



Possibly Jane Austen. Courtesy of the National Portrait Gallery.

Sisters, Sisters: Historical Context for Sororal Relationships in *Pride and Prejudice*

"The entire social fabric of Pride and Prejudice is constructed out of sister relationships, from the five Bennet sisters and Mr. Bingley's two sisters – Miss Bingley and Mrs. Hurst – to Mrs. Bennet's sister Mrs. Philips and her sister-in-law Mrs. Gardiner" (Perry 118).



Cassandra Austen. Courtesy of the Jane Austen Centre.

Key Terms

Accomplishments	Skills and abilities that contributed to a woman's domestic and social graces.
Being Out	To be officially introduced to society and eligible to attend social activities. After young women were fully educated, they could be introduced to society, whether at the royal court or in more confined social circles. Once young women came out, they were eligible for offers of marriage.
Precedence	The right of preceding others in ceremonies and social formalities; the fact of occupying the highest or a higher position in an assembly or procession.

Pairs of Sisters:

Cassandra (1773-1845) and Jane (1775-1817)

- Anna Lefroy on the sisters' intimacy: "Their affection for each other was extreme; it passed the common love of sisters; and it had been so from childhood. My Grandmother talking to me once [of] by gone times, & of that particular time when my Aunts were placed at the Reading Abbey School, said that Jane was too young to make her going to school at all necessary, but it was her own doing; she would go with Cassandra; 'if Cassandra's head had been going to be cut off Jane would have her's cut off too'—"
- Cassandra writing of Jane after her death: "I have lost a treasure, such a sister, such a friend as never can have been surpassed. She was the sun of my life, the gilder of every pleasure, the soother of every sorrow; I had not a thought concealed from her, and it is as if I had lost a part of myself."

"Austen calls attention to the loyalty and mutual exchange between complementary sisters; they benefit from each other's contrasting attributes and responses to situations" (Hudson 73).

"Had not my feelings decided against you—had they been indifferent, or had they even been favourable, do you think that any consideration would tempt me to accept the man who has been the means of ruining, perhaps for ever, the happiness of a most beloved sister?" (p. 186)

Groups of Sisters:

A Royal Example

George III and Queen Charlotte had 15 children and kept their six daughters (who were born between 1766 and 1783) very close to them, even as adults. The King said, "I cannot deny that I have never wished to see any of them marry: I am happy in their company, and do not in the least want a separation." Because the daughters were not allowed to marry and leave their parents until their 30s and 40s, they produced no surviving (legitimate) children.



The Three Eldest Princesses: Charlotte, Princess Royal (1766-1828), Augusta (1768-1840) and Elizabeth (1770-1840) by Thomas Gainsborough. Courtesy of the Royal Collection.

1. **Charlotte, Princess Royal and later**

Queen of Württemberg (1766-1828): As the eldest daughter, Charlotte was compelled into a politically advantageous marriage with Frederick of Württemberg at the age of 31.

2. **Augusta Sophia (1768-1840):** Although Augusta received multiple offers of marriage, her father never approved of any of the matches. She began a relationship with Army officer Brent Spencer in 1803 and privately married him in 1812 at the age of 44.

3. **Elizabeth, later Landgravine consort of Hesse-Homburg (1770-1840):** It is rumored that Elizabeth privately married George Ramus, the son of a page, and bore him a daughter in 1788. In spite of this relationship, Elizabeth continued to live at court until 1818, when she married Frederick of Hesse-Homburg at the age of 48.

4. **Mary, later Duchess of Gloucester and Edinburgh (1776-1857):** Mary found herself a

potential husband in the Dutch Prince Frederick in 1796, but she was not allowed to marry while her elder sisters remained single. Frederick died three years later, and Mary remained single until she married her first cousin William Frederick, the Duke of Gloucester and Edinburgh, in 1816 at the age of 40.

5. **Sophia (1777-1848):** Despite never marrying, Sophia likely bore the child of General Thomas Garth, a man 33 years her senior, at the age of 23.

6. **Amelia (1783-1810):** While seeking a cure for tuberculosis in 1801, Amelia fell in love with Charles FitzRoy, the son of a baron. Her mother would not allow her to marry, fearing a relapse of her father's mental illness. Amelia died as a result of various illnesses and her sickly constitution at the age of 27, and her father continued to call out for her in his bouts of madness.

The personalities and behavior of the Bennet girls conform to a widely observed pattern of sibling personality spread, where older sibs are conventional and cautious, the younger ones are perceived as rebellious and inclined to take risks, and the middle child is ignored and obliged to be satisfied with a family niche that nobody else has taken (or wants) (Souter 178).

“She was eagerly succeeded at the instrument by her sister Mary, who having, in consequence of being the only plain one in the family, worked hard for knowledge and accomplishments, was always impatient for display. Mary had neither genius nor taste; and though vanity had given her application, it had given her likewise a pedantic air and conceited manner, which would have injured a higher degree of excellence than she had reached” (pg. 25).



The Three Youngest Daughters of George III by John Singleton Copley. Courtesy of the Royal Collection.

Sisterly Competition:

“A good woman, for Austen, is invariably a good sister, and a woman's defects are often signaled by her lack of sisterly concern” (Lanser 54).

“Are any of your younger sisters out, Miss Bennet?”

“Yes, ma'am, all.”

“All! What, all five out at once? Very odd! And you only the second. The younger ones out before the elder ones are married! Your younger sisters must be very young?”

“Yes, my youngest is not sixteen. Perhaps *she* is full young to be much in company. But really, ma'am, I think it would be very hard upon younger sisters, that they should not have their share of society and amusement, because the elder may not have the means or inclination to marry early. The last-born has as good a right to the pleasures of youth as the first. And to be kept back on *such* a motive! I think it would not be very likely to promote sisterly affection or delicacy of mind” (pg. 162).

“She then joined them soon enough to see Lydia, with anxious parade, walk up to her mother's right hand, and hear her say to her eldest sister, ‘Ah! Jane, I take your place now, and you must go lower, because I am a married woman” (pg. 299-300).

Discussion Questions:

1. Why might authors in this period have used sisterhood as an avenue to explore women's lives? What does the sibling relationship offer to authors and readers that others, such as a romance or a parent-child relationship, does not?
2. How are sibling relationships presented in *Unmarriageable*, *Ayesha at Last*, and *Pride and Prejudice and Other Flavors*? Do the sisters pair up, as in *Pride and Prejudice*? Is a sister left out these pairs, like Mary Bennet?
3. How are the Bennet sisters visually represented in the film adaptations of *Pride and Prejudice*? Do these visual representations add anything to our understanding of the sisters' relationships?
4. Do the pairs of sisters remain stable throughout *Pride and Prejudice*? Are there any instances where the Jane-Lizzy and Kitty-Lydia pairings don't apply? What prompts these instances?
5. How do the Bennet sisters compete with one another?
6. How do the Bennet sisters' different personalities reflect their birth order and the Bennet parents' changing relationship?

Further Reading:

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