Mother Figures in Jane Austen Novels

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Abstract

Jane Austen purposely created three different mother figures in her novels *Pride and Prejudice*, *Sense and Sensibility*, and *Persuasion* in order to exploit how mother figures influence their daughters. Mrs. Bennet is typically concerned with her financial status and how she can find wealthy men for her daughters to marry to ensure they are well-established in life. Instead of ordering her daughters to marry, Mrs. Dashwood is more relaxed and allows her daughters to find their own paths in life while she struggles with her own financial downfall. Lady Elliot depicts the mother figure who is always aware of her social standing and who believes she has Anne’s best interests in mind. Even though these three mother figures are vastly different at times, they are all based upon aspects that Austen saw in her own mother. The most important overlapping value that all three women share with Mrs. Austen is the goal to see their daughters happy. By creating such different women, Austen is allowing for a wider audience to appreciate her novels and to see that a mother’s top priority should be that of seeing her children happy.
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Introduction

Jane Austen published her first four novels anonymously with her final two novels being published under her name posthumously. Now, two-hundred years later, Austen is widely known across the globe. Her works have been translated in hundreds of different languages and all six of her major novels have been adapted for film. Many high school classrooms across America still teach Austen’s *Pride and Prejudice* as a classic. In fact, I can thank my own high school experience for introducing me to the world of Jane Austen. As a senior in high school, I was especially excited to read *Pride and Prejudice* in my AP English class. When my teacher handed out our novels, most of the students groaned, but I could hardly wait to begin reading. Knowing that I would have to read the classic work during high school, I purposely put off reading any of Austen’s novels. I read the entire novel in two days and was filled with questions that I could not wait to have answered. Little did I know, my questions over *Pride and Prejudice* would continue to grow and develop into more complex thoughts as I read the novel twice during my undergraduate career.

While I am a hopeless romantic, I could not help but feel that Austen’s secondary characters are often overlooked in favor of the beloved Elizabeth and Darcy. For my own pleasure, I read all of Austen’s major novels during my college career. I began to notice that Austen’s works were filled with characters who influenced her protagonists. I noticed, too, that the most important characters in the lives of Elizabeth Bennet, Elinor Dashwood, and Anne Elliot appeared to hold a motherly role. Being close to my own mother, I was fascinated to learn about how each of these characters were influenced differently by the mother figure in their lives. This lead me to investigate the motivations behind Mrs. Bennet in *Pride and Prejudice*, Mrs. Dashwood in *Sense and Sensibility*, and Lady Russell in *Persuasion*. 
Perhaps the most widely depicted mother is Mrs. Bennet solely because *Pride and Prejudice* has been adapted into hundreds of films and novels across the world. Many people simply laugh at Mrs. Bennet’s anxieties about having her daughters married and instead root for protagonist, Elizabeth, to find true love with Darcy. However, Mrs. Bennet shows complex characterization throughout the novel. Obviously, Mrs. Bennet appears to have some concerns about money and marriage. Looking deeper into these topics, Mrs. Bennet uses these themes to depict her social standing. To understand how she does so, we must look at how financial status and marital status are connected. In the eyes of Mrs. Bennet, a woman’s only hope for financial security is through marriage to a wealthy man. With five daughters, we can see why Mrs. Bennet would push her daughters to find wealthy husbands as they cannot depend upon an inheritance. However, Mrs. Bennet also has selfish motivations for setting her daughters up with high-class men. In her mind, the higher standing a man has and the more income he has, the more he will also be the talk of the town. A wealthy son-in-law will also bring along the financial security to provide for Mrs. Bennet after her husband’s death. Moreover, Mrs. Bennet’s ideology exerts real power in the novel. When Mrs. Bennet claims that a single and wealthy man is moving into the area to find a wife, everyone assumes the latter is wishful thinking on her part. However, Mrs. Bennet turns the patriarchal family stereotype around, and by the end of the novel, asserts her dominance.

The second mother figure I will analyze appears to be more of the traditional mother figure. Mrs. Dashwood, in *Sense and Sensibility*, is first concerned with supporting her daughters financially. Given her situation, the readers feel compassion towards Mrs. Dashwood as she mourns the death of her husband all the while trying to find a new living arrangement based upon what little money is left for her and her daughters. However, we soon see that like Mrs. Bennet...
Bennet, Mrs. Dashwood wants her daughters to marry for financial security. While she does have the typical financial concerns, it is notable that she also supports their choice of men and tries not to pressure them. At times, it seems as if Mrs. Dashwood is the child while Elinor is the mother. Elinor tends to be the wise and rational thinker while Mrs. Dashwood relies upon her heart and emotions. This characteristic will lead to several occasions in which Elinor has to offer support and advice to both Mrs. Dashwood and her younger sister, Marianne. Nevertheless, even though Mrs. Dashwood does not fulfill all duties of a mother, she does love her daughters less selfishly than does Mrs. Bennet, and she ultimately wants to see them happy.

The final mother that I focus on in this study is not actually a biological mother, but a mother figure to Anne Elliot in *Persuasion*. Unlike the previous mothers, Lady Russell, a family friend, steps in and assumes the role of a mother after Anne’s biological mother dies. Like Mrs. Bennet, Lady Russell is primarily worried about social class. Since she is of a higher rank, she does not want anything or anyone to jeopardize her own rank or Anne’s. This is one of the reasons that she all but forbids Anne to marry Wentworth seven years prior to the novel’s setting. Even though Anne is now in her late 20s, Lady Russell still feels the need to make sure Anne is making the right decisions for both of their lives. Unlike Mrs. Bennet and Mrs. Dashwood, Lady Elliot admits that she may not have provided the best advice to Anne all those years ago. Granted, she only says this after she realizes that Wentworth has managed to exceed her expectations in both financial and social status. It is these changes that cause her to give her blessing for the two to marry. Ultimately, while Lady Elliot is concerned about finances and marriage, her concerns always revolve around how social class can provide both of these and ultimately uphold Anne’s image within society. However, unlike Mrs. Bennet, Lady Russell’s
goal with class status is for her and Anne to remain in the high-class society instead of simply having the financial security that Mrs. Bennet wishes to provide for her daughters.

Since I was discussing mother figures, it only made sense to look into Austen’s own relationship with her mother. As I read about Austen’s upbringing, I found parallels between Mrs. Austen and the fictional mother figures I was writing about. For starters, Mrs. Austen was first and foremost a housewife, and she raised her children while taking care of the house. When looking at Mrs. Bennet, we also see similarities between both individuals, as she too provides education for her daughters and keeps the estate in order. Shockingly, Mrs. Austen wanted her daughters to marry for the same reasons as Mrs. Bennet: financial security. Yet, Mrs. Austen did not pressure her daughters to marry and thus she resembles Mrs. Dashwood. Mrs. Dashwood is more concerned about her daughters receiving a proper education so that they become accomplished women. We see that Mrs. Austen attempted to send her two daughters away to school, presumably with the same goals in mind, but simply could not afford the cost. Also, both Mrs. Austen and Mrs. Dashwood fret over their sick daughters and help nurse them back to health like any concerned mother would. Financially, both women are put in a predicament when their husbands die and they are left to provide for their families. The similarities between Mrs. Austen and Lady Russell are also fairly evident as both women like to provide motherly advice. Lady Russell’s advice ultimately leads Sir Elliot to move to Bath, much like Mrs. Austen’s decision to move to Bath in her advanced age. Mrs. Austen’s motherly techniques also suggest why Anne Elliot would easily become attached to Lady Russell; Austen was raised by a surrogate mother for the better part of her first year of life as Anne is raised by Lady Russell. When we lay all of the main facts out, the similarities between Mrs. Austen and the three mother figures are overwhelming.
Eventually, I came to the conclusion that Austen used aspects of her own mother while she was creating her fictional mother figures. Elements of her mother can be found in Mrs. Bennet, Mrs. Dashwood, and Lady Russell, but none of these characters are a full representation of Mrs. Austen. Therefore, Austen selected certain qualities in her mother to form each mother figure, creating mothers she felt other women could relate to, as her primary audience was female. Austen essentially created a mother that who struggled, Mrs. Dashwood; the average mother, Mrs. Bennet; and the high-class mother figure, Lady Russell. She breaks each mother character down to show that they are deeply flawed, but human. However, one thing is common between all fictional mother figures and Mrs. Austen: they all want the best life possible for their children.
Chapter One: The Universal Truth of Mrs. Bennet

In the opening lines of Jane Austen’s novel *Pride and Prejudice*, the reader is immediately taken into the world of Mrs. Bennet. The famous line, “It is a truth universally acknowledged, that a single man in possession of a good fortune must be in want of a wife,” could have easily been spoken by Elizabeth’s mother (Austen *Pride and Prejudice* 1). The entire first chapter revolves around her views of the introduction of a wealthy man to the surrounding area, and one quickly gets a glimpse into the mind of Mrs. Bennet and her values. Mrs. Bennet is speaking to her husband about this mysterious man and states, “Oh single, my dear, to be sure! A single man of large fortune; four or five thousand a year. What a fine thing for our girls!” (6). Mrs. Bennet’s life goal is to have her five daughters marry wealthy men. When Mr. Bennet objects that this man did not come to find a wife, Mrs. Bennet insists, “But it is very likely that he may fall in love with one of them, and therefore you must visit him as soon as he comes” (6). Of course, she does not mention that one of her daughters may fall in love with the new neighbor, because she knows that Mr. Bingley holds the power and money. Consequently, this chapter sets up a novel in which Mrs. Bennet is concerned about social status and finances. Alongside her worries about wealth, Mrs. Bennet assumes it is her rightful duty as a mother to find wealthy husbands for her daughters who in turn will ultimately provide for her own self-interests since they will bring both financial security and social status to the family. By the end of the novels, Mrs. Bennet has attained these goals for herself and her daughters, thus showing her authority over her family.

Since women of 19th century England typically do not inherit enough money to become financially secure, they must rely upon marriage to a wealthy man. Upon learning of Mr. Bingley’s wealth, Mrs. Bennet says, “I can but see one of my daughters happily settled at
Netherfield and all the others equally well married, I shall have nothing to wish for” (11). She explicitly states that she will be happy upon the marriage of all five daughters. But here, the important phrase to look at is “well married.” Mrs. Bennet most certainly does not want her daughters to marry a poor man with no income or inheritance. She expects her daughters to marry men of a higher social class who can support them comfortably and in turn support her later in life since she did not bear any sons to inherit her husband’s wealth. This is why she is adamantly telling her husband to visit their new neighbor, so she can properly introduce him to one of her daughters. Massimiliano Morini writes, “Mrs. Bennet’s excitement at the appearance of a rich tenant for Netherfield is motivated by practical, rather than sentimental, considerations” (234). Mrs. Bennet does not care much for the idea of marrying out of love. In her eyes, one marries for financial benefits as women cannot support themselves. Therefore, she would be imprudent if she did not try to gain Mr. Bingley’s attention with one of her eligible daughters.

The Bennet family is not at the highest level of the social chain, but Mrs. Bennet makes sure to show off her position to those lower than her. As luck would have it, Mr. Bingley takes an immediate liking to Mrs. Bennet’s eldest daughter, Jane. Subtlety, Mrs. Bennet starts a conversation with Elizabeth’s friend, Charlotte, by gushing, “You began the evening well, Charlotte. You were Mr. Bingley’s first choice” (19). Mrs. Bennet is well aware that Charlotte danced with Mr. Bingley at the ball, but she is trying to draw attention to the fact that Jane and Mr. Bingley shared two dances. She manages to receive the exact response she is looking for and acts as if she could not care less, “Oh, you mean Jane, I suppose, because he danced with her twice. To be sure that did seem as if he admired her—indeed, I rather believe he did—I heard something about it—but I hardly know what—something about Mr. Robinson” (19). This conversation offers a stark contrast to the previous encounters with Mrs. Bennet. Earlier, Mrs.
Bennet could not contain her excitement when speaking to her husband about a potential suitor. However, now that company is present, Mrs. Bennet is trying to create an illusion that she has more important things to worry about than who danced with whom. For the reader, this demonstrates that Mrs. Bennet truly does care about the dance and the fact that her daughter dances with Mr. Bingley twice. She is trying to cultivate an air of superiority with the Lucas family, to slight them by acting as if her daughters would obviously be of more interest to any wealthy man than would Charlotte.

