, Mrs. Tulliver has to go against the opinions of the town and disobey social convention.
Maggie’s decision to leave Stephen reveals her true loyalties as she ends up choosing her relationship with Lucy over her relationship with Tom. When Maggie rejects Stephen, she tarnishes her own reputation and chance at a secure future to save Lucy, and in doing so, destroys her relationship with Tom. It may be then, that Maggie feels more loyalty to Lucy than she does to Tom, as she appears to have made her choice between the two via her actions. In a way, this appears to be a part of the literary tradition of virginal protector and fallen woman that Donoghue discusses in *Inseparable: Desire Between Women in Literature* where a virginal female character acts as the protector of a fallen woman. Eliot gives us a slight twist on this tradition, however, as it is Maggie, the fallen woman, who is the protector of the virginal Lucy. Donoghue states “death must ultimately separate the fallen woman and her virginal protector” thus providing a possible explanation for Maggie’s death (71). If Maggie and Lucy were to remain friends, Lucy’s close proximity to Maggie’s tarnished reputation would most likely damage Lucy’s reputation and chances at forming an advantageous marriage. It seems that Maggie, then, must die to further protect Lucy from the damage their inseparability would cause her. Despite the reactions of the town, Maggie decides to stay and weather the storm in hopes that her love with Lucy can be reclaimed. She tells others: “If I remained here, I could perhaps atone in some way to Lucy” and indeed, she does (Eliot 519). It is because she remains in town that she gets caught up in the flood and drowns, thus saving Lucy from any further distress stemming from their relationship.

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It is important to note that while Maggie is technically still a virginal woman, her community views her as a fallen woman. As long as she is forced to bear the yoke of the fallen woman, whether or not she is actually corrupted would have no impact on her treatment in society.
In the end, the supportive and loving relationship that we see between Lucy and Maggie proves itself to be truly rare. Before Maggie is swept away by the flood, she and Lucy have one final interaction which again proves the depth of their affection. Lucy is able to see the genuine good intentions behind Maggie’s actions, especially since Maggie gave up any chance at a respectable future to spare Lucy’s happiness. It is Lucy’s final words that reveal just how large a sacrifice Maggie has made: “‘Maggie,’ she said in a low voice that had the solemnity of confession in it, ‘you are better than I am. I can’t—’” (535). Lucy is overcome by emotions and unable to finish her thought, but the meaning is clear: Lucy could not have given up Stephen’s love for Maggie, as Maggie did for her. Lucy is not alone in this, and surely most other women in the novel could not have done what Maggie did in choosing a woman over a man. Like the Tulliver sisters, most women are driven to compete with each other, and choose other goals or relationships over their fellow women. Maggie was never trying to compete with Lucy, even though the circumstances in which she was placed pushed her towards it, and it was Maggie’s continual efforts to resist the drive towards competition that kept her and Lucy together. Had Maggie given in to the pressures around her, then her friendship and love with Lucy would not have been able to continue.

Though for most of the women in *The Mill on the Floss* life becomes a game where they must compete with one another and push each other though criticism and judgment, Lucy and Maggie prove that this is not the only option. By sticking to each other and always giving love, the two are able to form a supportive bond that public opinion cannot tear apart. Though Stephen tries to tell Maggie: “It is unnatural, it is horrible. Maggie . . . we should throw everything else to the wind for the sake of
belonging to each other” she does not give in to him (469-470). Instead she claims: “I must not, cannot, seek my own happiness by sacrificing others. Love is natural, but surely pity and faithfulness and memory are natural too” (471). Though in many ways this extreme selflessness is a way that Maggie is eventually pushed to conform to the nineteenth-century feminine ideal, it is the ways that she does not conform that say the most about her. Though she has grown up surrounded by female competition and criticism, Maggie rejects these behaviors in favor of the idea that women need not separate themselves and can instead find in each other the love and acceptance that is so often denied them. However, with this path comes great sacrifice, and Maggie must exercise continual consciousness and effort to do things differently than those who came before.
CHAPTER IV

