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"Forced on Exertion": Employment and Boredom in Austen's Sense and Sensibility

Katherine Yaun
“FORCED ON EXERTION”: EMPLOYMENT AND BOREDOM IN AUSTEN’S

SENSE AND SENSIBILITY

By

KATHERINE YAUN

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The members of the Committee approve the thesis of Katherine Yaun defended on October 27, 2004.

________________________________
Eric Walker
Professor Directing Thesis

________________________________
Barry Faulk
Committee Member

________________________________
Nancy Warren
Committee Member

________________________________
Bruce Boehrer
Director of Graduate Studies

The Office of Graduate Studies has verified and approved the above named committee members.
In loving memory of Hazel Clarice Jones Winney
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ABSTRACT

This thesis examines the employment choices available to single women on a typical 19th-century Georgian estate, represented by Barton Park in Jane Austen’s Sense and Sensibility. The word “employment” appears more than 65 times in her six novels, with approximately 13 references in Sense and Sensibility. Although “employment” signifies a variety of meanings throughout Austen’s work, in this study I analyze the word’s significations of a single concept—a concentrated activity contributing to a larger, individually-motivated project. Austen’s repeated usage of “employment,” coupled with her satiric exposure of Lady Middleton, indicate an underlying consciousness of the tensions associated with the landed gentry’s elite status as a leisure class and the culture of boredom that permeated the estate, precluding the normalization of employment.

In this work, I focus on a particular slice of the traditional private/public scholarship on 19th-century British literature and argue that both male and female estate residents locate themselves in multiple positions along the continuum between boredom and employment. I analyze the characters of Lady Middleton, Elinor and Marianne Dashwood and Edward Ferrars in order to understand the variety of possible cultural responses to this continuum that Austen offers her audience. Sense and Sensibility, Austen’s first published novel, tangibly exemplifies an employment choice available to single women of the landed gentry—reading and writing satire—and thus revises the intangible “nothingness” of Lady Middleton’s boredom satirized in the novel.
INTRODUCTION

“FORCED ON EXERTION”: EMPLOYMENT AND BOREDOM IN AUSTEN’S SENSE AND SENSIBILITY

“We certainly do not forget you as soon as you forget us. It is perhaps our fate rather than our merit. We cannot help ourselves. We live at home, quiet, confined, and our feelings prey upon us. You are forced on exertion. You have always a profession, pursuits, business of some sort or other, to take you back into the world immediately, and continual occupation and change soon weaken impressions.”

In both her juvenilia and mature work, Jane Austen consistently satirizes the archetypical late 18th and early 19th-century lady of leisure who is mind-numbingly bored. Rather than utilizing satire to dismiss the bored aristocratic lady, Austen offers the vibrantly employed single woman, usually of the landed gentry, as a progressive revision of this cultural icon. Employment—an action motivated by individual interest that productively passes the time on the Georgian estate—emerges as a strategy for combating the social construct of boredom that Georgian society generally condoned as model genteel behavior. Reading a book as part of a course of study, doing needlework intended to benefit the poor or exercising on the high downs to improve personal health are three common examples of female employment in an Austen novel—each is an isolated activity motivated by a larger goal or project. The term “employment” appears throughout Austen’s novels; it is a common feature of her language, a foil to boredom, and the focus of this thesis. First investigating Austen’s satiric representation of a bored lady of leisure, I next examine how she utilizes the employment choices of single women residing on a Georgian estate, represented by Barton Park in Sense and Sensibility, to reveal specific alternatives to the social construct of boredom.

In my argument I examine a specific slice of the public/private dichotomy of 19th-century British literature and define it more narrowly as a question of employment and boredom, conditions which are both possible within and without the confines of the Georgian estate. Therefore, this paper reads less as a socio-historical examination of specific activities and employments of time available to single woman on the estate, and
more as a psychological examination of the complacency and motivation that prevented and inspired such employment, with formalist readings of the language Austen chose to express these concepts. I draw from a variety of primary and secondary sources, using David Nokes’ *Jane Austen: A Life* (1997), Patricia Spacks’ *Boredom: The Literary History of a State of Mind* (1995) and Amanda Vickery’s *The Gentleman’s Daughter: Women’s Lives in Georgian England* (1998) to build the socio-historical framework of boredom and employment on the Georgian estate and in Austen’s own life. The work of Michel Foucault, Barbara and John Ehrenreich and Harold Perkin on the emerging professional class and its surveillance provides insight into the advancement that was possible through employment. Austen scholars such as Marilyn Butler, D.A. Miller, Sandra Gilbert, Susan Gubar and Eve Sedgwick offer theoretical insights into Austen’s methodology and motivation for writing satiric novels. I have included references to other Austen novels, her juvenilia and film interpretations of her primary work, although the main focus of this thesis is *Sense and Sensibility*.