These assumed airs appear in part because Mr. Bennet does not have any male heirs. Consequently, his property will be inherited by his cousin, Mr. Collins, and Mrs. Bennet will lose her estate and thus, her status. At first, Mrs. Bennet is not fond of meeting the man who will take over her home and cries to her husband, “if I had been you, I should have tried long ago to do something or other about it’” (60). Mrs. Bennet has not even formally met Mr. Collins, but she already detests him solely because he will be the one to inherit their estate. This makes finding wealthy husbands for her daughters even more important as her daughters will not inherit a substantial amount after Mr. Bennet’s death. Thus, Mrs. Bennet is quick to judge Mr. Collins upon their first acquaintance:

The dinner, too, in its turn, was highly admired; and he begged to know to which of his fair cousins the excellence of its cookery was owning. But here he was set right by Mrs. Bennet, who assured him, with some asperity, that they were very well able to keep a good cook, and that her daughters had nothing to do in the kitchen. (64)

Mrs. Bennet takes it personally when Mr. Collins assumes that one of the Bennet women has cooked the meal as it insinuates that they do not have money. Being the proud woman she is, Mrs. Bennet corrects him and assures him that they can indeed afford such luxuries. Compared
to Mr. Bingley, Mr. Collins is a clergyman with no status or income. In her initial thinking, Mrs. Bennet does not see any benefits of one of her daughters marrying Mr. Collins as he would not help raise their social status.

While Mrs. Bennet wants her daughters to be married for financial and social stability, she also feels that it is her duty to ensure that her daughters marry for her own self-interest. Mrs. Bennet does not like Mr. Collins as he will eventually inherit their estate. However, she soon learns that Mr. Collins has plans to keep the estate in the immediate family: “In seeking a reconciliation with the Longbourn family he had a wife in view, as he meant to choose one of the daughters” (68). This changes Mrs. Bennet’s perspective of Mr. Collins. She tells him that his first choice, Jane, is soon to be engaged and we learn that, “Mr. Collins had only to change from Jane to Elizabeth—and it was soon done” (69). Having Mr. Collins marry one of the Bennet daughters is the best-case scenario for Mrs. Bennet as the estate would stay with one of her daughters instead of another woman. With this thought in mind, she changes her opinion of Mr. Collins so much so that, “the man whom she could not bear to speak of the day before was now high in her good graces” (69). This shows how quickly Mrs. Bennet is willing to change attitudes towards a man based upon what he can offer her. If one of her daughters marries Mr. Collins, then she will not be kicked out of her estate and will not have to fret when Mr. Bennet dies. Thus, we see that while it appears Mrs. Bennet is initially concerned with her daughters’ futures, she ultimately has her own goals in mind.

Since status is so important to her, the only thing worse than Mrs. Bennet losing her estate is losing her estate to a woman of lower social rank. When Elizabeth’s close friend Charlotte tells the Bennets of her engagement, Mrs. Bennet cries, “Engaged to Mr. Collins! My dear Charlotte, impossible!” (119). As Mrs. Bennet suspects, Mr. Collins has not waited to find
another future wife after Elizabeth’s refusal. He has found the next best woman, Charlotte, to
take over the Bennet estate with him and live with him in his parsonage. As one may expect by
now, Mrs. Bennet does not take the news of the engagement well. She says to her husband, “it is
very hard to think that Charlotte Lucas should ever be mistress of this house, that I should be
forced to make way for her, and live to see her take my place in it!” (125). Even though the
Bennets are not wealthy, Mrs. Bennet sees herself of a higher status than the Lucas family
because “Sir William Lucas had been formerly in trade in Meryton,” which was lower-class
work (18). Mrs. Bennet cannot bear to think of the situation at hand. A woman of a lower status
will eventually be the mistress of her estate and will therefore hold more power than she does.
She has lost her estate to Elizabeth’s closest friend all because her own daughter refused to marry
Mr. Collins. Thus, her reaction reveals that not only does Mrs. Bennet care about her daughters’
future status, but she cares about hers as well. Nothing is more shameful than to lose her home to
a woman who is of less financial and social status.

Matters became worse when she learns of Lydia’s possible elopement with Wickham,
which could ruin the entire Bennet’s family status. Much like her reaction to Mr. Collins, Mrs.
Bennet has a mixed reaction to Lydia’s elopement to Wickham. Her initial reaction is one of
great distress. Jane says, “My mother is tolerably well, I trust; though her spirits are greatly
shaken. She is up stairs, and will have great satisfaction in seeing you all. She does not yet leave
her dressing-room” (266). Given that Mrs. Bennet wants her daughters to be married, we might
not expect that she would be locked in her room grieving. She should be jumping with joy that
one of her daughters is married to a man who is making a livable wage in the militia. However,
an elopement is a scandal during this era and it would ruin the entire Bennet family’s reputation.
Mrs. Bennet realizes that her other four daughters would likely never marry as their image would
be destroyed and thus, the Bennet women would no longer be considered eligible women for marriage. Mrs. Bennet blames everyone possible for what has happened. She cries, “If I had been able to carry my point in going to Brighton with all my family, this would not have happened; but poor dear Lydia had nobody to take care of her” (267). Wickham’s deprived reputation ultimately reflects upon the Bennets as they will be related through the marriage. While Mrs. Bennet wants her daughters to be financially stable, they must also marry men of acceptable social status, so they do not destroy Mrs. Bennet’s image.

Mrs. Bennet cannot bear the thought of such a scandal happening to her family, but she now must ensure that her daughter is prepared to be a wife as an improper wife will reflect upon Mrs. Bennet’s teaching. Once she learns that her daughter is married, her attitude shifts to acceptance, and she tells Mr. Gardiner, “And tell my dear Lydia not to give any directions about her clothes till she has seen me, for she does not know which are the best warehouses” (268). Mrs. Bennet is more upset that her daughter will not be in appropriate wedding attire than the fact that her daughter ran off with a man who wants to scam her family into paying off his debts. This suggests that if she cannot change the situation, then she will make the best of it by planning a wedding. She begins to look for a house for Lydia and Wickham to reside in after they are married: “She [Mrs. Bennet] was busily searching through the neighborhood for a proper situation for her daughter; and without knowing or considering what their income might be, rejected many as deficient in size and importance” (288). An estate is one factor in determining one’s social class at a glance, so Mrs. Bennet’s reason seems to be that if Lydia and Wickham own a nice estate, then Wickham’s transgression may not be remembered in the future. When Mrs. Bennet returns to the topic of Lydia’s wedding clothes she finds, “her husband would not advance a guinea to buy clothes for his daughter” (288). Mrs. Bennet cannot fathom the
thought of her daughter being disgraced in such a way. She calls the clothing, “a privilege, without which her marriage would scarcely seem valid” (288). For Mrs. Bennet, not spending money on wedding clothing is more shameful than having a daughter elope. Mrs. Bennet is able to overlook the elopement as she has found the silver lining in which Lydia will be her first married daughter. Since marriage is the ultimate goal for women, Mrs. Bennet will now get to tell her female neighbors about her success of having a married daughter. This news will likely spread around the nearby area and Mrs. Bennet will be the center of attention.

While Mrs. Bennet can boast about having one of her daughters married, she greedily wants to have another daughter married to a high-class man. Now that one daughter is married, Mrs. Bennet returns her efforts towards catching a man of higher social class and wealth: Mr. Bingley. As Mr. Bingley and Jane grow closer, Mrs. Bennet gladly welcomes him and the narrator tells us, “He was received by Mrs. Bennet with a degree of civility which made her two daughters ashamed, especially when contrasted with the cold and ceremonious politeness of her courtesy and address of his friend” (311). Mrs. Bennet does not welcome Darcy as she holds resentment toward him for attempting to separate Bingley and Jane. Knowing how prideful Mrs. Bennet is, she manages to slip in the fact that Lydia is now a married woman. She tells the gentleman, “Miss Lucas is married and settled: and one of my own daughters. I suppose you have heard of it; indeed, you must have seen it in the papers” (312). Much like her conversation earlier with Charlotte, Mrs. Bennet wants to talk about her family and how her daughters are thriving. By talking of marriage, she is hoping that Bingley will take the hint that he should marry Jane. After the men leave, she says to her daughters, “Well girls, what say you to the day? I think every thing has passed off uncommonly well, I assure you” (318). Her excitement lies within the idea that Jane is one step closer to becoming a wife with status.
Mrs. Bennet is aware that Darcy is of the highest social class, but she is not aware that he is in love with Elizabeth. Even though Darcy has more wealth than Bingley, Mrs. Bennet is not ready to forgive him for separating Jane and Bingley. Mrs. Bennet says, “I am quite sorry, Lizzy, that you should be forced to have that disagreeable man all to yourself” (348). Mrs. Bennet is not yet aware that Darcy had paid off Wickham to save the Bennet image, and she therefore holds a grudge. Yet, when Darcy and Elizabeth announce their engagement, Mrs. Bennet quickly shifts attitudes because of his tremendous status and wealth; she realizes his wealth can support their family. She exclaims, “Oh, my sweetest Lizzy! How rich and how great you will be!” Mrs. Bennet was incredibly happy knowing that Bingley made four thousand a year, but now she is overwhelmed with excitement at Darcy’s ten thousand a year. She then apologizes to Elizabeth for what she has said about Darcy saying, “Lizzy! Pray apologise for my having disliked him so much before. I hope he will overlook it” (351). Mrs. Bennet knows that Darcy’s income can easily cover for her and her daughters when Mr. Bennet passes. She tells Elizabeth, “And a special license—you must and shall be married by a special license” (351). The special license is money that is designated to a wife’s private use. Mrs. Bennet insists that Elizabeth has this license so that she may use it as she sees fit. Ideally, Mrs. Bennet believes that Elizabeth will use it to help her mother later in life. Naturally, Mrs. Bennet does not want to risk losing Darcy’s approval as she cannot bear to be poor. Of course, Darcy’s wealth also brings along his higher social status and ultimately, Mrs. Bennet would much rather boast about her daughters being married to Bingley and Darcy than Wickham.

Understanding Mrs. Bennet’s relationship with her husband helps us understand why she is self-motivated. As we delve into Mrs. Bennet’s complex mind, Austen is kind enough to give
us limited background information on Mr. and Mrs. Bennet’s relationship. In the beginning of Chapter 19, Elizabeth Bennet think about how:

Her father, captivated by youth and beauty, and that appearance of good-humour which youth and beauty generally give, had married a woman whose weak understanding and illiberal mind had very early in their marriage put an end to all real affection for her. Respect, esteem, and confidence had vanished for ever; and all his views of domestic happiness were overthrown. (221)

This gives the readers an insight into the family dynamic of the Bennet family. Much like many young adults, Mr. and Mrs. Bennet were too caught up in each other’s looks and they did not fully think about the consequences of a lifetime commitment. Mr. Bennet quickly realizes that he does not love his wife as a husband should and he simply tolerates her. Therefore, the Bennet family is established upon physical appearance. Morini also notes:

As a consequence of his domestic unhappiness, Mr. Bennet appears to be more interested in his books and his tranquility than in the welfare or correct behavior of his family. Left to their own resources, unguided by an indifferent father, most members of the Bennet household commit blunders and improprieties which are duly noted by their neighbors. (237)

Even Elizabeth is aware of the strain that her parents’ marriage has put on her sisters. She observes as her younger sisters, Lydia and Kitty, continuously vocalize their interest in the militia men. These young women are replicas of their mother, and it is easy to see why she takes easily to them while she bashes Elizabeth for voicing her own desires. Even though Elizabeth prefers her father, she still understands that he could have helped to create more well-rounded
daughters like Jane and Elizabeth had he invested his time in Mary, Lydia, and Kitty. Unfortunately, Lydia and Kitty will continue to disappoint the family as Mrs. Bennet shapes them into women of her liking who will marry men based upon their income and superficial finery.