MANIPULATION AND ISOLATION:

FEMALE RELATIONSHIPS

IN JANE EYRE

The drama that unfolds in Charlotte Brontë’s Jane Eyre allows us to see the roles that men play in controlling female relationships, often pushing women into competition with one another. The novel also allows us to see the cultural ramifications of these actions, as the character Bertha ends up committing suicide at least partially as a result of her isolation at the hands of her husband, Rochester. Bertha is not the only one affected by Rochester as he plays a particularly large role in the actions of the female characters around him. Rochester constantly manipulates people and situations in order to maintain power and centrality in female characters’ lives. He sets up competition between the characters Jane and Miss Ingram, as well as prevents a relationship from forming between Jane and Bertha. However, through meaningful inaction Bertha provides an example of women resisting the push into competition. It is partially because of Bertha’s unusual actions that she ends up being discussed so frequently in literary criticism. As Laurence Lerner, the author of “Bertha and the Critics” puts it, “Criticism has made Mr. Rochester’s mad wife . . . central not only to the plot of Jane Eyre but also to its emotional economy and its construction of woman” (273). Because she is locked in the attic and silenced by Rochester, Bertha reveals the extreme powerlessness of women
at the hands of men. *Jane Eyre* is typically seen as a feminist novel in which, as Sandra M. Gilbert asserts in “A Dialogue of Self and Soul: Plain Jane’s Progress,” “[Jane’s] confrontation not with Rochester but with Rochester’s mad wife, Bertha, is the book’s central confrontation, an encounter not with her own sexuality but with her own imprisoned ‘hunger, rebellion, and rage,’ a secret dialogue of self and soul on whose outcome . . . the novel’s plot, Rochester’s fate, and Jane’s coming-of-age all depend” (339). It is through the relationship between Bertha and Jane that we see the extreme control men can have over women, and though critics often wrongly reduce Bertha’s character into a symbol, the choices that she makes prove telling about the need for supportive female relationships.

We are able to see just how direct of a role men can play in competition between women during the scene where Rochester dresses up as a gypsy. At this point, Rochester cultivates a competition by planting the seeds in Jane’s mind that he is to marry Miss Ingram, and he sees to it that these seeds continue to grow throughout the novel (Brontë 297). Again and again he mentions his forthcoming nuptials to Jane through comments such as: “In about a month I hope to be a bridegroom, . . . and in the interim I shall myself look out for employment and asylum for you” (374). This particular lie, which Rochester carefully nurtures for nearly a hundred pages, pushes Jane and Miss Ingram into competition. Jane has fallen in love with Rochester, and his continual mention of impending marriage to Miss Ingram proves not only emotionally harmful, but was meant to trick Jane into loving him even more. Rochester admits his motives when he states: “I feigned courtship of Miss Ingram, because I wished to render you as madly in love with me as I was with you; and I knew jealousy would be the best
ally I could call in for the furtherance of that end” (392). Rochester sees that creating competition between Miss Ingram and Jane will increase Jane’s desire for him. In order to further his own goals, Rochester purposely creates and nurtures competition between women. He manipulates the relationship between Jane and Miss Ingram so that they will like him all the more. It becomes clear through these actions that Rochester is a master of manipulation and he finds no qualms in deceiving others for his own personal gain. In fact, this is not the only instance where Rochester deceives women in order to shape their relationships, revealing the hand men often play in setting up female competition.