In Chapter One, I discuss Austen’s satiric representation of Lady Middleton, a character she utilizes to expose the gross waste of talent, intellect, and physical energy of socially-condoned aristocratic boredom. Lady Middleton, nee “Jennings” of the urban trading class, replaces an active commitment to studying music with a new commitment to “doing nothing” after her marriage to Sir John Middleton. I argue that her “doing nothing” emerges from a desire to meet successfully with the standards of boredom — inactivity and confinement — that are inherent in her new environment. Lady Middleton’s marriage into the aristocracy represents a kind of social advancement that was possible for accomplished or talented single women within the 19th-century English class system. Such a marriage often involved the eventual immobilization of a woman’s talents and pursuits, curtailed within a culture that condones feminine boredom, which questions whether an increase in material wealth and social status constitutes complete individual advancement.

In the next two chapters, I pursue the ways that Austen offers the actively employed Marianne and Elinor Dashwood as revisions of the “normalization of boredom,” or “the social prohibition for women of many forms of meaningful action” (Spacks 189). The Dashwood sisters have been stripped of their land and estate at
Norland, have undergone forced relocation, and are obliged to aristocratic relations for their new home at Barton Cottage. No longer exactly “landed gentry,” and far from “aristocracy,” they work through a new class position that eludes classification. Chapter Two discusses Marianne Dashwood’s method of taking “meaningful action” to meet her larger goal of exploring her family’s new neighborhood. Chapter Three is an investigation into the ways that Elinor’s daily employments contribute to a traditional “caregiving” role that facilitates her family’s adjustment to relocation. Both objectives create a myriad of employment opportunities that contain a strain of subversive unwillingness to emulate the aristocratic, but bored, Lady Middleton. Their performance of employment implicitly acknowledges the usefulness of “accomplishment” in gaining a socially-advancing marriage proposal, one that would restore their degraded social position. However, I argue that the Dashwood sisters’ vibrant agendas more broadly dispute the social assumption that a woman’s marriage into the boredom-condoning aristocracy automatically signifies advancement.

In Chapter Four, I conclude the thesis with a juxtaposition of Edward Ferrars’ employment choices with the Dashwood sisters’ to reveal his similar method of resisting entry into the elite culture of boredom on the estate. Unlike his female counterparts whose employment choices are limited to the geographic confines of the estate, Edward pursues employment — study at Oxford and ordained ministry — that allows him to travel in and out of this physical boundary. Edward’s two employment choices do not physically confine him, but they do remain inside the cultural boundary of what I argue is an “estate-nexus,” a geographic and cultural center intricately connected to privileged positions within social institutions such as the university, parliament, the military, and the emerging professional class. A forbidden engagement and the position of clergyman emerge as two employment strategies that rescind the estate-nexus’ trajectory of advancement and instead send Edward on a less glamorous path of his own choosing.
In *Emma* the protagonist contrives love matches for her protégé. In *Mansfield Park* Lady Bertram obsesses over her pet pug between what are probably opium-induced naps. In *Lady Susan* the title character aggressively seeks status-advancing marriage. And, in *Catharine, Or the Bower* Austen’s protagonist runs away from her oppressive aunt. Throughout her writing career, Austen ridicules erratic behaviors performed by bored aristocratic ladies and their genteel neighbors of commercial, professional and gentry families as symptoms of absent employment. Austen’s repeated use of the word “employment” in the novel correlates with activities a character performs that are geared toward the completion of a larger project, and that productively pass the time on the Georgian estate. The word can signify a range of ideas depending on the context of each usage. Meanings of employment can signify “to put into use,” a generic past-time, bustle and even interested absorption. By consistently including “employment” in her lexicon, Austen reminds her audience of an available alternative to the erratic behaviors she ridicules: employment. From among this variety of meanings the word portrays in the novel, the particular usage of employment upon which I focus is a singular activity performed by female protagonists that connects to the completion of a larger goal, a clear objective or a specific project.

In *Sense and Sensibility*, we read several examples of women who adopt erratic behaviors that replace truly productive employment. Mrs. Jennings’ aggressive matchmaking, Lucy Steele’s instantaneous and manipulative “friendship” with Elinor, Fanny Dashwood’s obsession with money, and this chapter’s focus on Lady Middleton’s “doing nothing” all fit this pattern (213). Meanwhile, the Dashwood family appears to resist such behaviors and instead chooses employment in order to reach the larger goal of adjusting to relocation, both within and without the cottage. We learn that upon the Dashwoods’ removal to Barton Cottage,
After Charlotte Palmer gives birth, the Miss Dashwoods are forced to employ their time with Lady Middleton and the Miss Steeles. Here we see the contemptuous way one supposedly content with boredom receives her two more active house-guests:

Though nothing could be more polite than Lady Middleton’s behavior to Elinor and Marianne, she did not really like them at all. Because they neither flattered herself or her children, she could not believe them to be good-natured; and because they were fond of reading, she fancied them satirical, perhaps without exactly knowing what it was to be satirical, but \textit{that} did not signify. It was censure in common use, and easily given. (212)