Lydia may not have followed her mother’s advice, but Mrs. Bennet attempts to find how she can benefit from Lydia and Wickham’s marriage. After the happiness of having a daughter married, Mrs. Bennet welcomes them with open arms:

Lydia’s voice was heard in the vestibule; the door was thrown open, and she ran into the room. Her mother stepped forwards, embraced her, and welcomed her with rapture; gave her hand with an affectionate smile to Wickham, who followed his lady, and wished them both joy, with an alacrity which showed no doubt of their happiness. (292)

As Mrs. Bennet talks with her youngest daughter, she reflects upon how far away she will be living. However, Mrs. Bennet is more than happy to visit her daughter at Newcastle during the winter and to bring the rest of her daughters along so Lydia can find husbands for them. Mrs. Bennet cannot, in fact, be upset with Lydia as she married Mr. Bennet upon the same principles when she was younger. Wickham may not be able to offer any tangible item to Mrs. Bennet, but she knows that she can spread the word of their marriage. Since Mrs. Bennet is keen to share any type of news to get others talking about her, she willingly accepts the situation. Upon her departure, Mrs. Bennet cannot help but be emotional as she wishes her favorite daughter away, “Oh my dear Lydia when shall we meet again?” (306). Overall, Lydia is Mrs. Bennet’s favorite daughter as they share similar qualities and Mrs. Bennet cannot stay mad at her for long, but she is also using her daughter to gain popularity within the town.
As Bingley continues to visit Jane, a scheming Mrs. Bennet does her best to assure that Bingley and Jane are left alone in hopes of a marriage proposal. When Kitty does not pick up a subtle hint from Mrs. Bennet she says, “What is the matter, mamma? What do you keep winking at me for? What am I to do?” (320). Mrs. Bennet then must call both Kitty and Elizabeth out of the room to leave Bingley and Jane together. Eventually, her efforts pay off in the form of an engagement. Elizabeth is the first to see Jane after the engagement and Jane gushes, “I must go instantly to my mother. I would not on any account trifle with her affectionate solicitude, or allow her to hear it from any one but myself” (322). Thus, Mrs. Bennet’s arduous work has become a reality when she hears the news of the engagement. When Mr. Bennet congratulates Jane, Mrs. Bennet is sure to state, “Exceed their income! My dear Mr. Bennet, what are you talking of? Why, he has four or five thousand a year, and very likely more” (323). She then continues to talk of Jane’s beauty and how she knew that she was destined to be with Mr. Bingley. It is also noted how this engagement will change the Bennets’ image with the public. The narrator tells us, “The Bennets were speedily pronounced to be the luckiest family in the world; though only a few weeks before, when Lydia had first run away, they had been generally proved to be marked out by misfortune” (325). Much to her liking, Mrs. Bennet can now boast to her acquaintances about how her daughter is to marry the wealthy Mr. Bingley. She will have two of her five daughters married in a short amount of time. Even though Bingley and Jane are in love, Mrs. Bennet will likely take the credit for their relationship as she pushed to ensure that Jane and Bingley would be around each other often. This situation proves ideal to Mrs. Bennet as her family is receiving positive attention and she will not have to worry about providing for herself or Jane after Mr. Bennet’s death. Thus, Mrs. Bennet ultimately exerts her power on her daughters’ behalf.
A letter from Caroline Bingley inviting Jane to dine with her at Netherfield is all we need to see that Mrs. Bennet holds the power in this family. Although Mrs. Bennet is disappointed that the men will not be dining with them, she quickly concocts a plan for Jane that involves:

“Can I use the carriage?” said Jane.

“No my dear, you had better go on horseback, because it seems likely to rain; and then you must stay all night.”

“That would be a good scheme”, said Elizabeth, “if you were sure that they would not offer to send her home.”

“Oh, but the gentlemen will have Mr. Bingley’s chaise to go to Meryton; and the Hursts have no horses to theirs.” (31)

Even though there is no direct contact with Mr. Bingley planned, Mrs. Bennet formulates a way to have Jane stay the night in hopes that she will run into Mr. Bingley. Mr. Bennet does not partake in this conversation other than to agree with his wife when she says that he horses are needed at the farm. Typically, the men run the household and would make these types of decisions. However, Mrs. Bennet is without a doubt the one to call the shots in this instance. When Jane becomes sick during her stay, Elizabeth offers to walk to see her only to be shut down by Mrs. Bennet telling her, “You will not be fit to be seen when you get there” (32). The heavy rains mean that Elizabeth’s walk will cover her dress in mud. Mrs. Bennet will not have Elizabeth show up looking disorderly as it will give the notion that the Bennet family does not have the money for a carriage or multiple horses. In Mrs. Bennet’s mind, having Jane’s future family see her sister in such a state is a disgrace and may turn Mr. Bingley away from Jane.

Obviously, Mrs. Bennet has strong opinions on how her daughters should act around Bingley and
his company. Not only that, but Mrs. Bennet does everything in her power to ensure the best outcomes for her family and she usually gets her way, because Mr. Bennet is not the least bit worried about who his daughters will marry and does not have any say around his wife.

Most of the time, Mrs. Bennet holds authority over her husband and daughters, but in one case, her husband holds the power. Realizing that Longbourn may stay in the family, Mrs. Bennet is eager to have Elizabeth marry Mr. Collins. Elizabeth is well aware of what is to happen and tries to leave, but her mother traps her, “Lizzy, I insist upon your staying and hearing Mr. Collins” (101). A mother can sense hesitation, and Mrs. Bennet is asserting her authority to make her daughter talk with Mr. Collins. Upon hearing that Elizabeth has turned down his proposal, Mrs. Bennet replies, “But depend upon it Mr. Collins that Lizzy shall be brought to reason. I will speak to her about it myself directly. She is a very headstrong, foolish girl, and does not know her own interest; but I will make her know it” (106). Shocked, Mrs. Bennet tells Mr. Collins that Elizabeth will return with an appropriate response. This shows that she believes she can force her daughter to accept his proposal, as she knows that her daughters will obey her orders as she has raised them to do so. Mrs. Bennet immediately calls her husband to back her up and defuse the situation. She is worried that if Elizabeth does not change her mind quickly then Mr. Collins will not want to marry her. That would mean that their estate would be lost for good. However, Mr. Bennet sides with his daughter in this situation. He says, “From this day you must be a stranger to one of your parents. Your mother will never see you again if you do not marry Mr. Collins, and I will never see you again if you do” (107). Even though Mr. Bennet does not often speak his preferences, he knows that his daughter does not love Mr. Collins and that she would never be happy with him. This shows that he still holds some power over his wife even though he does not often choose to exert this power. He does not give his blessing and therefore,
Elizabeth is free to turn down the proposal. Naturally, this only upsets Mrs. Bennet and she tells Elizabeth, “I have no pleasure talking to undutiful children” (108). Mrs. Bennet sees marriage as a duty and furthermore, marrying a man who will take over the family estate is a duty to the entire family. Elizabeth is no more than a disgrace in her mother’s eyes, and she has all but disowned her. Mrs. Bennet feels that she has failed in her task to raise daughters who abide by her rules and will not associate with Elizabeth unless she marries Mr. Collins.

Nevertheless, ultimately Mrs. Bennet exerts plenty of power. Traditionally, it is the father’s job to bless an engagement, but Mrs. Bennet assumes this role in her family. When Mrs. Bennet goes into town, she scopes out the area for any potential bachelors. Her younger daughters happen to catch the eye of soldiers and Mrs. Bennet is content with that knowledge. She tells her husband, “if a smart young colonel, with five or six thousand a year, should want one of my girls, I shall not say nay to him” (30). Again, Mrs. Bennet is focused on the financial gain and stability that her daughters would receive by marrying such a man. She also takes possession of the situation. Her husband often scoffs at her and even calls his daughters “silly” (29). However, Mrs. Bennet implies that she will bless a marriage between one of her daughters and an officer. Even though this is during a patriarchal era, Mrs. Bennet holds her ground and does not waver when it comes to who her daughters can marry. Morini writes, “Mr. Bennet appears to be more interested in his books and his tranquility than in the welfare or correct behavior of his family” (237). Perhaps this is why Mr. Bennet does not bother to argue with his wife and lets her talk about potential marriages; he knows his wife will do as she pleases as he holds little power over her.

In the end, Mrs. Bennet receives what she has always wanted. When Jane and Elizabeth marry, Mrs. Bennet is happily alongside them. The narrator tells us that, “Happy for all her
maternal feelings was the day on which Mrs. Bennet got rid of her two most deserving daughters” (357). Therefore, the opening lines of the novel and Mrs. Bennet’s belief has come true: “It is a truth universally acknowledged, that a single man in possession of a good fortune must be in want of a wife” (1). This universal truth is none other than Mrs. Bennet’s universal belief. The two most wealthy men in the area have married two of her daughters and given ease to Mrs. Bennet’s worries about finances and social class for her daughters and herself. Mrs. Bennet is able to use this universal truth as she holds the authority in her family and often over other individuals as well. At first glance, there does not appear to be much substance behind Mrs. Bennet; however, she is arguably one of the most complex characters in *Pride and Prejudice*. 
Austen’s first published novel, *Sense and Sensibility* has a mother who is less eccentric than Mrs. Bennet. However, Mrs. Dashwood’s role is worth investigating. Much like Mrs. Bennet, Mrs. Dashwood is raising multiple daughters. Her three daughters, Elinor, Marianne, and Margaret, have vastly different personalities and beliefs. Mrs. Dashwood and her daughters are left without an income after the death of Mr. Dashwood. Since Mrs. Dashwood does not have any sons, she must relocate to a smaller estate as Mr. Dashwood’s son from a previous marriage inherits his wealth. Even after a drastic change in scenery, Mrs. Dashwood is focused on her relationship with her daughters and their relationships with eligible bachelors. At times, Mrs. Dashwood thinks with a romantic mindset and often disagrees with her more rational-minded daughter, Elinor, but she differs from Mrs. Bennet in that wants her daughters to be happy with the men they marry.

Mrs. Dashwood is having troubles coming to terms with her new situation in life and therefore, Elinor takes on the parent role to support her mother. Mrs. Dashwood’s stepson is married to Fanny, who wants the Dashwood women out of the estate now that it is officially hers. The narrator tells us, “No one could dispute her right to come; the house was her husband’s from the moment of his father’s decease” (Austen *Sense and Sensibility* 7). A woman who recently became a widow would most likely be under a significant amount of stress and grief. However, Mrs. Dashwood is not given time to grieve as Fanny pushes her way in to her home. Mrs. Dashwood cannot help but disapprove of Fanny’s actions, “So acutely did Mrs. Dashwood feel this ungracious behavior, and so earnestly did she despise her daughter-in-law for it, that, on the arrival of the latter, she would have quitted the house for ever” (8). Unlike Mrs. Bennet, Mrs. Dashwood feels powerless and makes no attempt to exert her power over Fanny. As the chapter
continues, we realize that Mrs. Dashwood is calmed down by her eldest daughter, Elinor, and that Mrs. Dashwood relies upon her daughter’s support in this troubling time. We can see that the tables have turned, and Elinor takes on the parent role to support her mother. To make matters worse, “Mrs. John Dashwood now installed herself mistress of Norland; and her mother and sisters-in-law were degraded to the condition of visitors” (9). In one fell swoop, Mrs. Dashwood has lost her husband, income, and identity as mistress of Norland and she struggles to reframe her future. Sarah Melz writes in her dissertation, “This [Mr. Dashwood’s death] is important in that the Dashwood girls are on their own in a patriarchal society” (23). We quickly see that John is not going to be able to offer support, so one of the Dashwood women must take over. Being rational, Elinor steps in to help her mother as her “steadier judgement rejected several houses as too large for their income, which her mother would have approved” (15). Through their financial struggles, Mrs. Dashwood often looks to her eldest daughter for assistance. Even though Mrs. Dashwood should have stepped up as the head of the household, she is hesitant to do so as she has grown accustomed her role as a wife who depended upon her husband to keep their finances. Thankfully, Elinor takes after her father and she can provide recommendations to her mother.