By keeping his wife Bertha’s existence a secret from Jane, Rochester prevents there from being any kind of interaction or relationship of any nature between Bertha and Jane. Every time Bertha appears in the novel, Rochester is able to formulate a lie to keep Jane in the dark. Even when Jane comes face to face with Bertha, he still does not fill her in, and instead chalks it all up to “an over-stimulated brain” (425). Only Grace Poole knows Bertha’s true identity as Mrs. Rochester. We later learn that Rochester “took care that none should hear of . . . [Bertha] under that name” (436). With this information carefully kept secret, Rochester acts as a literal road block between these two women, making a relationship for them impossible while at the same time ensuring that Jane’s feelings for him are not altered. For Bertha the situation is dire as she is not only kept from having a relationship with Jane, but from having any relationships at all. The only

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6 In the article “Edward Rochester and the margins of masculinity in Jane Eyre and Wide Sargasso Sea” author Robert Kendrick expresses a different reading of this scene. He feels that Rochester “has once again demonstrated the limits of his own power” because, despite his disguise, he did not get the information that he desired out of Jane. However, the fact remains that this scene shows the readers as well as Jane how easily Rochester can manipulate people and circumstances to his own advantage. Because of this, I feel this scene tells us more about how powerful Rochester is through his ability to manipulate and deceive.
person she really has contact with is her keeper, Grace Poole, who is an employee of, and thus controlled by, Rochester.

Interestingly, Bertha seems to be blamed for the cultural practices that resulted in her marriage to Rochester, making Jane Eyre yet another novel that posits woman as the place where social norms become reified. Rochester asserts that his marriage is false because he claims to have been “cheated into espousing” Bertha (437). When Rochester explains how this came about, however, we find that what he deems cheating is no more than the customary courtship practices for the time. He narrates the story thus: “Her family wished to secure me because I was of a good race . . . They showed her to me in parties, splendidly dressed. I seldom saw her alone . . . She flattered me, and lavishly displayed for my pleasure her charms and accomplishments . . . Her relatives encouraged me; competitors piqued me; she allured me” (457). Marriages at the time were commonly conducted for reasons related to money and connections, so the desires of her family are nothing shocking. No more shocking is the notion that a woman of marrying age should dress her best in public, present her accomplishments, or be denied private conversation with young, single men. Rochester’s anger is therefore misplaced upon Bertha as though she were the one responsible for the common social procedures of their time. Further proof of the normalcy of Rochester’s courtship with Bertha is evident in that it is extremely similar to the situation between Rochester and Miss Ingram, yet when this second courtship is unfolding, no other character bats an eyelash; they all find the proceedings normal, and assume that the two are to be married. Indeed, just as with Miss Ingram, Bertha is acting in accordance with her station as a woman of high society in her attempts to woo Rochester. Her whole life would have prepared her to find and secure a
husband, and that’s what her family would have expected of her and pushed her to accomplish, just as Maggie’s female relations pushed her to reach feminine ideals in *The Mill on the Floss*. Rochester neglects to consider Bertha’s side of things, and misnames Bertha as the culprit, instead of as a fellow victim. His actions seem to support the idea of women as the site where ideology is perpetuated as he sees Bertha as the reason for their current situation as though she was the one who chose to create and maintain cultural norms.