The very mention of her “fancying” Marianne and Elinor “satirical” signifies Lady Middleton’s intellectual perception. By nebulously censuring the Miss Dashwoods as being “satirical,” Austen ironically reveals in her character the raw makings of a satiric reader. I argue that it is not Lady Middleton’s intelligence that Austen satirizes in this passage, but her failure to employ her time in sharpening that intelligence with a clearer understanding of satire. The presence of the Miss Dashwoods prevents Lady Middleton and Lucy Steele from total contentment with “doing nothing” and “business,” their individual compensations for boredom:

[Elinor and Marianne’s presence] checked the idleness of one and the business of the other. Lady Middleton was ashamed of doing nothing before them, and the flattery which Lucy was proud to think of and administer at other times she feared they would despise her for offering. (213)

Lady Middleton has gained entry into the aristocracy through marriage and she is now content with “doing nothing.” Lucy Steele desires to advance her social position and does so through the administration of “flattery.” Both are kinds of erratic behaviors that submit to boredom rather than seeking productive employment in order to resist it. However, according to the narrator, Lady Middleton is more than uncomfortable — she is “ashamed”— when she is with the Miss Dashwoods. Their lively interest in books reveals an acute awareness of her own lack of intellectual pursuits. We can juxtapose Lady Middleton’s “ashamed” reaction to the Miss Dashwoods’ reading with Sir John’s earlier “amazed” reaction to their “occupation”— both are kinds of discomfort with
female employment. While Sir John’s amazement has more to do with surprise that the Miss Dashwoods defy the normalization of boredom among the landed gentry by self-determinedly employing their time with projects, Lady Middleton’s shame has more to do with a self-deprecating awareness of her acquiescence to the cultural norm of boredom. This acquiescence prevents her from joining the Miss Dashwoods in a lively discussion of satiric readings, but it also protects her from the “amazement” of her family and social circle, a signifier of resistance to her class’s standard of boredom.

According to Amanda Vickery in The Gentleman’s Daughter: Women’s Lives in Georgian England, “the resonant tale of the descent of seventeenth-century propertied Englishwomen into indolence and luxury has been frequently reiterated” (Vickery 2). Austen “reiterates” this “descent” through Lady Middleton’s character, who forfeits the “enterprise, estate management, and productive housekeeping” of her ancestors to the “decorative display,” or attention to a genteel exterior, that characterizes aristocratic women of early nineteenth-century culture (3). Part of this genteel exterior entails maintaining an appearance of languishing inactivity. Thus, one can read Lady Middleton’s inaction in at least two ways: 1) as compliance with her culture of languishing boredom and 2) as a kind of silence that protects her from personal shame over this compliance that obstructs her from intellectual employment. Understanding an exact definition of satire does not signify, and is thus “insignificant” to her condition as lady; therefore Lady Middleton views any effort at intellectual pursuit on her part with silent indifference. However, her nebulous understanding of “satire” does signify the intellectually stagnant atmosphere in which she lives at Barton Park. Were she motivated to search for “satire” in the dictionary, for example, she would have few promising intellectual companions with whom to share her freshly-unearthed definition. Marianne and Elinor have each other to discuss the fascinating nuances of language; Lady Middleton has Sir John, Mrs. Jennings, the Miss Steeles, and Mrs. Fanny Dashwood, none of whom indicates any real interest in reading. In fact, the narrator is quite unsympathetic to Lady Middleton’s character when she settles on Fanny Dashwood for companionship:

Lady Middleton was equally pleased with Mrs. Dashwood. There was a kind of coldhearted selfishness on both sides which mutually attracted
them; and they sympathized with each other in an insipid propriety of demeanor and general want of understanding. (197)¹

In wholehearted agreement with the narrator, I believe Lady Middleton “wants” understanding — she desires it, but “wants,” or lacks, the effort to sharpen it, the source of her shame. To do so would resist the standard of inactivity, one erratic behavior condoned by the culture of boredom she inhabits. Rather than choosing to resolve her shame through reading, she avoids it through an association with Fanny Dashwood, a woman who supports Lady Middleton in her attention to propriety and inattention to personal intellectual fulfillment.

Austen’s satire casts this early 19th-century character’s lack of reading as amazing when we consider that her character is historically situated within “the intellectual horizons of privileged, provincial women [that were] majestically roll[ing] outward in the course of the eighteenth century”(Vickery 287). Ever the master of irony, Austen is well aware that the “Lady Middletons” of 19th century England, trapped in intellectually stagnant domestic spaces, would hardly glance at a book, let alone the satiric Sense and Sensibility, to study employment as a productive alternative to boredom. Through writing and “ravenous reading” genteel women could “[embrace] a world far beyond the boundaries of their parish” (287). Indeed, this novel’s existence is evidence that some 19th-century genteel women, like Austen, successfully revised their boredom with a committed interest in the reading, writing and understanding of satire.