Even though Mrs. Dashwood announces the new living arrangements, she still exerts limited power as she is not the one who found the solution. A distant relative “understood that she was in need of a dwelling; and though the house he now offered her was merely a cottage, he assured her that every thing should be done to it which she might think necessary, if the situation pleased her” (23). Mrs. Dashwood allows this offer to decide for her. We learn that she, “needed no time for deliberation or enquiry. Her resolution was formed as she read” (23). At this time, Mrs. Dashwood does not have the income to be picky about where she resides as Fanny is all but kicking the Dashwood women out of Norwood. Surprisingly, Mrs. Dashwood does not consult
Elinor upon the matter as she has been dependent upon her help since the beginning of the novel. However, Mrs. Dashwood still requires the assistance of a relative offering a solution, thus showing that she does not hold the power. Therefore, Mrs. Dashwood is not yet ready to be the head of the household and to control the finances.

Yet, like Mrs. Bennet, Mrs. Dashwood does recognize the need to take finances into consideration. When she is talking to Edward, who is a potential suitor for Elinor, she cannot resist bringing up finances. Before discussing such heavy topics, Elinor makes Edward feel at home. The narrator shares, “Indeed a man could not very well be in love with either of her [Mrs. Dashood] daughters, without extending the passion to her; and Elinor had the satisfaction of seeing him soon become more like himself” (82). Now that Mrs. Dashwood can see that Edward is comfortable, she pushes the topic toward finances. Edward mentions that his mother wants him to have a respectable occupation with a comfortable salary and Mrs. Dashwood replies, “I should be puzzled to spend a large fortune myself if my children were all to be rich without my help” (83). Mrs. Dashwood views wealth as a support system for a family as she would not know what to do with a considerable sum if her daughters were already wealthy. She has spent her life living within her means and cannot fathom not having to worry about finances. Even though Mrs. Dashwood struggled to find a new home, this comment shows that Mrs. Dashwood is content with her life as it is and simply wants to provide for her daughters. She may have lost her husband and estate, but her core values of putting her family first remain unbroken.

While putting her family first, Mrs. Dashwood often voices her approval of any men in her daughters’ lives. When hearing that Marianne is opposed to Colonel Brandon’s age, Mrs. Dashwood tries to talk sense into her daughter. We learn that “Mrs. Dashwood…could not think a man five years younger than herself so exceedingly ancient as he appeared to the youthful
fancy of her daughter” (35). While she generally tries to support her daughters, she cannot let a perfectly good man walk out of their lives due to his age. She knows that the Colonel can provide for Marianne and does not want to miss the opportunity to secure one of her daughters in marriage. Like Mrs. Bennet, Mrs. Dashwood cannot find fault with a man of steady income and says, “My dearest child, at this rate you must be in continual terror of my decay; and it must seem to you a miracle that my life has been extended to the advanced age of forty” (36). This scene gives the readers a taste of Mrs. Dashwood’s humor. After the recent events in her life, it is nice to see a lighter side of Mrs. Dashwood. It should be noted that her humor is revolved around a man who may be a potential husband for one of her daughters. Mrs. Dashwood is likely joking with her daughters as Colonel Brandon is thirty-five while she is only five years older. She does not want them to call him old and put him off simply due to his age. Much like Marianne, she believes in true love and she does not want Marianne to discount a gentleman on a superficial belief as it is possible that she will fall in love with him once she gets to know him. While Mrs. Dashwood is the type to believe in true love, she is struggling with her motherly nature to provide financially for her daughters. If she can convince Marianne to not write off Colonel Brandon, then she may be able to push the couple together over time.

Even when Marianne is near death, Mrs. Dashwood’s romantic side tries to convince Elinor that Marianne and Colonel Brandon should marry. After seeing that Marianne will survive, Mrs. Dashwood catches up with Elinor. Mrs. Dashwood says, “My Elinor, you do not yet know all my happiness. Colonel Brandon loves Marianne. He has told me so himself” (297). Mrs. Dashwood immediately tells Elinor the biggest news possible and naturally, it involves a man who wants to marry one of her daughters. Most mothers in this situation would be more focused on comforting their sick child, however, Mrs. Dashwood hardly bats an eye at
Marianne’s condition and cannot wait to share her news. Elinor does not share in her mother’s excitement, however. She believes that Marianne will not be able to love a man who is significantly older. Mrs. Dashwood tries to convince Elinor of Colonel Brandon’s affection saying, “He has loved her, my Elinor, ever since the first moment of seeing her” (297). A classic admission of love easily woos Mrs. Dashwood and she believes Colonel Brandon’s confession. When Colonel Brandon is first introduced, Marianne is not interested due to his age even after her mother tells her to keep an open mind. Mrs. Dashwood is caught up in her romantic ideals that she does not immediately think of what her daughter wants in a romantic relationship. This is where Elinor comes in as she remembers what her sister said. Sadly, Elinor has no effect in changing her mother’s mind as she cannot break down her mother’s irrational side when it focuses on romance.

The relationship between Mrs. Dashwood and her daughters continues to shift throughout the novel from passive to active. After the Dashwoods depart from Norland, Marianne suspects that Edward must be ill as he has not yet visited them at Barton. Mrs. Dashwood replies, “I rather think you are mistaken, for when I was talking to her [Elinor] yesterday of getting a new grate for the spare bedchamber, she observed that there was no immediate hurry for it, as it was not likely that the room would be wanted for some time” (37). Marianne and Mrs. Dashwood continue to discuss the parting of Elinor from Edward. Even though Elinor lives a private life, she still manages to talk to her mother about her personal affairs. Mrs. Dashwood observes that Elinor does not expect Edward to come visit and that she is saddened by this fact. As Melz describes Edward and Elinor’s relationship, she writes: “Emotions should not rule all, but some sense of them must be understood” (33). We know that Elinor avoids showing emotions, but she is still a woman who has been separated from a potential husband and must move on with her
life. In her concern over Elinor’s loss, Mrs. Dashwood begins to focus more on marriage much like Mrs. Bennet. However, she is not as abrasive as Mrs. Bennet and she does want her daughters to find their own way. Instead of pushing them, she is gently guiding them. She does not order them to marry a certain man, but rather listens to their wishes and keeps an open mind. As she is guiding them, she learns that not all men are worthy to be married and that some hide secrets. However, the information she learns does not come directly from the men, but from her daughters. This shows that she does have a close relationship with her daughters and that she will continue to let her daughters live their lives as they see fit, all the while supporting them.

While Mrs. Bennet is in one sense highly patriarchal and after money and status, Mrs. Dashwood is highly romantic and after love and happiness for her daughters. When we first meet Willoughby, the narrator says, “Had he [Willoughby] been even old, ugly, and vulgar, the gratitude and kindness of Mrs. Dashwood would have been secured by any act of attention to her child; but he influence of youth, beauty, and elegance, gave an interest to the action which came home to her feelings” (40). Even Mrs. Dashwood is aware of the handsome man, and she briefly ignores her daughter to profusely thank the gentleman. Melz claims that “Marianne’s head is influenced too much by what she has read and her self-centeredness,” and Mrs. Dashwood encourages these flaws. (30-31). Like a teenager, Marianne is solely caught up in his physical attributes and lets her mind create the perfect man. Being aware of Marianne’s feelings, Mrs. Dashwood can tell that her daughter is taken with this man. The wheels in Mrs. Dashwood’s mind are turning and she is trying to find out all the information she can about this graciously handsome man. He may potentially be the man whom Marianne falls in love with and marries. Therefore, Mrs. Dashwood wants to make a good first impression so that Willoughby will return.
Like Marianne, she seems unconcerned about his background and about the rapidity with which their relationship arises because of her romantic impulses.

Due to her romantic nature, not only does Mrs. Dashwood try to appease her daughters, but she tries to account for Willoughby’s desires as well. As Mrs. Dashwood speaks about making renovations, Willoughby has other thoughts: “And yet this house you would spoil Mrs. Dashwood? You would rob it of its simplicity by imaginary improvement! And this dear parlour in which our acquaintance first began, and in which so many happy hours have been since spent by us together” (67-68). Taken by a sentimental comment, Mrs. Dashwood promises that she will not update the cottage. Willoughby does not reside in Barton cottage, but he still influences Mrs. Dashwood’s decision. She is enamored by his sweet memories of meeting Marianne and bringing her to the cottage. Before Willoughby, Mrs. Dashwood went through each room of the house and talked about renovations to make the cottage her own. However, one word from Willoughby silences these thoughts. For one thing, Mrs. Dashwood wants Willoughby to marry Marianne and does not want him to find fault within her or her family. But for another, she allows his sentimentally to encourage her decisions.

Mrs. Dashwood’s romantic nature is also seen when she encourages her daughters to spend the winter learning how to become accomplished women. Both Elinor and Marianne have a close bond to their mother and they are hesitant to leave her when they are invited to stay with Mrs. Jennings for the winter. If Mrs. Bennet were in this situation, she would have only thought about herself and would have encouraged her daughters to find wealthy men while in the city. However, Mrs. Dashwood knows that an opportunity for her daughters to become more accomplished will not happen again. She urges them to accept the offer and assures them that she will benefit from the separation:
On being informed of the invitation, Mrs. Dashwood, persuaded that such an excursion would be productive of much amusement to both her daughters, and perceiving, through all her affectionate attention to herself, how much the heart of Marianne was in it, would not hear of their declining the offer upon her account. (137)

She continues to tell her two eldest daughters that she and Margaret will enjoy spending quality time together and that she can now renovate the bedrooms without any inconvenience. Mrs. Dashwood knows that her daughters are in the hands of a proper woman whom she trusts. Thinking of her situation, Mrs. Dashwood knows that she cannot provide her daughters with the chance to live in the city to become more well-rounded women and the chance to find eligible men. As the sisters are enjoying their winter, they receive a letter from their mother. The narrator says, “Mrs. Dashwood had determined that it would be better for Marianne to be any where, at that time, than at Barton, where every thing within her view would be bringing back the past in the strongest and most afflicting manner, by constantly placing Willoughby before her” (188). She also mentions that their brother is to be in town in a short time and they are to visit him. Even though they are not with their mother, she is still able to comfort them and give them direction. She understands that she cannot provide a life in the city for them to learn how to become accomplished women, but she does not let them pass on the chance to visit London with a trusted woman as she continues to put her daughters’ interests first.

Mrs. Dashwood continues to strengthen her bond with her daughters once they are back from London by sharing what has happened in all their lives since they last departed. Mrs. Dashwood first learns what she believes to be that Willoughby never loved Marianne and that he is married to a woman of better financial and class standing. Mrs. Dashwood is happy that her daughter did not end up marrying such a malicious man. She exclaims, “No—my Marianne has
not a heart to be made happy with such a man! Her conscience, her sensitive conscience, would have felt all that the conscience of her husband ought to have felt” (309). Even though Marianne is upset, Mrs. Dashwood assures her daughter that she will find a man who is worthy of her love. As if learning about Willoughby was not enough, Mrs. Dashwood and her daughters receive more devastating news that Mr. Ferrars is married. This news leaves all the Dashwood women speechless. The narrator says, “Mrs. Dashwood feared to hazard any remark, and ventured not to offer consolation” (314). Mrs. Dashwood sympathizes with her daughters who have both lost men whom she intended to marry them for love. She knows that Marianne can marry Colonel Brandon, but Elinor does not have a second option. Even though Elinor does not reveal her emotions as Marianne does, her mother knows that she is deeply upset by the news as she loves Edward. Melz contrasts the sisters’ reactions to their romantic downfalls: “Elinor is surrounded by those who would share in her pain of losing a suitor, yet she chooses a more independent path in dealing with the setback on her own. She is more self-reliant than Marianne” (37). These scenes demonstrate how each sister handles heartbreak and it is clear that Elinor deals with it gracefully as she must remain strong in the face of society. It is now up to Mrs. Dashwood to comfort both her daughters and be the support that they need during this emotional time. However, Mrs. Dashwood is not yet prepared to help both of her daughters as she is still learning how to be the head of the household.