The deliberate manipulation and separation of Bertha and Jane is not the only place in the novel where we see female isolation. When Rochester finds out that Jane has no relations or friends to look out for her best interests he admits: “that is the best of it” (381). He knows that by preventing the women around him from having relationships and interaction with others, he will be able to maintain a central position in their lives, as well as keep them from discovering anything about him that he does not want them to know. This provides a small example of the ways that men can manipulate female relationships in order to maintain power in the larger cultural setting. Rochester takes this attitude to the extreme when he presents the following advice to Bertha’s brother Mason: “when you get back to Spanish Town, you may think of [Bertha] as dead and buried—or rather, you need not think of her at all” (317). Mason has just witnessed the state to which his own sister has been reduced, but instead of comforting him, Rochester urges him to just forget about Bertha. This provides him with his ideal situation where Bertha is as friendless and isolated as Jane so that he may maintain power and do as he pleases, and Bertha seems to be aware of the position in which this places her.
The physical altercations that occur between Bertha and Rochester suggest that Bertha is aware of her shared position with the women in Rochester’s household. Though there are a few times in the novel where Bertha physically attacks, it is important to note that the only people she targets are Rochester and Mason, which perhaps shows that she recognizes the power dynamics in her larger social surroundings. Bertha easily takes down Mason, and is good competition for Rochester even though he is continually described as being a broad and athletic man. She should have no difficulties in mastering her keeper, Grace Poole, as well, and as the two spend all of their time together, Bertha has had plenty of opportunities; yet she does not attack. Likewise, when Jane wakes up to find Bertha in her room, Bertha tears Jane’s veil, but leaves Jane unharmed. During this encounter Jane loses consciousness, and would have been an extremely easy target; yet Bertha does not attack. It seems that Bertha’s rage is brought on by more than her supposed insanity, and may in fact have far more grounds behind it. Perhaps then, Bertha recognizes the commonalities between herself and the women around her. She knows that both Jane and Grace Poole are subjected to the same level of manipulation at the hands of Rochester, and that he is the one in charge of the situation. In fact, the text even implies that Bertha’s rage is brought on by Rochester specifically as we see in the scene where Rochester first reveals Bertha to Jane. Up until she sees Rochester, Bertha paces on all fours. Once she spots him, however, she rises to her full height, upon which action Grace warns him: “Ah, sir, she sees you! . . . you’d better not stay” (439). It appears that Bertha may only be attacking those whom she has a compelling reason to attack: Rochester and Mason. In this case, inaction between women proves telling, as Bertha’s decision only to attack Rochester and Mason reveals a knowledge of power dynamics that leave her on an
equal footing with other women, and at the mercy of the male ability to control social conditions.

If Bertha is acting based on knowledge of power dynamics then it is key that her keeper is a woman. It may be that Rochester knows Bertha will not attack a woman whom she knows to be only acting under his own power, and thus is preventing violence by choosing Grace. However, his actions also put one woman at least partially in charge of the oppression of another woman. The decisions are made by those in power (men like Rochester) but those decisions are carried out by those in a place of submission (women like Grace). Bertha’s actions may be the result of recognizing these dynamics and she is therefore placing the blame and the punishment where it belongs (with Rochester) as opposed to with those who merely appear guilty as they are acting out the will of others.

The fact that Bertha does not attack Jane and Grace is also interesting in that it may represent a failed attempt at creating competition between women. Jane is in love with Bertha’s husband (albeit without knowing that he is a married man), placing the two in dynamics not all that different from Jane’s relationship to Miss Ingram. Though the situation has the potential to lead them into the pattern of female rivalry, such as we see with Elizabeth Bennet and Caroline Bingley, the fact that Bertha does not attack Jane shows a break from this pattern. Bertha seems to be aware that Jane intends to marry Rochester (as we can see when Bertha finds and tears Jane’s wedding veil), but instead of turning to rivalry and a negative relationship with Jane, Bertha focuses her negative energy on Rochester and does not attack Jane. This may be symptomatic of a desire in Bertha for positive female relationships and interaction that is not being met.
We can further see an indication of Bertha’s need for relationships with other women through the novel’s treatment of speech and silence, particularly through Jane’s interaction with Miss Temple. The ability to defend oneself and tell one’s own story is so important, that we see it continue to resurface throughout the novel. The first time in Jane’s narration that an outsider comes into her life, Jane becomes “[f]earful . . . of losing this first and only opportunity of relieving [her] grief by imparting it” (29). Jane knows how important it is to be able to communicate her story to others, and must take advantage of every opportunity to do so. Just as it would be terrible for Jane not to be able to speak, it is equally terrible to be spoken for. When her aunt, Mrs. Reed, tells Mr. Brocklehurst, the clergyman who runs Lowood School, that Jane is a liar, Jane tells us: “the accusation cut me to the heart” (45). Jane well knows that Mrs. Reed does not like her, and had heard similar insults from her before, but this particular incident hurts so badly because Mrs. Reed is lying about Jane to a stranger, and Jane is not allowed to defend herself. Later in the scene Jane narrates: “Speak I must: I had been trodden on severely, and must turn” (emphasis in original, 48). The desire to speak is represented as more than a desire, but rather a necessity. Once she has reached Lowood, Jane sees that others also realize how important it is to speak. Upon being charged with being a liar by Mr. Brocklehurst, her teacher Miss Temple informs her: “when a criminal is accused, he is always allowed to speak in his own defence. You have been charged with falsehood; defend yourself to me as well as you can” (101). Miss Temple too seems to realize the importance of speech and thus it is she who gives Jane that ability. At this point, Jane does not have a positive relationship with her aunt, her cousins, or really with any other women in her life. It is not until she receives support from Miss Temple that Jane is able
to clear her name, thus revealing the important role that supportive female relationships can have in these characters’ lives.