According to Spacks, “interest,” or “involvement with a world beyond the self” motivates employment and remedies boredom (Spacks 123). The narrator depicts Lady Middleton as having no interests, or “fondnesses” beyond her self and thus represents her as boring.² After all, Lady Middleton is “more agreeable than her mother, only in being more silent”; has a “reserve that is a mere calmness of manner”; has “nothing to say one day that she did not say the day before”; possesses “invariable insipidity”; that “even her spirits were always the same”; and that “she never [appears] to have more enjoyment from [parties] than she might have experienced in sitting at home” (46-47). The silence and want of understanding make Lady Middleton boring to others; this language reveals no apparent interests that would instead make her “interesting.” Yet, Austen has tucked a powerful foil to this negative portrayal of Lady Middleton inside a passage supposedly
centered on a “fondness” of Marianne’s, her musical ability. We learn that Lady Middleton herself does indeed have a significantly strong “fondness” for music. Early in the novel, Marianne entertains guests at Barton Park with songs

. . . which Lady Middleton had brought into the family on her marriage, and which perhaps had lain ever since in the same position on the pianoforte, for her ladyship had celebrated that event by giving up music, although by her mother’s account she had played extremely well, and by her own was very fond of it. (30)

Here we have the language of activity, of purpose, of talent surrounding Lady Middleton, a woman who other characters in the novel, including the narrator, have perceived as interested in “nothing” but an “insipid propriety of demeanor” (197). Austen utilizes the superlative to describe Lady Middleton’s interest in music: she was “very fond” of it; she had played “extremely well.” Further Austen’s use of the past perfect tense suggests that this extreme talent had come to a standstill after a specific event in her life, her marriage to Sir John Middleton. Why does Lady Middleton “give up music,” something she was “very fond of” and had done “extremely well?” Why does marriage compel Lady Middleton to forgo a genuine employment of her time, talent, and interest?

I contend that her marriage to Sir John symbolizes entry into the elite culture of female boredom condoned by the aristocracy. Her talent attracted Sir John’s attention to the point of marriage but was a pursuit neither he nor she encouraged once they married. Had Lady Middleton continued a serious study of the pianoforte, one wonders at the level of “amazement” that would have issued from her husband and social circle at this musical employment. Austen criticizes not Lady Middleton’s absent “fondness” for a subject outside herself and home, but her failure to employ her time in improving a very real musical talent after “advancing” into an aristocratic marriage. I am not suggesting that every aristocratic marriage resulted in a stifling life of boredom for the bride. According to Vickery’s examination of letters written by Georgian wives about married life:

What all successful marriages shared was a division of role and responsibility mutually agreed by man and wife . . . none of these husbands expected blind obedience . . . [but] for every harmonious union
described a parallel example of stale boredom or harsh discord could be offered. (72)

What I am suggesting is that the Middleton marriage has failed to establish a clear “shared division of role and responsibility,” which in turn has led to Lady Middleton’s state of “stale boredom.” But, I also contend that Lady Middleton is the recipient of enormous cultural pressure, represented by Mrs. Jennings’ bravado, to “win” an advantageous marriage proposal. The unmarried Lady Middleton was a member of the urban merchant class whose deceased father had “traded with success in a less elegant part of town”; her marriage to Sir John has therefore increased her wealth and social status (129). But when we learn that as a widow with two married daughters, Mrs. Jennings has “nothing better to do” than to remain “zealously active” in marrying “the rest of the world,” the implication is that Mrs. Jennings was equally zealous in encouraging Lady Middleton’s marriage to Sir John (30). Considering the urgent pressure to marry, one questions the likelihood of the engaged couple halting wedding proceedings until they had determined a “mutually agreed division of role and responsibility” for the marriage. Without such a predetermined “plan” the couple falls prey to the stereotypical habits of their time period:

... for however dissimilar in temper and outward behaviour, they strongly resembled each other in that total want of talent and taste which confined their employments, unconnected with such as society produced, within a very narrow compass. Sir John was a sportsman, Lady Middleton a mother. He hunted and shot, and she humored her children; and these were their only resources. (27)

In fact, Lady Middleton has unlimited “resources” for employment from her very real intellectual capabilities and musical talents. The narrator has failed to acknowledge these “talents and tastes” because the Middletons have failed to establish a mutual plan that allows Lady Middleton to continue developing them. According to Vickery, “whether a woman was content in marriage turned in large measure on her ability to resign herself to the traditional roles, responsibilities, and relationship of husband and wife” (Vickery 83). In contrast to “humoring children,” intellectual and musical employment are not typified as “traditional” daily “roles” of the aristocratic Georgian lady. Lady Middleton’s “doing
nothing” prevents and silences contemporary critics who would have read her intellectual and musical employment as distraction from motherhood. As Spacks has it, “boredom as concealment” is the hallmark of the lady’s “moral achievement” (197).