It is easy to see that Mrs. Dashwood and Marianne are both romantic and think with their heart while Elinor is rational and thinks every situation through. This can be seen in Mrs. Dashwood’s view of Edward:

Some mothers might have encouraged the intimacy from motives of interest, for Edward Ferrars was the eldest son of a man who had died very rich; and some might have
repressed it from motives of prudence, for, except a trifling sum, the whole of his fortune depended upon the will of his mother. But Mrs. Dashwood was alike uninfluenced by either consideration. It was enough for her that he appeared to be amiable, that he loved her daughter, and that Elinor returned the partiality. (15-16)

Knowing Mrs. Bennet, she would have immediately pressed one of her daughters to marry such a man. However, we see another side of a mother figure in Mrs. Dashwood. She is happy because she can tell that Edward has romantic feelings towards Elinor, who appears to reciprocate such feelings. As we have already seen, Mrs. Dashwood believes that love should win against monetary value and she does not push her daughters to marry like Mrs. Bennet. When she talks to Elinor, Mrs. Dashwood cannot help but gush, “I can feel no sentiment of approbation inferior to love” (17). Unlike Elinor, Mrs. Dashwood is quick to love anyone who appears to be caring and genuine. She has an open heart and easily trusts those she may not know well. This type of thinking will eventually lead to problems as she approves of men who are deceitful much like Willoughby. Elinor provides a contrast with her mother since she guards her heart and attempts to tell her mother that she may love Edward after getting to know him. If she does become fond of him, she will also weigh the benefits of marrying such a man as Edward. Melz writes, “Austen’s views on women involve a balance between what is expected of them from society and their individual desires” (2). Mrs. Dashwood and Marianne focus on these individual desires while Elinor is abiding by common societal expectations. Therefore, Elinor’s and her mother’s opposing views when it comes to romance will lead to disputes as both Elinor and Marianne become romantically involved.

We learn that Mrs. Dashwood’s sentimental tendencies can apply to more than relationships when she moves into the cottage. Upon their first viewing, Mrs. Dashwood states,
“As for the house itself, to be sure, it is too small for our family, but we will make ourselves tolerably comfortable for the present, as it is too late in the year for improvements. Perhaps in the spring, if I have plenty of money, as I dare shay I shall, we may think about building” (28). This talk sounds insensible for a woman who does not have the income that she depended upon in the previous years. The narrator is sure to make a comment about the impracticality of Mrs. Dashwood’s inner thoughts: “In the mean time, till all these alterations could be made from the savings of an income of five hundred a year by a woman who never saved in her life, they were wise enough to be contented with the house as it was” (29). This shows that in Mrs. Dashwood’s sentimental mind, money will just magically appear, and she will be able to afford these costly renovations. She is brought back to reality when she realizes that she does not know how to manage finances and simply cannot afford the lavish renovations she wishes. This shows progress in her characterization as she was able to come to the conclusion that she should at least wait until her finances improve without help from Elinor.

Mrs. Dashwood’s romantic side comes out once again after Sir John insults her daughters. When Mrs. Dashwood inquiries about Willoughby’s character, Sir John says that Willoughby is worth “catching.” Mrs. Dashwood scolds him saying,

I do not believe that Mr. Willoughby will be incommoded by the attempts of either of my daughters, towards what you call catching him. It is not an employment to which they have been brought up. Men are very safe with us, let them be ever so rich. I am glad to find, however, from what you say, that he is a respectable young man, and one whose acquaintance will not be ineligible. (42)

Mrs. Dashwood is offended that Sir John sees her daughters finding husbands as a game or lifestyle. She is sure to correct him about the proper women they are. Mrs. Dashwood takes pride
in her daughters and will not have them degraded. This outburst exemplifies how Mrs. Dashwood acts solely out of emotion rather than rationally observing that Sir John did not intend any insult. For Mrs. Dashwood, finding a husband is essential for her daughters’ survival and she does not see it as a laughing matter, but she is also romantic enough to believe that love does not need to be pushed and that it is not part of a social game.

Ultimately, since one woman is a practical thinker and the other is a romantic thinker, Elinor and her mother have different outlooks on how one should act while talking to a potential suitor. When Willoughby stops by after rescuing Marianne, Mrs. Dashwood greets him as thus: “He was received by Mrs. Dashwood with more than politeness; with a kindness which Sir John’s account of him and her own gratitude prompted” (43). Willoughby’s kind act shows Mrs. Dashwood that he is a man of honor and a true gentleman. It is safe to say that she is pleased with his actions thus far and will continue to indulge their desire to be together as she knows Marianne is taken with him and he is taken with her. Elinor, on the other hand, reprimands Marianne for acting so childishly saying: “But how is your acquaintance to be long supported, under such extraordinary despatch of every subject for discourse? You will soon have exhausted each favourite topic” (45). Clearly, Elinor sees that Marianne is not thinking practically as she is not thinking about his finances or her future with him. It is no surprise that their mother takes Marianne’s side in this matter, “My love, you must not be offended with Elinor—she was only in jest. I should scold her myself, if she were capable of wishing to check the delight of your conversation with our new friend” (45). Since Marianne and Mrs. Dashwood have similar personalities, it is easy to see why she would comfort her after Elinor’s attack. Previously, Mrs. Dashwood stood up for both of her daughters, but now she takes the side of her favorite. Sensible Elinor has no one on her side and she knows it is a battle that she cannot win. Melz comments
upon both sisters: “Marianne often uses her independent spirit in selfish and simple ways, while Elinor is more complex in that she commands her emotions in order to not diminish her worth in society’s eyes” (20). This demonstrates Marianne’s childish behavior while talking with Willoughby and Elinor’s response as she believes society would frown upon such behavior. At this point, it seems that Mrs. Dashwood is making progress in realizing that she must be strict with her finances, but her romantic ideas of relationships still prove to be problematic as she easily and readily accepts Willoughby as Marianne’s future husband.

Even when Willoughby tells Mrs. Dashwood that he is leaving due to business in London, she believes that he is simply hiding his engagement to her daughter instead of taking his words at face value. When Mrs. Dashwood finds Marianne in hysterics, she quickly questions, “Is any thing the matter with her? Is she ill?” (69). Willoughby admits that she is disappointed with the news of his departure from Devonshire. Optimistically, Mrs. Dashwood replies that he will not be gone for long. However, Willoughby says, “You are very kind; but I have no idea of returning into Devonshire immediately. My visits to Mrs. Smith are never repeated within the twelvemonth” (69). After Willoughby leaves, Mrs. Dashwood suspects that he is not telling the truth. Knowing that Mrs. Smith does not approve of an engagement between Willoughby and Marianne, she formulates an idea that Willoughby has proposed to Marianne and is to leave the area to avoid Mrs. Smith. Essentially, Mrs. Dashwood is seeing what she wants to see and is in denial that Willoughby will not marry her daughter. Elinor has her doubts on the matter since she has never quite trusted Willoughby’s intent. She tells her mother of her concerns and Mrs. Dashwood cries, “How strange that is! You must think wretchedly indeed of Willoughby, if, after all that has openly passed between you, you can doubt the nature of the terms on which they are together” (73). Mrs. Dashwood refuses to believe that Willoughby is
deceitful nor that he does not love Marianne. Elinor pushes her to simply ask Marianne if they are engaged, but Mrs. Dashwood fears that if they are not engaged then the question would devastate her further. In Mrs. Dashwood’s mind, she cannot understand how a man who reportedly loves her daughter would simply leave her. Her romantic and irrational side concocts this idea, so she can cope. Elinor attempts to have her mother see Willoughby’s true actions, but ultimately, she is unsuccessful.

In the end, Mrs. Dashwood is able to celebrate with her daughters as they both find love. Mrs. Dashwood remains at Barton as her youngest daughter is entering the age at which she will find a husband. Even with two of her three daughters married, Mrs. Dashwood still finds time to see her daughters and remain close to them. We learn that, “Between Barton and Delaford there was that constant communication which strong family affection would naturally dictate” (336). Through her daughters’ relationships, Mrs. Dashwood remains supportive and tries her best to not interfere. Her goal in life is to see her daughters happily in love and financially supported. Even though her daughters may have different ideals of love, Mrs. Dashwood supports them both as a guiding hand.

For Mrs. Dashwood, establishing a caring family is the most important construct. In the beginning of the novel, she loses her husband and is kicked out of her estate. She only has the support of her three daughters, but she marches on and finds a new arrangement for them. Unlike Mrs. Bennet, Mrs. Dashwood is not one to assert her power and thus depends upon Elinor for support. However, Mrs. Dashwood continues to build her relationship with her daughters so that they can depend upon her for support in their times of need instead of looking for ways to benefit from her daughters like Mrs. Bennet often does. When looking for love, Mrs. Dashwood never pushes Elinor or Marianne to marry a certain man, but rather supports them in their relationships
while Mrs. Bennet strongly suggests and practically arranges marriages for her daughters. While Mrs. Dashwood is often motivated by romantic and irrational ideas, she ultimately wants the best for her daughters.
Chapter Three: Lady Russell’s Persuasion

Unlike the previous novels, Austen’s *Persuasion* does not have a mother who influences the protagonist. The Elliot family is comprised of Sir Walter, Elizabeth, Anne, and Mary. Sir Walter’s wife has passed away and this has left his three daughters with no mother. Without a mother, the sisters might not learn how to become accomplished women and may struggle to find suitors when the time comes. However, there is a neighbor who serves to fulfill a mother’s role in the young women’s lives. This woman, Lady Russell, is a family friend who has lost her spouse, much like Sir Walter has. Through the years, Lady Russell grows closer to the Elliot family and supports them as a friend. Most notably, Lady Russell has formed such a close relationship to Anne that she has become a surrogate mother to her and offers advice she believes is in Anne’s best interests. However, throughout the novel, Lady Russell struggles with accepting those of a lower social class over whom she believes that she is superior, and this mindset proves to motivate her actions. Thus, Lady Russell is protective of Anne as she ultimately wants her to be happy with a respectable man of high-class.

From the beginning, Lady Russell is characterized as a close family friend to the Elliots. Austen writes of Lady Russell,

This friend, and Sir Walter, did *not* marry, whatever might have been anticipated on that head by their acquaintance. –Thirteen years had passed away since Lady Elliot’s death, and they were still near neighbors and intimate friends; and one remained a widower, and the other a widow. (*Persuasion* 5)

Austen is sure to state that Lady Russell is a friend to the family and to Sir Walter so that we understand that she does not have an ulterior motive to marry him when she offers advice or help
to the family. Even though she accepts the Elliots as her own family, she does have a preference for one of the daughters. The narrator tells us, “To Lady Russell, indeed, she was a most dear and highly valued god-daughter, favourite and friend. Lady Russell loved them all; but it was only in Anne that she could fancy the mother to revive again” (6). Lady Russell was married to a knight and did not have any children. Therefore, she is of a high social class and is wealthy with plenty of energy to invest in the Elliots. She does this in part because Lady Elliot was her close friend and after her death, Lady Russell wanted to look after the Elliot family guiding them as she thinks Lady Elliot would have done. As the young women grow up, Anne is the one to take lead of the household, and not her elder sister Elizabeth. Sir Walter does not find anything extraordinary in Anne and often pushes her aside because he does not see her worth in comparison to Elizabeth’s. Breanna Neubauer says, “Women without prospects were in many ways treated as members of the lower rank, regardless of their family’s societal rank” (130). In Anne’s case, Sir Walter and Elizabeth are guilty of treating Anne in this way. When Anne forms a plan to help the family save money, the narrator tells us: “How Anne’s more rigid requisitions might have been taken, is of little consequence” (13). Her father ignores Anne’s advice as he cannot live without his lavish expenses. Yet, Lady Russell can see Anne’s value; she can tell that Anne is a hard-worker and is the most similar to the late Lady Elliot. Therefore, she forms a close bond with Anne.