Like Jane, Bertha too is spoken for; but unlike Jane, Bertha does not get the chance to clear her name by telling her side of the story. No matter what is said, there is no Miss Temple to come and ensure that Bertha’s story is heard. If speech is indeed a necessity, as Jane presents it, then we know that as a human being, Bertha must also be desirous of an ability to speak and tell her story. Perhaps then, her apparent madness is really the result of being continually denied positive human interaction as well as the right to speak and defend herself. This is especially problematic considering that the one person telling Bertha’s story is Rochester. Everything that Rochester says about Bertha is presented as fact, and never questioned or challenged. The novel does nothing to remedy this situation, but instead simply presents the reader with a situation where a woman is silenced behind a man and cut off from the outside world.

Interestingly, one of the few female relationships in the novel that is presented as positive ends up being a place where gender ideologies and cultural norms are reinforced, revealing how sometimes women assist in their own subjugation. When Jane comes to Lowood she is filled with anger because of the way her family has treated her. She has even attacked her cousin because of his cruelty. These actions are certainly not what would be culturally considered proper from a girl. However, once she reaches Lowood, Jane becomes friends with Helen Burns. Helen seeks to quiet Jane’s rage and tells her: “It is far better to endure patiently a smart which nobody feels but yourself, than to commit a hasty action whose evil consequences will extend to all connected with you; and, besides, the Bible bids us return good for evil” (78). Helen teaches Jane to be
submissive and endure her sufferings in silence. She cites the bible as her source of inspiration, but these actions are also what would be considered appropriate female behavior for the time period. Because Jane has so few positive female relationships in her life, Helen is important to her and thus has a fair amount of influence. Authors Judith Leggatt and Christopher Parkes touch on this in their article “From the Red Room to Rochester's Haircut: Mind Control in Jane Eyre.” They state that “[a]ny rebellion the inmates [of Lowood] may have becomes almost completely internalized to the point where girls like Helen Burns convert their hatred of the school into self-loathing. Helen believes she deserves to be punished and that her punishers do her good” (176). In this sense, then, Helen is teaching Jane to be critical of herself instead of critical of her oppressors, similarly to how Maggie Tulliver is taught to be critical of herself by her mother and aunts. By the time Jane reaches Thornfield, her anger and passion are far more suppressed than they were before she met Helen. Jane ends up fitting fairly well into her submissive, culturally acceptable feminine role, and her rebellion appears to be all but dead. Thus, while the death of Jane’s rebellion is often linked to Bertha’s death, it seems more likely that Jane’s rebellion dies when she meets Helen and begins trying to quiet her anger.