The narrator continues this topic of concealed talent by focusing on Lady Middleton’s countenance rather than on her forgotten capabilities. Through Marianne and Elinor’s points of view, the narrator rates Lady Middleton according to her physical and vocal success — if she pleases the eyes and ears of Barton Park she is implicitly deemed interesting. When Marianne and Elinor first meet Lady Middleton, we follow their thoughts that plummet from delighted to derisive as they detect reticence to be Lady Middleton’s distinguishing quality:

Lady Middleton was not more than six or seven and twenty; her face was handsome; her figure tall and striking, and her address graceful. Her manners had all the elegance which her husband’s wanted. But they would have been improved by some share of his frankness and warmth; and her visit was long enough to detract something from their first admiration, by showing that though perfectly well-bred, she was reserved, cold, and had nothing to say for herself beyond the most commonplace inquiry or remark. (26)

It is no wonder that Lady Middleton has “nothing to say for herself” — she has no apparent “fondnesses” that “entertain” her new neighbors. But Lady Middleton’s earlier description of herself as “doing nothing” is hardly accurate when we read of the traditional role of “female stewardship of children” she has chosen as employment over the less traditional female stewardship of intellectual and musical interests (Vickery 285). Therefore, it is more accurate to revise the narrator’s description of Lady Middleton’s conversational habits from “Lady Middleton has nothing to say for herself” to “Lady Middleton has something to say about her children” — a topic that engages her interest but that she withholds from conversation in polite anticipation of her new neighbors’ boredom with the subject.

Through Marianne and Elinor’s disinterest, Austen implies that Lady Middleton’s mothering is another form of compliance with her boredom-condoning class rather than as a self-determined choice of employment. The first project of motherhood, childbirth
itself, was seen “as both natural fulfillment and inescapable duty;” but child-rearing “gained a romantic profile” in eighteenth-century literature that lacked references to the authentic performance of duties such as breast-feeding babies or disciplining older children (Vickery 96). Lady Middleton fills the position of mother but does not seem to perform specific duties as seen in the following passage:

. . . the excessive affection and endurance of the Miss Steeles towards her offspring were viewed therefore by Lady Middleton without the smallest surprise or distrust. She saw with maternal complacency all the impertinent incroachments and mischievous tricks to which her cousins submitted. She saw their sashes untied, their hair pulled about their ears, their workbags searched, and their knives and scissors stolen away, and felt no doubt of its being a reciprocal enjoyment. It suggested no other surprise than that Elinor and Marianne should sit so composedly by, without claiming a share in what was passing. (104)

Lady Middleton’s position rather than performance as mother, the Miss Dashwood’s disdainful disinterest in her offspring, and the Miss Steele’s flattering interest in Lady Middleton as mother intersect in this passage. The Miss Steeles flatter the lady for filling the position of “fond mother” who complacently allows the tricks of her children to continue to an aggravating point. After all, such persistent flattery might some day result in a marriage proposal from a member of the lady’s elite class. The Miss Dashwoods take a more disinterested view in what are to them the offspring of the lady, mere indicators of her position as mother. The offspring’s undisciplined “incroachments” signal that she performs no real disciplinary duties in this scene. Ironically what the “mischievous offspring” are most interested in is the Miss Steeles’ workbags, the sisters’ current source of employment. Witnessing an employed woman is outside of the Middleton children’s daily experience, and according to our earlier definition of interest as being founded in something outside of the self, is a source of interest for the children. What Marianne and Elinor fail to see is that the offspring’s trick of searching the workbags is more likely simple curiosity in what is to them the new and interesting concept of employment.
Similarly, since neither of the Dashwood sisters has given birth, what is their apparent disinterest, verging on disdain, in Lady Middleton’s inactive mothering and raucous offspring actually has the potential to be a great source of interest for them as a subject outside of the self. Instead, their disinterest in Lady Middleton’s choice of employment contributes to the lady’s implicit classification as boring. On the one hand, Lady Middleton’s inactive style of mothering can be read as compliance with her boredom-condoning class, rather than as a choice to raise well-mannered children. But on the other hand, Marianne and Elinor’s disinterest in Lady Middleton’s mothering and in her “offspring” reinforces the lady’s classification among the elite culture of boredom.

Austen has illuminated several social ills in her satiric treatment of Lady Middleton. Who and what is to blame for Lady Middleton’s silence, shame, want of understanding, boredom? Lady Middleton herself for neglecting intellectual and musical employment in order to maintain an “insipid demeanor of propriety” that she perceives her social position as lady and mother demands? A society that is amazed not by women who matchmake, money-grub and manipulate but by women who remain actively employed with pursuing their talents? Or, the exemplary satiric readers Marianne and Elinor, who ironically “want the understanding” that Lady Middleton’s “cold,” “silent” character might possibly improve with the warmth, companionship, and lively conversation that they have to offer? While it is in the Dashwood sisters’ power to interest Lady Middleton in one of the many choices of employment, Austen has implied that “mothering” is her particular source of employment. Unfortunately, this choice fails to interest her neighbors just as much as it fails to fulfill an agenda, namely teaching her “offspring” how to behave when guests are busily employed.