Much like Mrs. Dashwood values Elinor, Lady Russell values Anne’s input and her company. After Sir Walter dismisses Anne’s and Lady Russell’s financial advice, Lady Russell and Mary request Anne’s company before she departs to Bath. The narrator says, “This invitation of Mary’s removed all Lady Russell’s difficulties, and it was consequently soon settled that Anne should not go to Bath till Lady Russell took her, and that all the intervening time should be
divided between Uppercross Cottage and Kellynch-lodge” (33). Anne does not want to reside in Bath with her father as he completely ignores her suggestions to cut spending. Anne is not fond of Bath and readily agrees to spend time with both Mary and Lady Russell. The narrator tells us, “To be claimed as a good, though in an improper style, is at least better than being rejected as no good at all; and Anne, glad to be thought of some use…readily agreed to stay” (33). Sir Walter does not value his second daughter and Anne feels useless around him as he never listens to her advice. She knows that at least Mary and Lady Russell will appreciate her company, unlike her father. Neubauer says, “The poor treatment Anne’s family doles out to her, however, also elevates Anne to a remarkable degree of capability that no one else in the novel can match” (131). Anne’s labor may go unnoticed by her family, but at least Lady Russell recognizes her abilities and can appreciate Anne and hold intellectual conversations with her. Therefore, Lady Russell is not eager for Anne to move to Bath as the distance will mean their daily visits will end. So, Lady Russell wants to make the most of the time she has left with her. Anne also is not eager to separate from Kellynch Hall nor from Lady Russell. Anne has spent the past thirteen years viewing Lady Russell as a mother figure and has valued her opinions as Anne ultimately takes the advice to not marry Wentworth. The narrator tells us, “She [Anne] did not blame Lady Russell, she did not blame herself for having been guided by her” (28). Anne knows that Lady Russell’s advice was in her best interests and seven years have passed with their friendship only growing stronger. While the move to Bath will separate Anne and Lady Russell, both women know that moving to Bath will not be the end of their relationship because Lady Russell vows to visit as often as possible. Lady Russell and Anne will not let distance ruin a friendship as strong as the one they share.
Lady Russell takes on a motherly role when she provides Anne with advice she believed would save Anne from an unhappy marriage. Seven years prior to the setting, Anne falls in love with Captain Wentworth. At this time, Wentworth had just started his career and did not have the money to provide for a wife. The young couple becomes engaged and Lady Russell has strong opinions about Wentworth. The narrator tells us “His sanguine temper, and fearlessness of mind, operated very differently on her. She saw in it an aggravation of the evil” (26). Lady Russell knows that Anne is young and is in love. Therefore, she is not thinking of her future. As a close friend, Lady Russell tells Anne of all of Wentworth’s faults. Both Lady Russell and Anne’s father see the superficial elements of Wentworth. He is not wealthy, and he has no class. Zietlow claims, “Lady Russell’s respect for rank is her weakness” (182). In Lady Russell’s mind, Anne will not gain anything from marrying him and she will in turn destroy her family’s status. Lady Russell “was persuaded to believe the engagement a wrong thing” and convinces Anne that she will be better off without him (27). Ultimately, Lady Russell thinks that Wentworth will make Anne unhappy after her initial feelings subside. She believes that she is protecting Anne from a lifetime of debt, sorrow, and a lower-class rank.

When Captain Wentworth is brought back into Anne’s life, Lady Russell must remind Anne why he is not proper marriage material for her. After Lady Russell and Anne are reunited, the narrator says, “Lady Russell had not been arrived five minutes, the day before, when a full account of the whole had burst on her; but still it must be talked of; she must make enquiries, she must regret the imprudence, lament the result, and Captain Wentworth’s name must be mentioned by both” (118). Like old friends, they gush upon the topic of men, especially Captain Wentworth. When Anne tells her friend of Captain Wentworth’s attraction to Louisa Musgrove, Lady Russell internally rolls her eyes:
Lady Russell had only to listen composedly, and wish them happy; but internally her heart reveled in angry pleasure, in pleased contempt, that the man who at twenty-three had seemed to understand somewhat of the value of an Anne Elliot, should eight years afterwards, be charmed by a Louisa Musgrove. (119)

Lady Russell tries to feel sympathy towards Anne, but she still believes that her advice all those years ago was for the best. If Wentworth has aged and grown into a more sensible man, then it makes no sense to Lady Russell why he would be attracted to such a child as Louisa. Therefore, this tells her that he has not changed and is still not worthy of a woman like Anne. This suggests that Lady Russell has Anne’s best interests at heart and does not want her to get hurt or used. Similarly, Mrs. Dashwood comforts Marianne when Willoughby runs off to marry Miss Grey and suggests that Willoughby does not deserve such a woman as Marianne. Much like a mother and close friend, Lady Russell does not want Anne to marry just any man, but a man who will value her character.

Even though Lady Russell is trying to act as a mother to Anne, she does not prove to know what is best for her at all times. Anne admits that the advice of her friend was not fit for her situation with Wentworth, but that she does not regret following the advice as her young self would have regretted marrying Wentworth. Anne says, “I was right in submitting to her, and that if I had done otherwise, I should have suffered more in continuing the engagement than I did even in giving it up” (237). Zietlow defends Lady Russell because “she was in the place of a parent” (183). As a parent, Lady Russell was trying to ensure that Anne did not end up in a poor and loveless marriage. Wentworth agrees with Anne, however, he says that he cannot yet forgive Lady Russell. He says that he will in time and that he looks forward to getting to know Lady Russell on a personal basis. At this point, Lady Russell has had years to reflect upon the advice
that she gave to young Anne. At the time, she believed that she was only doing what was best for her. However, she realizes now that she was wrong in her initial judgements of Wentworth and William Elliot. The narrator says, “There was nothing less for Lady Russell to do, than to admit that she had been pretty completely wrong, and to take up a new set of opinions and of hopes” (240). Her opinions of Wentworth change because he has become successful and thus has risen in social class. Lady Russell now approves of Anne and Wentworth’s engagement as he fulfills the role of a proper gentleman. This shows how Lady Russell ultimately values social rank in her acquaintances and also the acquaintances of Anne and her family.

From the start of the novel, Lady Russell is viewed as a confidant for the entire Elliot family, but as we can see with Wentworth, her advice is often related to social class. When Sir Walter is in financial troubles after his wife’s death, he looks to Lady Russell for help. The narrator tells us that “Lady Russell was most anxiously zealous on the subject, and gave it much serious consideration” (11). Since Lady Elliot kept the family’s finances in check, Lady Russell realizes that Sir Walter has simply overspent on lavish living expenses. Unlike Sir Elliot, “[Lady Russell] had a value for rank and consequence, which blinded her a little to the faults of those who possessed them” (11). Lady Russell values class rank and she does not want any of her acquaintances to bring shame upon her or her friends. Additionally, Lady Russell cares for Anne as one of her own daughters and does not want to see her suffer due to her father’s carelessness. For this reason, “She drew up plans of economy, she made exact calculations, and she did, what nobody else thought of doing, she consulted Anne, who never seemed considered by the others as having any interest in the question” (12). Much Like Lady Elliot and Lady Russell, Anne thinks logically and only wants the best for the family. Ultimately, Lady Russell and Anne propose that the family should spend money only on necessities. Sir Walter, on the other hand,
despises that idea and we learn that “he would sooner quit Kellynch-hall at once, than remain in it on such disgraceful terms” (13). Lady Russell is not surprised that Sir Walter would not want to give up his extravagant lifestyle but agrees with his decision to move to a smaller house in Bath to save money. For Sir Walter to ask for financial advice, he has to admit that he needs help and he knows he can trust Lady Russell. Lady Russell also believes that moving to Bath will also improve Anne’s lifestyle. She believes, “Anne had been too little from her home, too little seen. Her spirits were not high. A larger society would improve them. She wanted her to be more known” (15). While Lady Russell values Anne, she also wants her to become a proper lady and be seen by potential high-class suitors, so she can marry well.

Lady Russell pushes Anne to pursue Mr. William Elliot as he has a higher-class rank than Wentworth and he will also inherit Sir William’s estate and wealth. Upon first meeting Mr. Elliot, Lady Russell is charmed by his gentleman-like qualities. Naturally, he is in need of a wife and Lady Russell suggests Anne for the role,

Lady Russell was now perfectly decided in her opinion of Mr. Elliot. She was as much convinced of his meaning to gain Anne in time, as of his deserving her; and was beginning to calculate the number of weeks which would free him from all the remaining restraints of widowhood, and leave him at liberty to exert his most open powers of pleasing. (152-153)

As mentioned, William Elliot seems like a proper gentleman who is in search of an accomplished woman. Lady Elliot believes that William deserves Anne based upon her intelligence and grace. Advice typically comes with an ulterior motive with Lady Russell. In this case, if Anne and Mr. Elliot were to marry, Anne would then be the mistress of Kellynch, much like her mother was and she would remain in the same social standing. Similarly, Mrs. Bennet pressured Elizabeth
into marrying Mr. Collins as he was also to inherit the family estate. Mrs. Bennet and Lady Russell believe that marrying a man who will inherit the estate is expected in order to support the family. If Anne were to marry Mr. Elliot, Lady Russell would be able to continue her weekly visits with Anne and stay connected to the family. Lady Russell says to Anne, “My dearest Anne, it would give me more delight than is often felt at my time of life!” (153). After trying to persuade her, Lady Russell can tell that Anne is seriously considering the benefits of marrying Mr. Elliot. She decides to leave the matter and let the charm of Mr. Elliot take over.

Unlike Lady Russell, Mrs. Smith, another friend of Anne’s, does not approve of Mr. Elliot and tells Anne of his deceitful past that could destroy her family’s status. Anne learns that William Elliot deceived Mrs. Smith and her husband and led them to spend above their means. Anne is horrified that she considered marrying a man who is simply after the title of Sir Elliot. Unbeknownst to Lady Russell, setting up a marriage between Anne and William Elliot would destroy the entire Elliot family:

It was very desirable that Lady Russell should be no longer deceived; and one of the concluding arrangements of this important conference, which carried them through the greater part of the morning, was, that Anne had full liberty to communicate to her friend every thing relative to Mrs. Smith, in which his conduct was involved. (203)

Since Lady Russell believes Anne and William Elliot would make a happy couple, Anne knows that she must tell her of the truth. Lady Russell pushes William and Anne together as she feels he is a proper gentleman of middle class looking for a wife. It also helps that he is directly related to the Elliots and Lady Russell assumes he could do no harm. Much like Lady Russell, Mrs. Bennet and Mrs. Dashwood are also under the influence of men whom appear to be proper gentlemen, namely Wickham and Willoughby. Anne does not blame Lady Russell for falling for William’s
charms as she did as well. However, Anne’s first thought after hearing the news is to turn to Lady Russell. This shows that Anne and Lady Russell share a close friendship and that Anne knows she can trust her with major news. Anne also wants to protect Lady Russell in case William tries to target her wealth. This shows that Lady Russell is only concerned with the societal balance that will result from Anne marrying William as they share similar rank.

Another example of Lady Russell’s value on rank can be seen in Sir Elliot’s and Elizabeth’s friendship with Mrs. Clay, who is of low social status. When we reflect back upon Lady Russell’s first piece of advice to Sir Walter, we see that there is another reason why Lady Russell pushes for the family to move to Bath. That reason is Mrs. Clay. Anne’s elder sister, Elizabeth, is forming a close relationship to the woman who left an unprosperous marriage with two children. Mrs. Clay is the daughter of another family friend whom Sir Walter turned to for advice alongside Lady Russell. The family tolerates Mrs. Clay as she constantly praises them and is now friends with Elizabeth. However, Lady Russell can see through her act and knows that she is trying to become the next Lady Elliot while aspiring to rise in class status:

From situation, Mrs. Clay was, in Lady Russell’s estimate, a very unequal, and in her character she believed a very dangerous companion—and a removal that would leave Mrs. Clay behind, and bring a choice of more suitable intimates within Miss Elliot’s reach, was therefore an object of first-rate importance. (16)

Lady Russell knows that Mrs. Clay is not in the same social class as the Elliot family. Therefore, Mrs. Clay is trying to climb the social ladder in the only way in which she can: through marriage. In this sense, Mrs. Clay reflects Mrs. Bennet’s eagerness to have her daughters married to wealthy men. If Mrs. Clay were to marry into the Elliot family, she would instantly be a high-class member of society and would not suffer financial strain in her mind. In the eyes of Lady
Russell, Mrs. Clay will never be held on the same level as Anne and the late Lady Elliot. Therefore, a move to Bath would separate Elizabeth and Mrs. Clay and she would no longer be a threat to Lady Russell or the Elliots.

