

# “The Business of Mothering”: The Paradox of Regency Motherhood

CONTEXT CORNER IV | KATHERINE STEIN

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—And then, by not beginning the business of Mothering quite so early in life, you will be young in Constitution, spirits, figure & countenance, while Mrs W<sup>m</sup> Hammond is growing old by confinements & nursing. Do none of the Plumptres ever come to Balls now?—You have never mentioned them as being at any?—And what do you hear of the Gipps?—or of Fanny & her Husband? (p. 347)

— Jane Austen to Fanny Knight  
Chawton, 13 March 1817

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## KEY TERMS

### The Lying-In:

For a period of 4 – 6 weeks following the birth of a child, mothers were expected to remain indoors (preferably in bed) in order to recover from the birth. Often, a mother’s lying-in ended with the newborn’s christening. The “confinement” was a period of time before the birth where a mother was expected to stay out of the public eye. You might think of *Persuasion*, where Mrs. Wallis is “only known ...by description, as she was in daily expectation of her confinement.” (Chapter XV)

### The Wet Nurse:

A woman of a lower-class employed to nurse the child of her employer and to fulfill other care-taking responsibilities; a “Dry Nurse” would care for the child, but not breastfeed. While wet-nursing had largely fallen out of fashion by the 1770s and the 1780s, the fact remains that (as scholar Lawrence Stone puts it) “breast-feeding was a task entirely without social prestige” (p. 426), and it was still a subject of contemporary conversation and debate.

### The Governess:

Charged with the education of the girls of the family and employed to teach feminine accomplishments and to serve as a companion. The 18<sup>th</sup>-century governess occupied an ambiguous position in society, but was often a poor relation, orphan, or spinster. As boarding schools fell out of fashion, the employment of a governess was increasingly understood as a status symbol of the genteel household.

### The Household:

The institution of the 18<sup>th</sup>- and 19<sup>th</sup>- century household extended far beyond the nuclear family to include servants, extended family and dependents, and a revolving-door of long-term visitors. The household was traditionally headed by a paternalistic figure (the eldest male), though contemporary census reports show a small number of female-headed households, too. The ever-shifting boundaries of the 18<sup>th</sup>- and 19<sup>th</sup>- century household helped to create and maintain the existence of intricate and densely constructed family networks that were an essential part of Austen’s world.



“The Fashionable Mamma” (1796). Image courtesy of [the British Museum](https://www.britishmuseum.org).



“Elizabeth Lady Melbourne with Her Son, the Honourable Peniston Lamb” (1775). Image courtesy of [the British Museum](#). See also: [What Jane Saw](#).

## ROMANTICIZING THE “business of Mothering”

—Letty is with Mary at present, of course exceedingly happy, and in raptures with the child. Mary does not manage matters in such a way as to make me want to lay in myself. She is not tidy enough in her appearance; she has no dressing-gown to sit up in; her curtains are all too thin, and things are not in that comfort and style about her which are necessary to make such a situation an enviable one. Elizabeth was really a pretty object with her nice clean cap put on so tidily and her dress so uniformly white and orderly. We live entirely in the dressing-room now, which I like very much; I always feel so much more elegant in it than in the parlour. (pps. 24-5)

— *Jane Austen to Cassandra Austen  
Steventon, 1-2 December 1798*

- Motherhood was increasingly conceptualized as a SPECIAL DUTY or a SACRED CALLING, especially for the middle classes.
- The NATIONAL stakes of Motherhood: if a Mother failed in the execution of this sacred duty, she sent forth “damaged material.” (Davidoff and Hall p. 335)
- Increasing efforts to “ESSENTIALIZE women’s role as devoted mother.” Often, this operated at the expense of a woman’s own distinct sense of individual personhood, as a Mother’s identity was expected to be subsumed by that of her children. (Brassard p. 29)
- All women were understood to have a NATURAL maternal instinct.

## DEFINING THE “business of Mothering”

As a more affectionate and relaxed era in parent-child relations was inaugurated, a new model of motherhood began to be solidified, too: that of the NURTURING MOTHER.