The extreme suppression and isolation that Bertha faces can be seen as a possible explanation for her death, further reinforcing the importance of supportive relationships between women. As is a common reading, Gilbert feels that “Bertha . . . is Jane’s truest and darkest double: she is the angry aspect of the orphan child, the ferocious secret self Jane has been trying to repress ever since her days at Gateshead” (360). Bertha is often seen as Jane’s anger resulting from oppression. As Gilbert further puts it:
“Bertha’s incendiary tendencies recall Jane’s early flaming rages, at Lowood and at Gateshead, as well as that ‘ridge of lighted heath’ which she herself saw as emblematizing her mind in its rebellion against society” (362). If Bertha is a symbol of Jane’s rebellion, then the novel seems to conclude with the idea that Jane’s rebellion must end. However, explaining Bertha’s death in this way unfairly reduces Bertha to a mere symbol. Bertha’s death was more likely a result of her isolation. It is plausible that someone in Bertha’s situation would commit suicide as they have no supportive relationships or means of self expression. It may be, then, that in Bertha’s death we see the extreme necessity for communication and human interaction. Without the ability to do either of these things, Bertha’s desperation drives her to suicide.

In addition to further highlighting a desperate need for positive human interaction and speech, Bertha’s death sheds light on the damaging effects of competition between women. Positioning Bertha between Jane and Rochester turns woman against woman. It names Bertha as the obstacle that must be overcome and beaten down in order to gain the ultimate prize. Bertha is one of—if not the most—oppressed figures in the novel. Through being locked away and denied the ability to speak, Bertha is the ultimate dominated figure in a patriarchal society. Though she seems wild and powerful when we see her attack Rochester and Mason, this power is fleeting and superficial. As a woman who is silenced, imprisoned, and whose husband claims she is insane, she has literally zero power in society or even over herself. As Nina Baym puts it in “The Madwoman and Her Languages: Why I Don’t Do Feminist Criticism” “The creature [Bertha] is wholly hateful, and no wonder: she has stolen Jane’s man. Jane’s rage against Rochester . . . is deflected to what a feminist might well see as an innocent victim” (emphasis in original,
Bertha is the ultimate dominated figure, and pitting Jane against her only adds another level to this oppression. By representing Bertha’s death as a positive thing, as it opens up the option for Jane to marry Rochester, the novel contributes to a negative view of women. Jane does not mourn or feel sorry at Bertha’s death. To Jane, Bertha’s death is an opportunity. In a more feminist novel, one would expect to find Jane sympathizing with Bertha’s extreme oppression. Instead, the novel divides woman from woman in presenting one woman’s death as another woman’s opportunity. Baym further explores the dynamics between Jane and Bertha’s relationship by describing how the novel leads its audience to want Bertha’s death: “Jane turns to Rochester, at first, as to a refuge. That refuge is sullied by the presence in the nest of another woman, who is made repulsive and ridiculous, so that the reader must reject her, and is killed before the narrative is out so that the daughter can replace her” (212). Though Baym’s ideas about Jane as daughter and Bertha as mother are problematic, her point about the novel turning woman and against woman is accurate. The novel sets up its readers to be happy about Bertha’s death, despite the fact that Bertha has done nothing wrong.

The same situation that pushes readers to see Bertha’s death as a positive also pushes readers to see Jane’s isolation as positive. Despite his manipulation and cruelty, Rochester is the ultimate goal of the novel, and the novel ends with Rochester and Jane married and living in the middle of the woods. Jane’s happiness at these events inclines readers to share in her feelings, but what we are truly seeing is Jane in a position not all that different from Bertha’s situation earlier in the novel. Gilbert shares Jane’s happiness because she feels that Jane has found a “marriage of true minds” and thus sees the ending as “an emblem of hope” (371). Similarly, in the article “A Patriarch of One's Own: Jane
Eyre and Romantic Love” author Jean Wyatt states: “Rather than equality developing through a woman’s entry into the world of work and adventure, it comes about through Rochester’s loss of mobility and ambition” (212). Both Gilbert and Wyatt seem to think that Jane has found equality with Rochester, but this couldn’t be farther from the truth. His changed circumstances end up making Jane more of her servant than ever, as she now must devote her life to caring for him. Furthermore, the immobility that Wyatt describes is anything but beneficial to Jane. Jane is now located much farther from any town than she used to be, so human interaction outside her household is hard to come by, and the only other people living with her and Rochester are two of Rochester’s servants. Though she is not literally locked in an attic like Bertha, she is very much isolated, and the only people she has contact with are subservient to Rochester, just like Grace Poole. The novel ends, then, with another situation where a woman and her interactions with others are controlled by a man.