Even though Lady Russell typically has ulterior motives related to class, she is also protective of Anne. Sir Walter and Elizabeth invite Mrs. Clay to accompany them to Bath much to Lady Russell’s astonishment: “So far all was perfectly right; but Lady Russell was almost startled by the wrong of one part of the Kellynch-hall plan, when it burst on her, Mrs. Clay’s being engaged to go to Bath with Sir Walter and Elizabeth” (33). At this comment, Lady Russell is immediately concerned with Anne’s response. She worries that Anne will feel as if she is being replaced by Mrs. Clay. It is obvious that Sir Walter and Elizabeth do not realize what Mrs. Clay is trying to do as they enjoy her company. Paul Zietlow explains, “Her vain and foolish father and sister…virtually throw her out of the family to make room for the unscrupulous Mrs. Clay” (187). At this point, Lady Russell simply wants to comfort Anne and support her as needed. While Lady Russell is concerned about Mrs. Clay’s status, she puts her attention on Anne instead. Previously, Mary stated, “Then I am sure Anne had better stay, for nobody will want her in Bath,” when discussing who was to depart to Bath (32). Clearly, Anne feels unwanted and by inviting Mrs. Clay to come with, Sir Walter and Elizabeth have suggested that she will be better company than Anne. Lady Russell can see the pain in Anne and immediately jumps to her aid while forgetting about Mrs. Clay.

While Mrs. Clay is becoming a permanent fixture in the lives of Sir William and Elizabeth, Lady Russell focuses on building her relationship with Anne. Lady Russell must remain poised while Anne is ignored yet again even when Mrs. Clay is not in attendance at Camden Place. Together, Anne and Lady Russell listen while Elizabeth and Sir Walter drone on.
about how wonderful Mrs. Clay is. The protective side of Lady Russell is out again as she feels that Anne is being completely ignored. She stresses, “The sight of Mrs. Clay in such favor, and of Anne so overlooked, was a perpetual provocation to her there” (140). Lady Russell cannot believe that Anne is not welcomed into the conversation. This only adds to Lady Russel’s dislike of Mrs. Clay. However, Anne and Lady Russell depend upon one another to suffer through interactions involving Mrs. Clay. Lady Russell does not like Mrs. Clay because everyone ignores Anne more than usual and Lady Russell also does not deem her worthy of their social class. In Mrs. Bennet’s case, she deems Charlotte Lucas unworthy of becoming the mistress of Longbourn as her family is also of a lower social class and Charlotte will inherit the Bennet estate with her husband, Mr. Collins, and thus hold more power over Mrs. Bennet. However, Anne does not favor Mrs. Clay because she can see that she is trying to marry her father for the social rank it will bring her.

It is of no surprise that Lady Russell is conscious of socioeconomic class as we have already seen examples related to Mrs. Clay. Being wealthy and well-known, Lady Russell is careful to only keep company that will highlight these aspects. A few years after Anne’s proposal with Wentworth, Charles Musgrove offers Anne another marriage proposal. Lady Russell approves this option because of his social class and income. She believes it would be a perfect match for a young woman like Anne. However, Anne does not take the advice of her friend before refusing his offer. Lady Russell laments, “Charles Musgrove was the eldest son of a man, whose landed property and general importance, were second, in that country, only to Sir Walter’s, and of good character and appearance” (28). Such a man would surely be a suitable match for one of Sir Walter’s daughters. Lady Russell thinks that Anne is a fool for turning Charles down as he moves on to ask Anne’s younger sister instead. Mrs. Bennet can relate as
Elizabeth turned down Mr. Collins even though he was to take over the family’s estate. Both Lady Russell and Mrs. Bennet question why Anne and Elizabeth turn down perfectly decent men with financial stability and respectable rank.

While Lady Russell has been a family friend to the entire Elliot family, she has most importantly been a mother figure to Anne. More often than not, Lady Elliot’s advice revolves around class rank and how she can ensure that the Elliot family does not lose their high status in society. This can be seen when she separates Anne and Wentworth as at the time, Wentworth did not have wealth or rank. However, when Mrs. Clay is held in high regards with Sir Walter and Elizabeth, Lady Russell is quick to ensure that Mrs. Clay will not become a member of the Elliot family and that Anne is not forgotten. In the end, Lady Elliot is finally able to stop protecting Anne from Wentworth since he has become a respectable gentleman. Lady Elliot now sees that Wentworth has kept his claim that he would become successful and thus has achieved acceptable class status according to her. He is now wealthy and well-respected among the Elliots, Lady Russell, and the higher class. Therefore, Lady Elliot can be happy as Anne is happy with a man who will not ruin either woman’s class rank.
Chapter Four: The Real Mother Figure

At times, authors may have trouble forming works that do not incorporate some aspects of their lives. Jane Austen is no exception. To understand how she created Mrs. Bennet, Mrs. Dashwood, and Lady Russell, it helps to take a look at her personal life. In doing so, it becomes evident that Austen was influenced by her own mother when creating these women. While all three mother figures have different qualities, Austen draws upon certain experiences she had with her mother and ultimately creates three different versions of her mother in the novels. In these characters, Mrs. Bennet presents the financial-minded side of her mother, Mrs. Dashwood represents the concerned mother, and Lady Russell depicts the side of Austen’s mother that provided affection. While all three mother figures have their differences, they are all concerned about finances and marriage in some regard, much like Austen’s own mother.

From the beginning of *Pride and Prejudice*, we see that Mrs. Bennet is a comedic character. However, Austen’s mother, Cassandra, does not appear to have had the comedic edge that Mrs. Bennet does. Much like the Bennet family, Austen’s family was large; she had seven siblings, including six brothers. Much like Elizabeth Bennet, the Austen family members held literature in high regard. David Nokes writes, “She [Mrs. Austen] raised all her children with a fondness for rhyming-games, songs and charades, and would teach them to write their own answers in rhyme to the riddles she set them” (64). We can see parallels to Mrs. Bennet here, for Mrs. Bennet is the one who actively provides an education her daughters. When talking to Lady Catherine, Elizabeth tells her that she and her sisters did not have a governess. Lady Catherine replies, “No governess! How was that possible? Five daughters brought up at home without a governess! Your mother must have been quite a slave to your education” (Austen *Pride and Prejudice* 157). Indeed, Mrs. Bennet educated all of her daughters without the help of a
governess, showing her dedication to their education. It is also likely that the Bennet family could not financially support a governess either. The Bennet sisters are of too high a status to have jobs, but also too poor to support themselves financially. Mrs. Bennet knows that her daughters need to find wealthy men to live a comfortable life. In order to find such a bachelor, her daughters need to be well-read. Mrs. Bennet thinks it senseless to have a governess when she could teach them how to catch the right man. Therefore, she teaches her daughters by herself. It is likely that Austen’s own mother prided herself on having children who were well-versed, as she often wrote her own poetry.

Financially, the Bennet family is in much the same situation as the Austens were. Even though the Austens did not have a governess, they did have other servants. When the family was preparing to move to Bath, Mrs. Austen struggled with determining which servants would accompany them. Nokes says, “Mrs. Austen was determined on keeping at least two maids” (224). The family was not rich, but they could afford such luxuries as servants. This is another similarity to the Bennet family. In the scene where Mr. Collins visits, he mentions that one of the Bennet sisters must have cooked the meal. Mrs. Bennet remarks that they can afford a cook, implying that they are not of the lower class. However, Austen’s family was known for running a school for boys as they could not survive off of her father’s income as a clergy member. Austen’s father was a respected reverend who also took in male pupils to run a boarding school. Being an educated woman, Mrs. Austen often helped her husband by teaching the boys as well. Yet, her first position was always that of a housewife. Author George Holbert Tucker notes that, “As she [Mrs. Austen] grew up to be a notable housewife (as well as an accomplished needlewoman, a skill she passed on to her daughter Jane), it is certain she was well instructed in domestic accomplishments when she was a girl” (67). Much like Mrs. Bennet, Mrs. Austen was
a housewife and fulfilled all duties a wife was expected to even though she grew up in a higher class than her husband. Mrs. Austen was originally from Bath and had to adapt to the country life after marrying George as she was not familiar with living on a farm and raising one’s own food. Park Honan says of Mrs. Austen, “George rejoiced in his foresight in marrying a lady who merely needed time to adjust to rural life before she loved it” (17). We know that the Bennets do own livestock for survival as they are not of a high enough class to own livestock for sport, like Mr. Bingley. This can be seen in the scene where Jane is expected to visit Ms. Bingley and the family cannot spare the horses needed for her to depart in a carriage. This highlights that both Mrs. Bennet and Mrs. Austen are of the same class as they both depend upon livestock for survival. However, Austen took creative liberties when creating Mrs. Bennet and made her financial worries more dependent upon her daughters getting married than about providing the necessities to survive.

Perhaps the most shocking similarity between Mrs. Austen and Mrs. Bennet would be their goals for their daughters. Shields states that Mrs. Austen was of a higher social class than her husband,

We do know she was a strong, clever woman from a slightly higher ledge of the gentry than her husband, that she was occasionally caustic in the verses she wrote, and later, like Mrs. Bennet, was anxious about her unmarried daughters. But how could she not have been, and have we as readers been completely fair to Mrs. Bennet of *Pride and Prejudice*? (17)

This shows that Mrs. Austen would have grown up knowing that marriage was the only option for survival for a young woman. Austen herself knew that she was expected to marry as Nokes writes: “Reading her mother’s verses, Jane was reminded of that narrow world of Hampshire
society from which, before long, she must be expected to select an eligible husband” (144). Mrs. Austen is careful not to put too much pressure on her daughters, but Austen is aware of what society expects. Thus, Austen becomes aware of looking for a husband. Similarly, Mrs. Bennet sees her main task as trying to ensure that her daughters will be financially stable in life. We see this in the first chapter of *Pride and Prejudice* when Mrs. Bennet hears about the wealthy bachelor moving in and immediately proposes that one of her daughters will become his wife. However, unlike Elizabeth, Jane Austen never marries, nor does her sister. This shows that unlike Mrs. Bennet, Mrs. Austen was content knowing that her daughters were simply happy as they were because she raised her daughters with the freedom to make their own choices.

Much like Marianne and Elinor in *Sense and Sensibility*, Austen had the opportunity to become an accomplished woman away from home. As Austen was growing up, she did not get to stay at home and attend school with her brothers and the other boys whom her father taught. Instead, according to Nokes her parents sent Austen and her sister away to a widow who was a former principal at a college (79). Nokes continues to describe Austen’s displeasure at attending such a school, “For Jane, it was not a happy experience to exchange the freedom of Steventon for the petty rules and regulations of Mrs. Cawley’s academy” (79). Claire Tomalin states that Mrs. Austen sent the girls to Mrs. Cawley as she was her brother-in-law’s sister and so highly regarded as a teacher. Tomalin also states that it was a financial decision for the family to send the girls away to school: “There may have been a financial motive for this brisk decision, their parents reasoning that they could more than cover the cost of the girls’ school fees by using their room for further boy pupils” (33). Looking to the novel, we see a similar arrangement when Mrs. Jennings invites Elinor and Marianne to spend the winter. Mrs. Dashwood is happy that they will get to experience city life and learn how to be proper ladies from Mrs. Jennings. Mrs. Dashwood
exclaims, “I would have every young woman of your condition in life acquainted with the manners and amusements of London” (Austen Sense and Sensibility 138). Like Mrs. Cawley, Mrs. Jennings is also a widow and teaches the young ladies important lessons such as how to mix with the upper class and how to be a devoted caretaker. Both sets of sisters only remain with these women for a short amount of time. Austen and her sister are only with Mrs. Cawley for a up to three years while Elinor and Marianne spend a few months with Mrs. Jennings, but both sets of sisters learned important lessons related to class.