- This new model coincided with lower rates of infant mortality (which had peaked c. 1750) and with new conceptions of the child (as children were no longer perceived as “objects of utility,” but instead as “objects of sentiment”).

Mothers were tasked with:

- The moral and spiritual training of her children
- The development of a middle-class behavioral code (i.e. proper speech and conduct)
- The education of her children, especially their first lessons (i.e. reading, writing, and spelling)
  - Although most boys were sent off to school elsewhere, mothers continued to supervise the education and training of their daughters—often resulting in the formation of different kinds of relationships between mothers and daughters versus mothers and sons.

The “business of Mothering” varied drastically across the class divide. While the middle classes scorned the aristocratic habit of leaving children in the care of nursemaids and servants, “nurturing” middle-class mothers delegated many of these duties, too. Maternal conduct books of the period “emphasized maternal engagement with children *and* the maternal surveillance of caregivers.” (Francus p. 2)

## MOTHERHOOD BY THE NUMBERS

13	average number of child-bearing years
17.5 %	of children between 0 – 5 years old died
20 %	of mothers died in childbirth
27 years old	average age at birth of first child
40 years old	average age at birth of last child



Silhouette of Mrs. Cassandra Leigh Austen, Jane Austen's mother

## THE MATERNAL CONDUCT MANUAL

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—I am glad you recommended 'Gisborne', for having begun, I am pleased with it, and I had quite determined not to read it. (p. 117)

— *Jane Austen to Cassandra Austen*  
*Goodnestone Farm, 30 August 1805*

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Thomas Gisborne, *Enquiry into the Duties of the Female Sex*, from "On Parental Duties" (1797)

"As childhood advances, the opening faculties are employed, under maternal direction, on the rudiments of knowledge. The parents in these days possess, in the variety of elementary tracts of modern date, advantages of which, when she herself was a child, her preceptress was destitute. The first principles of religion are inculcated in a mode adapted to interest attention; and information, on many other subjects, is couched under the form of dialogue and narrative, suited to the comprehension, and amusing to the imagination of the pupil...

The time now arrives, when the regular business of education, in all its branches, is to begin; and the great question, whether it shall be conducted at home or abroad, is to be decided... To fix that plan, is an office which belongs jointly to both parents. But the superior acquaintance which the husband possesses, with the habits and pursuits of active life, and his superior insight into those attainments, which will be necessary or desirable for his sons, in the stations which they are to fill, and the professions which they are to practice, will entitle his judgement, to the same preponderance in determining the scheme of their education, as, for similar reasons, he will commonly do well, to give into the opinion of his wife, with respect to the mode of bringing up his daughters. If domestic circumstances be such, that the girls are to be sent to a boarding-school, let not the mother be influenced in her choice, by the example of high life and fashion; nor by the practice of her neighbours and acquaintance; nor by a groundless partiality for the spot, where she was herself placed for instruction."

Mary Wollstonecraft, *Vindication of the Rights of Women* (1792)

"To be a good mother—a woman must have sense, and that independence of mind which few women possess who are taught to depend entirely on their husbands. Meek wives are, in general, foolish mothers; wanting their children to love them best, and take their part, in secret, against the father, who is held up as a scarecrow... unless the understanding of woman be enlarged, and her character rendered more firm, by being allowed to govern her own conduct, she will never have sufficient sense or command of temper to manage her children properly. Her parental affection, indeed scarcely deserves the name, when it does not lead her to suckle her children, because the discharge of this duty is equally calculated to inspire maternal and filial affection... What sympathy does a mother exercise who sends her babe to a nurse, and only takes it from a nurse to send it to a school?"