Through Jane Eyre we are able to see a situation where female relationships are completely controlled by the actions of a man, and positive female relationships are few and far between. Bertha is completely dominated by Rochester, so much so that we never even hear her speak, and in the end these patriarchal dynamics are reaffirmed by Bertha’s death and Rochester’s glorification as the heroine’s ultimate goal. Even though Rochester is deceitful, angry, and even violent, these often terrifying faults are ultimately rewarded when Jane marries Rochester, thus devoting her entire life to caring for him. Throughout it all, Bertha remains the ultimate oppressed figure in a patriarchal society. Instead of granting Bertha the right to speak or any sort of redemption, the novel kills her off, and perhaps with her goes the little bit of rebellion that at one point lived within Jane.
Though many have sought to explain away Bertha’s poor treatment by reducing Bertha to a subhuman level, this justification is merely an extension of the misogynistic ideas that keep Bertha locked away in silence. With the conclusion of *Jane Eyre* we find our once rebellious heroine acting as wife and caretaker while tucked away in the seclusion of the woods in a way that is reminiscent of Bertha’s environment earlier in the novel. With Bertha dead and Jane married to Rochester, *Jane Eyre* ends up reaffirming the patriarchal ideals of the nineteenth-century, and revealing the terrifying possible outcome in a world where all female relationships are manipulated and controlled by men.
CHAPTER V

CONCLUSION

Ultimately, the competition prevalent between female characters in nineteenth-century fiction proves damaging. Because they are not able to receive support and often do not feel love from the women in their lives, they sometimes work extra hard to try and find approval and love elsewhere. This pushes them even further towards relationships with male characters, and thus the dynamics that keep women critical of each other help maintain male centrality as that is where the female characters’ attentions often turn.

The fact that these nineteenth-century characters are so affected by competition is important because the push to competition is still around today. Certainly circumstances have changed somewhat, but not to the degree that we would like to think. For heterosexual women, men are often still central in our lives so our friendships fall by the wayside. We often still demonize and compete with other women, naming them as the enemy to be defeated in order to gain a man. The social conditions present in nineteenth-century Britain that pushed women to compete have become naturalized to the degree that we often still act them out. Because they have become naturalized, we no longer need the exact conditions that were present when they first started, as we see these tendencies as originating in the individual instead of seeing the social and political purposes they serve (Butler 185-186). These dynamics are detrimental to women and a
large part of the reason that we still live in a patriarchy as they keep women isolated from one another, and focused on male attention. Movies in modern popular culture clearly reveal the ways that nineteenth-century dynamics are still present in our culture. For instance, the movie *Mean Girls*, which premiered in 2004, closely follows the extreme criticism and competition between high school girls in America. The popular group of girls in *Mean Girls*, known as the “Plastics,” even create what they call the “Burn Book” which criticizes all the other girls at their school (*Mean Girls*). Two of the main characters, Cady and Regina, end up competing over a boy, and each go to great lengths to try and sabotage the other’s efforts. At the end of the movie, the female characters are no longer tearing each other down. However, the ending seems to hint that the pattern of competition and criticism is not yet over via the brief introduction of a group of younger girls who are new to high school, and who are taking the role as the new Plastics (*Mean Girls*). The prevalence in modern popular culture of films like *Mean Girls* which rely heavily on the themes of competition and criticism between women, clearly mirror the dynamics in nineteenth-century fiction. With these types of films in the spotlight, there can be no doubt that we still have a long way to go before we are able to leave patriarchy behind.


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