Austen does not depict the subject of mothering as engaging, exerting, exciting or even interesting to Lady Middleton. Rather, we see in her character the embodiment of the list of the negative psychological effects of boredom: “listlessness of mind, inability to employ oneself, generalized insipidity” (Spacks 72). In the next two chapters, I argue that Austen revises Lady Middleton’s “insipid” behavior in the active characters of Marianne and Elinor. By watching their committed, purposeful daily activities, we read viable alternatives to boredom in the employment choices that engage Marianne and Elinor’s time and that energize their bodies and minds.
One must consider the possible motivations for the Dashwood sisters’ constant employment before examining their specific actions. The young women are no longer true members of the landed gentry, since a money-motivated sister-in-law and easily-swayed stepbrother have stripped them of their home and land on the Norland estate. They are under obligation to their aristocratic relation, Sir John Middleton, for his charitable offer to live in a cottage at Barton Park. The fundamental 19th century question of class identity eludes definition in the newly dispossessed Dashwoods, who fit neither “landed gentry” nor “aristocracy” class categories. With their very identity in question at Barton Cottage, the Dashwood sisters “do” in order to manage their indefinite new circumstances. One can read their employment choices as distraction from the injustice of a forced removal to Barton Cottage and from the simultaneous gratitude they owe Sir John and Lady Middleton for providing this new home.

Perhaps Marianne and Elinor understand that one means of rectifying their new circumstance is through a marriage that will reinstate their social position among the landed gentry, if not among the aristocracy. And, perhaps every encounter with Lady Middleton reminds them of the possibility of social advancement through marriage, since she made a supposedly advantageous match in marrying Sir John. Yet, perhaps they also understand the conflicting requirements both the landed gentry and the aristocracy hold for women: to be accomplished as single women in order to gain a socially-advancing marriage proposal, but to be “content with doing nothing” once married like Lady Middleton. Based upon their observations of Lady Middleton as a woman who fills the social spaces of lady, wife and mistress of the estate, rather than performs activities associated with these positions, one can read the Dashwood sisters’ employment choices as unwillingness to emulate the married lady’s specific example of boredom. Further, I argue that Marianne and Elinor Dashwood choose employment at Barton Cottage in
resistance to the hierarchical Georgian class structure that condones insipid boredom once a lady reaches its summit.

In *Jane Austen and the War of Ideas*, Marilyn Butler explains that *Sense and Sensibility* “advances on the assumptions that what happens to one of the central characters must also happen to the other” while it also contains a “concern to enforce a similarity of situation in order to bring out a dissimilarity of character” (Butler 184).\(^1\) My aim in the next two chapters is to uncover the “dissimilarities” of employment that Marianne and Elinor adopt under the exact same conditions in order to gain a broad view of the alternatives to boredom that were available to female residents of the Georgian estate. As the novel’s title suggests, Marianne’s project is to act out a life of “sensibility.” She finds passion, inspiration, and beauty in the people and nature of Barton Park which isolates her physical body outdoors, away from her family. Elinor chooses to fill her time with projects of “sense” that directly benefit her family and household at Barton Cottage, but that exhaust her physical body kept indoors.

In this chapter, I examine Marianne Dashwood’s interest in outdoor exploration. Marianne’s exploration of the landscape surrounding Barton Cottage is the action she adopts to aid her adjustment to an indefinite new social position and to a new home, a conditions that I refer to as geographic and social relocation. Through exploration, Marianne makes familiar the unfamiliar. Her activities include an exploratory walk, a wild ride in Willoughby’s chaise, a tour of Allenham, acquaintance-building conversations with Willoughby and a regime of self-regulation verging on self-torture for the undesirable consequences venturing outdoors ultimately brings.

Early in the novel, Marianne spends the afternoon in an “open carriage” with Willoughby as her sole companion. Elinor admonishes her sister: “I am afraid . . . that the pleasantness of an employment does not always evince its propriety” (59). In the social circle in which Elinor and Marianne travel, pure enjoyment is clearly an unacceptable motive for unchaperoned outdoor recreation with a member of the opposite sex. One might initially read Elinor’s comment as one of Austen’s famous epigrams, as though through Marianne’s character, Austen is asserting that “the pleasantness of an employment” is always proper and is thus a “universal standard” (Miller 2). But Elinor states that the “pleasantness of an employment” does not always evince its propriety —
implying that there could very well be moments when it does. I argue that Marianne’s excursion is a moment that simultaneously evinces “propriety” and “impropriety”: Mrs. Jennings teases Marianne about the excursion. Elinor reprimands her for the breach of social etiquette. But, Elinor also understands Marianne’s purpose is to spend time with a man she loves, an exclusive moment “outside” of a sister’s opinion or society’s censure.

In this scene, Austen utilizes Elinor’s character as a foil. Elinor angrily voices the cultural reaction to Marianne’s excursion to Allenham, represented by the "very impertinent remarks" of Mrs. Jennings (59). However, such impertinent remarks do not originate with Elinor; it is not the exclusively intimate time Marianne spends with Willoughby that she chastises. It is the publicity that the destination of Allenham and the “open” carriage generate that Elinor faults. Elinor’s chastisement allows Marianne to think through her actions and to defend the “pleasantness,” the fun, the personal interest, spending time with Willoughby has afforded her:

... for if there had been any real impropriety in what I did, I should have been sensible of it at the time, for we always know when we are acting wrong, and with such a conviction I could have no pleasure. (59)

As she speaks, Marianne realizes that although the Allenham excursion was pleasant and therefore in her estimation proper as it unfolded, the consequences of the excursion are quite unpleasant for both her personal reputation and for Elinor, the unhappy recipient of Mrs. Jennings’ “impertinent remarks.” After Elinor’s rebuke, Marianne submits that “perhaps it was rather ill-judged in me to go to Allenham; but Mr. Willoughby wanted particularly to show me the place; and it is a charming house I assure you” (59).