## FURTHER READING

- Barchas, Janine. "1813: British Institution." *What Jane Saw*. Austin: The University of Texas at Austin. [www.whatjanesaw.org](http://www.whatjanesaw.org)
- Brassard, Geneviève. "'The Sacred Impulse of Maternal Devotion': Austen's Critique of Domesticity and Motherhood in *Lady Susan*." *Women's Studies* 34, no. 1: 2004.
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- Davies, Rebecca. *Written Maternal Authority and Eighteenth-Century Education in Britain: Educating by the Book*. Surrey: Ashgate Publishing, 2014.
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- Jaadla, Hannaliis, Ellen Potter, Sebastian Keibek, and Romola Davenport. "Infant & Child Mortality by Socio-Economic Status in Nineteenth-Century England." *Economic History Review* 73, no. 4: 2020.
- Martin, Joana. "Introduction." In *A Governess in the Age of Jane Austen: The Journals and Letters of Agnes Porter*, ed. Joanna Martin. London: Hambledon Press, 1998.
- Nussbaum, Felicity. *Torrid Zones: Maternity, Sexuality, and Empire in Eighteenth-Century English Narratives*. Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University Press, 1995.
- Stone, Lawrence. *The Family, Sex and Marriage in England 1500-1800*. London: Weidenfeld and Nicolson, 1977.

## DISCUSSION QUESTIONS

1. What do you make of Austen's reference to Motherhood as a "business"? Do you find Austen's allusion to this "business of Mothering" to be sincere or tongue-in-cheek? Why? How do you think Austen's audience in this opening excerpt (Fanny) influenced Austen's portrayal of Motherhood? (See *Letters*, p. 347)
2. How do you see Austen's ideas of Motherhood evolving across the course of her life—as evidenced in her letters, her novels, and/or the Tomalin biography? To what extent do you find Austen subscribing to or critiquing these romanticized ideals of Motherhood? As a starting place, consider the four excerpts included here. (See *Letters*, pp. 24-5, 117, 347, 351). How do you see the tension between "absolute maternal devotion" and "the repression of female desire and freedom" reflected across Austen's writing?
3. Considering what you know about this "business of Mothering," how do you understand Austen's professedly maternal relationship with her novels? What is the significance of such declarations of authorial maternity? See, for example, "I am never too busy to think of S&S. I can no more forget it, than a mother can forget her sucking child" (*Letters*, p. 190), and her reference to *Pride and Prejudice* as "my own darling Child" (*Letters*, p. 210).

4. Tomalin characterizes “Mrs. Austen’s system of child-rearing [as] an unusual one,” musing that “in Jane’s case, the emotional distance between child and mother is obvious throughout her life,” and later making note of Mrs. Austen’s “note of defensiveness” (pp. 7-8) about her decision to send “such a young child as Jane away from home” (p. 36). Building from what you know about Regency-era motherhood, do you agree with Tomalin’s characterization? Why or why not? How do the different models of Motherhood we see in the Tomalin biography and across Austen’s letters align with or deviate from this model of ideal motherhood? How did Mrs. Austen’s approach differ from Jane’s cousin Eliza’s? From the Austen sisters-in-law? What is the significance of these differences (or similarities)?
  
5. Think back to the expectations of the middle-class “nurturing” mother and the necessity of delegation (to nurses, governesses, other family members, etc.) in order to achieve the romanticized maternal ideal. How is this idealized model of motherhood contingent upon the unrecognized and/or non-attributed work of other, less advantaged groups of people? Consider Austen’s mention of Letty in the second excerpt (*Letters*, p. 24, 377n6), or the “impersonal” system of the Austens’ use of the families in the village (Tomalin pp. 7-8). What other examples can you think of? What happens when we recenter the presence of this invisible labor?
  
6. Contrast Thomas Gisborne’s ideas with the ideas of Mary Wollstonecraft. In particular, consider Wollstonecraft’s question: “And have women, who have early imbibed notions of passive obedience, sufficient character to manage a family or educate children?” How do Wollstonecraft and Gisborne envision gender equality and gender roles? How is motherhood positioned in relation to gender, and to what extent do you see motherhood being “essentialized”? How do you see Gisborne and Wollstonecraft participating in the contemporary discourse surrounding motherhood and gender, and how do these excerpts inform your understanding of Motherhood in Austen’s world and in Austen’s novels? (see Tomalin, p. 140 for more on Austen & Wollstonecraft).

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—Anna has not a chance of escape; her husband called here the other day, & said she was pretty well but not equal to so long a walk; she must come in her Donkey Carriage.—Poor Animal, she will be worn out before she is thirty.—I am very sorry for her. (p. 351)

—*Jane Austen to Fanny Knight  
Chawton, 23-25 March 1817*

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