Both Mrs. Austen and Mrs. Dashwood fret over their daughters when an illness strikes them while away from home. While at school with Mrs. Cawley, Austen became seriously ill. Tomalin writes, “Jane Austen was by then in danger of her life. She was nursed back to health by her mother, and taken home” (37). Austen uses this event when she writes about Marianne becoming ill while she is staying with Mrs. Jennings. Like Mrs. Austen did for Jane, Mrs. Dashwood frantically travels to Marianne’s side to ensure that she will survive. Both women naturally worry about their daughters who are genuinely in danger. In fact, Jane was so worried that the end of her life was near that she drew up her will (Nokes 513). After a month, Austen finally recovered and Nokes states, “It was a relief to be away from her mother, who worried and fretted constantly at witnessing her feverish attacks” (515). Mrs. Dashwood takes the same approach when Marianne is sick and worries because she sees herself in Marianne. The narrator describes, “Mrs. Dashwood, whose terror as they drew near the house had produced almost the conviction of Marianne’s being no more, had no voice to enquire after her” (Austen Sense and Sensibility 295). It is safe to say that both women have maternal instincts that include deep concerns over their children’s health.
While Austen could have potentially had poor finances after her father died, her brothers came together to help the Austen women unlike Mrs. Dashwood’s stepson who left her helpless. If mothers do not have any sons, then their husband’s wealth will be given to the next male heir and that could mean no money for the women. This predicament is quickly established within the first chapter of the novel. When Mrs. Dashwood is left without a husband her stepson receives the inheritance and leaves her and her daughters with their small annual income that is hardly enough to survive off. Similarly, Mr. Austen died and left his wife and two daughters with little to live on. Thankfully, the Austen men were willing to help their mother and sisters out:

At Mr. Austen’s death in January 1805 Mrs. Austen and her two daughters were left with an income of only £210 a year, but this was soon raised to £460 by an annual contribution of £100 from her son Edward, and £50 apiece each year from James, Henry and Francis. This enabled the Austen ladies to live in prudently quiet comfort. (Tucker 75)

The Dashwood women and the Austen women are both dependent upon the men in their lives to provide for them. Unlike the Dashwoods, the Austen women were indeed provided for by these men. If Austen’s brothers had decided not to provide an additional annual income, then Mrs. Austen would have been in much the same situation as Mrs. Dashwood and her daughters. In this situation, we can see how Austen is expanding upon what could have been a stressful financial situation in her life through her fictional characters. Therefore, Mrs. Dashwood’s concerns about her financial status depict how Mrs. Austen would have likely reacted in the same situation.

While Mrs. Dashwood is searching for a new home, the narrator tells us “But she [Mrs. Dashwood] could hear of no situation that at once answered her notions of comfort and ease, and suited the prudence of her eldest daughter” (Austen Sense and Sensibility 14-15). Even though Mrs. Dashwood represents the concerned parent in Mrs. Austen, we can see that Austen wanted
to depict a situation that could have easily happened in her own situation. Mrs. Dashwood is trying to mourn the loss of her husband while figuring out a new living arrangement based upon a limited income, so it is understandable that she relies upon Elinor for support. Austen would have supported her own mother in this situation as well.

Not only are finances an issue for the Dashwoods, but they are of importance to the Elliot family as well in *Persuasion*. In this situation, the reverse has happened: Lady Elliot has passed away and Sir Elliot cannot control his outrageous spending habits and has put his family into debt. While Sir Elliot has only three daughters to support, Mrs. Austen had eight children and one can assume that raising so many children would be costly. Honan writes, “She [Mrs. Austen] was soon carrying her fourth child who was born at the rectory and baptized Henry Thomas Austen on 8 June 1771. By then she knew poverty” (16). Mrs. Austen was accustomed to putting her children first as she often went without new clothing to ensure her children had what they needed. When she sent her daughters away to school, she reasoned that the family would have more money coming in to pay for the school. However, the Austens simply could not afford the education. Nokes says, “Towards the end of 1786, Mr. Austen recalculated the equation between the ‘reasonable quantity of accomplishments’ provided by the Abbey School and the ‘reasonable price’ he was paying for them, and concluded, reasonably enough, that the figures did not balance” (86). The sisters were pulled from the school and continued their education under their parents. In *Persuasion*, instead of a parent making decisions, it is Lady Russell who offers advice to help Anne and the Elliots. Financially, Lady Russell believes that Wentworth will not become successful and that Anne will live her life as a poor man’s wife. Lady Russell describes the engagement as “indiscreet, improper, hardly capable of success, and not deserving it” (Austen *Persuasion* 27). Anne places her trust in Lady Russell and ultimately breaks the engagement off.
In the end, both Mrs. Austen and Lady Russell make decisions that are based upon those they love in order to provide the best for them.

A move to Bath presently appears to be in the best interest for both the Elliots and the Austens. The Elliot family decides to move to bath in an attempt to cut the cost of living. Similarly, Austen’s family also decided to move to Bath in Austen’s adult years for easier living. Tucker claims that Mr. and Mrs. Austen’s older age could have been a factor. Mrs. Austen was having trouble keeping up with the necessary housework and it would be easier to move to a smaller home. They also believed that Bath would have more eligible bachelors for their two unmarried daughters (Tucker 35). Much like Anne’s reaction to hearing her family’s decision to move to Bath, Austen was not thrilled: “To Jane…the shock of this news was so great that she immediately fainted” (Nokes 220). Unlike the Elliot family, the Austens did not move to Bath because they were in debt. However, wanting their daughters married was still a financial concern to Mrs. Austen. She was aware that her husband was not wealthy and would not be able to provide above his means. If their daughters were married, then Mrs. Austen would not have to fret about their situation in life after she and her husband passed. The Austens also did not have a wealthy neighbor helping them with their budget like the Elliots have. Lady Elliot believes that moving to Bath will be beneficial to both Anne and Elizabeth to get away from Wentworth and Mrs. Clay respectively. While Lady Elliot provides advice, she is also primarily concerned about Anne’s financial situation in life. She does not approve of Wentworth and hopes the change in scenery will open her eyes to new men in the same way that Mrs. Austen hopes Bath will bring future husbands to her daughters.

It is worth noting that Austen did have another mother figure who played a role similar to Lady Russell’s role in Anne’s life. This mother figure was not wealthy and was actually getting
paid to take care of Austen. Tomalin depicts Mrs. Austen’s unconventional process of raising
infants: “her practice was to give each baby a few months at the breast as a good start…and then
hand the child over to a woman in the village to be looked after for another year or eighteen
months, until it was old enough to be easily managed at home” (7). This process was repeated for
all of Mrs. Austen’s children, and Tomalin describes the emotional bond that infants form with
the caregiver in their first year. She then goes on to say, “bonding between mother and child is a
largely modern concept, and babies were handed about freely” (Tomalin 7). Today, we know
that bonding has a significant impact on how children develop. Austen would have viewed this
woman as her own mother as she would not have had memories of her own mother at such a
young age. This woman protected her and provided her with the care she needed, much like Lady
Russell does for Anne later in her life. Even though Anne is older when Lady Russell becomes a
mother figure, Austen is drawing upon the idea that to provide for a child does not require blood
relation. Austen would have no memory of her surrogate mother, but this practice was typical in
her era. Therefore, she created a character whom many women could relate to and thus
reinforces our view of Lady Russell.

As we can see, Mrs. Bennet, Mrs. Dashwood, and Lady Russell have characteristics that
overlap. At some point, all three women have concerns about money and marriage. Austen uses
characteristics that she saw in her own mother to create three separate mother figures. Shields
states, “the assumption is made that fiction flows directly from a novelist’s experience rather
than from her imagination” (11). We see that this is true for Austen as Mrs. Bennet reflects Mrs.
Austen’s financial worries to provide for her children. Mrs. Dashwood shows that Austen’s
mother was concerned for her children’s lives into their adulthood. Finally, Lady Russell
displays Mrs. Austen’s humble characteristics. Even though all three mother figures have similar
characteristics to Mrs. Austen, none of them fully portray her. It is likely we see shades of
Austen’s mother in these novels as Jane and her mother spent most of their lives living together.
Austen even let her mother read drafts of her novels and looked to her for feedback. Thus,
Austen drew upon the only mother she knew to create mother figures for the literary works that
she considered to be her own pride and joy.
Conclusion

Jane Austen has seamlessly incorporated aspects of her own mother into her fictional mother figures of Mrs. Bennet, Mrs. Dashwood, and Lady Russell. By doing so, she has created female characters whom a wide variety of individuals can relate to. The one concept that all of these mothers share is the goal to have daughters who do not regret their life choices and who are generally satisfied with their lives. Most mothers in real life can also attest to wanting the best for their children. Therefore, Austen creates a fictional world that closely mirrors 19th century society in England.

When looking at Mrs. Bennet, it is clear that she is the type of mother who wants to have complete control of her life and others, from dinners with neighbors to her daughters’ romantic relationships. This kind of mother is often over-involved in her children’s lives and will not stop until she knows her children will be provided for later in life. This authoritarian style does not always agree with everyone, as Elizabeth usually rolls her eyes whenever her mother’s antics begin. Even though Mrs. Bennet is not living in a time in which women are the head of the household, she has no problem acting as if she is in charge, and her husband rarely puts her in “her” place. Mrs. Bennet takes charge as she knows that her husband is not concerned with who his daughters marry. Austen uses Mrs. Bennet to depict mothers who often come off as harsh and with self-interests, but who have good intentions. Mrs. Bennet does not want her daughters to become like her because she is not living the high-class life she wishes. Mothers like Mrs. Bennet want to ensure that their daughters will be financially supported and therefore, content.

The mother figure in Sense and Sensibility is not as abrasive as Mrs. Bennet and has more of a gentle temperament. Mrs. Dashwood represents the women who have fallen on hard times, and yet still rise above to support their family. While she is by no means perfect, Mrs. Dashwood
is trying to establish her new role as head of the household. If she were more like Mrs. Bennet, she would have no problem doing so. However, Mrs. Dashwood relies heavily upon her eldest daughter to provide emotional support and a clear mind. This type of mother relies upon permissive parenting to set few rules but provide more affection and love. Mrs. Dashwood can be viewed as more of a friend to her daughters. She supports them as they are trying to find worthy men to marry and avoids putting too much pressure on them to pick a man of status. Mrs. Dashwood also realizes that she cannot provide the best education for her daughters and allows them to journey to a city in hopes of learning how to become more accomplished women. In the end, Mrs. Dashwood is delighted that her daughters find worthy men, who have financial stability, by their own accounts.

Even though Lady Russell is not a mother, she serves the purpose of one in Anne Elliot’s life. This high-class woman is raising a high-class daughter and teaching her that class does, in her opinion, indeed matter. By creating a woman who is not a biological mother, Austen is addressing the section of her audience that cares for children who are not blood-related. Out of all the mother figures, Lady Russell is the most class-conscious. She will not let Anne marry Wentworth until he rises above her status quo in order to prove that he is wealthy and of the equivalent social status. Like most mothers, Lady Russell provides advice to Anne and her family multiple times. It is likely that many types of mothers can relate to Lady Russell as they give advice with their children’s best interests in mind. Unfortunately, mothers are not perfect and said advice may result in unforeseen consequences. Despite her original judgement, the *Persuasion* mother figure is able to finally approve of Wentworth after she realizes that he can provide both financially and through social rank for Anne.
All of these types of mothers are found in Mrs. Austen in some way. Mrs. Bennet comes from the side of Mrs. Austen that is worried about finance. Mothers in England may often be worried about financial stability if they do not have sons to inherit their husband’s income and thus provide for them. Mrs. Bennet is only trying to ensure that her daughters are set up for life by marrying rich men. Mrs. Dashwood is proof of the financial stress that may be placed upon a widow with children; however, she provides for her daughters as best she can. Much like Mrs. Dashwood, Mrs. Austen had her own battle with finances but always put her children first to ensure they had the materials necessary to thrive. It was not uncommon for mothers in the 19th century to go without new clothing or to skip a meal if it meant they could provide their loved ones with clothing or food. Women of the lower or middle class most likely lived in such a way until their children were old enough to work or get married. On the other hand, women of the upper class typically did not have to worry about finances in such a way. Women like Lady Elliot are more concerned with their public image while safeguarding their children by arranging marriages or dictating individuals that their children may be around. Even though Mrs. Austen was not of the upper class, her children were still raised by a wet-nurse as this was common for mothers who could afford to have another woman rise their children during the first year of their life. Mothers and daughters of all types could easily relate to the mother figures in Austen’s novels. Austen is making a statement that while mothers may come in a wide variety, they are ultimately working towards the same goal of raising well-adjusted and joyful daughters. In reading her novels, she hopes that women will form an appreciation for both their daughters and their mothers.
Works Cited


Bibliography