Marianne has demonstrated an understanding that she had committed a social faux pas when she visits the home of a man she hopes to marry, but from whom she has not received a marriage proposal. However, she iterates that this excursion has nothing to do with adhering to social conventions, and everything to do with sharing an intimate moment with Willoughby. According to Claudia Johnson in Jane Austen: Women, Politics and the Novel, “Marianne advocates self-expression unhampered by conventional restraints” (60). Through the “impertinent remarks” of Mrs. Jennings, Austen has revealed the amazement with which society views a young woman’s unconventional choice to employ her time: spending an enjoyable afternoon with the object of her
genuine affection. The public manner in which Marianne and Willoughby set forth on their excursion, as well as the destination Marianne realizes, can be seen as improper but she stands firmly behind her decision to enjoy the pleasantness of Willoughby’s company, outside of her family’s and society’s watchful eye, whether in an open carriage or in the privacy of “one of the pleasantest summer rooms in England” (60).

From the conception of their relationship, Marianne and Willoughby continuously blur the boundaries between public and private. The site where Marianne and Willoughby first meet is an undeniably public space — the outdoors. More specifically, they meet on the “high downs” between Barton Park and Allenham. Yet it is the oxymoronic privacy of the outdoors, the weather, and open spaces that employs Marianne’s time and interest. She finds personal contentment, and coincidentally, a tan — “her skin was very brown” — in this socially shared space (39). “In one of [her] earliest walks [at Barton]” Marianne and Margaret discover “an ancient respectable looking mansion . . .” (34). Both her “brown” appearance and exploratory walk upon the Dashwoods’ arrival at Barton are testaments to Marianne’s project of outdoor exploration. As the Dashwood family settles into their new home, Austen provides her audience with a glimpse into the bustling activity within Barton Cottage that inspires Marianne’s walking away from it, outdoors:

The high downs, which invited them from almost every window of the cottage to seek exquisite enjoyment of air on their summits, were a happy alternative when the dirt of the valleys beneath shut up their superior beauties; and towards one of these hills did Marianne and Margaret one memorable morning direct their steps, attracted by the partial sunshine of a showery sky, and unable longer to bear the confinement which the settled rain of the two preceding days had occasioned. The weather was not tempting enough to draw the two others from their pencil and book in spite of Marianne’s declaration that the day would be lastingly fair, and that every threatening cloud would be drawn off from their hills . . . (35)

In this passage, we see that it is the changing weather that holds Marianne’s interest and compels her outdoors. While rain has confined her indoors, the “partial sunshine” of a “showery sky” lures her outdoors, and the “high downs” tempt her away from the “dirt of
the valley.” By talking about the weather, and declaring it to be “lastingly fair,” Marianne idealistically decides this is the case, whether it is truthfully “fair” outdoors or not. Because Elinor and Mrs. Dashwood remain indoors employed with drawing and reading, it is more than likely not “fair” outdoors, but Marianne’s compass is set upon outdoor exploration of her new abode. In David Nokes’ biography of Jane Austen, we learn that the author hailed outdoor adventure over indoor reading as choice employments when visiting a new place: “‘I come to you... not to read or hear reading... I can do that at home” she wrote in a letter to Martha Lloyd (Nokes 219). Nokes states that Austen’s “mind was full of more daring adventures” that involved “abandonment and escape” outdoors when traveling to a new place, just as Marianne determines on exploratory walks to “escape” the confines of her family’s cottage and to learn the new landscape of Barton Park. Modern critics such as William Wimsatt and Monroe Beardsley argue the inaccuracy of referencing an author’s intent in his or her creation of a literary work, but based upon Nokes’ biography, it is clear that one possible source for Marianne Dashwood’s interest in outdoor exploration originates with the author’s own interest in the same. The connection between fiction and biographical non-fiction points to a rising undercurrent in 19th-century culture, that of dissatisfaction with ordinary employments available on a typical Georgian estate (drawing and reading in the previous passage) and deep interest in exploring the physical world beyond its confines.

The language Austen chooses in the previous scene embodies the determination of Marianne’s character to explore the landscape at Barton Park. It is a language embodying her intense personal interest in the weather and its ability to obstruct her project of outdoor exploration. For example, it is Marianne’s consciousness telling us that “every threatening cloud would be drawn off from their hills.” I argue that “drawn” is a pun displaying Marianne’s playful attempt to lure Elinor outdoors with her drawing pencil, implying that if Elinor joins her, she can use her artistic talent to draw a clear sky above the hills where Marianne wishes to venture. But Austen also utilizes Elinor’s artistic talent as a foreshadowing device to suggest that there are indeed “threatening clouds,” or obstructions, to Marianne’s outdoor project of exploration—a sprained ankle, and a risky acquaintance with Willoughby. Elinor’s “pencil” represents a realistic character whose artistry can sketch the actualities of the weather and of Willoughby, two
components of the outdoors surrounding Barton Park that Marianne is determined to explore.

To further exemplify the language of determination in the previous passage, I read a pointedly determined tone inherent in the phrase, “. . .towards one of these hills did Margaret and Marianne one memorable morning direct their steps.” The word “direct” has a distinctively focused tone underlining Marianne’s drive to venture away from the domestic space and into the physical outdoors. By pointedly broaching the weather as a topic of conversation, Marianne makes public her personal resolution to escape the confinement of Barton Cottage, in favor of the “superior beauties” and “exquisite enjoyments” of the “high downs.” The high downs, of course, will bring Marianne tumbling low down into love at first sight and the pain of a sprained ankle.

The same topic of weather that compels Marianne’s interest in this scene elicits her derision a few chapters later after she has met and conversed with Willoughby. Tongue in cheek, Elinor warns Marianne not to discuss too many topics with Willoughby early in their acquaintance:

You will soon have exhausted each favourite topic. Another meeting will suffice to explain his sentiments on picturesque beauty, and second marriages, and then you can have nothing further to ask. (41)

Marianne replies:

. . .But I see what you mean. . .I have erred against every commonplace notion of decorum; I have been open and sincere where I ought to have been reserved, spiritless, dull, and deceitful: had I talked only of the weather and the roads, and had I spoken only once in ten minutes, this reproach would have been spared. (41)

This is indeed the same Marianne speaking who in the previous chapter finds the weather to be quite a spirited topic. Austen’s language thinly veils the fact that Marianne is not claiming the weather to be a perpetually “spiritless, dull” topic, but that she is instead slamming Elinor for the alleged “reserve,” and “deceitfulness,” that manifest in her suggestion to stick with “commonplace” topic like the weather. Though her attitude toward the weather may fluctuate, it is clear that Marianne remains committed to
exploring the surroundings of Barton Park, which includes exploring who her neighbor Willoughby is through “open and sincere” conversation.

In her retort, Marianne alludes to a cultural belief that part of a woman’s education in the 19th century ought to comprise the art of conversation (Wollstonecraft). A young unmarried lady who could carry on a “proper” conversation, could presumably carry on the roles of wife, mother, and head of household. Marianne, however, has disdainfully outlined the two conversational topics she perceives her culture has deemed “proper” in a young lady: the weather and the roads. A woman’s command of these two topics functions as a social signal that she is at least attempting to abide by a cultural code of propriety. If she plays the role of a road and weather rhetorician, then it follows she will inevitably play the typical roles of wife, mother, and mistress of an estate. One can read Lady Middleton’s married silence and Marianne’s unmarried conversational gusto as functions of this social situation. But when Sir John teasingly accuses the Miss Dashwoods of utilizing their talents to husband-catch, Mrs. Dashwood rebukes him:

‘I do not believe,’ said Mrs. Dashwood with a good-humoured smile, ‘that Mr. Willoughby will be incommoded by the attempts of either of my daughters towards what you have called 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.’ (38)

Through Elinor’s conversational “reserve” and Marianne’s bravado, I see Austen demonstrating the Miss Dashwoods’ recognition that some conversations carry the social pressure to impress potential marriage partners with a knowledge of topics that are standard in the drawing-rooms where they may be mistress. But Marianne recognizes that being “open and sincere” is the key to engaging in a personally enjoyable conversation, an employment “outside” of the cultural standard, a place she wishes to explore. Claudia Johnson states:

If Marianne has resisted the codes which not only require but reward calculation and coldheartedness, she has submitted without resistance to those which dictate desolation and very nearly death as the price of feeling. (50)
By engaging in conversation that naturally complies with her present feeling Marianne asserts a creed that applies outdoors with Willoughby but that is not condoned inside Barton Cottage.

Decorous or not, the topic of conversation that does interest Marianne immensely is her acquaintance with Willoughby. As their acquaintance continues, Willoughby gives Marianne a horse, a gift that Elinor finds inappropriate because of the added expense maintaining it will incur, and the freshness of Marianne’s acquaintance with Willoughby. Marianne interprets Elinor’s reaction as once again “drawing clouds” when Marianne wants only to see “weather” that is “lastingly fair.” Thus she defends the appropriateness of the gift horse in the following retort:

‘You are mistaken, Elinor,’ she said warmly, ‘in supposing I know very little of Willoughby. I have not known him long indeed but I am better acquainted with him than I am with any other creature in the world except yourself and mama. It is not time or opportunity that is to determine intimacy; it is disposition alone. Seven years would be insufficient to make some people acquainted with each other, and seven days are more than enough for others.’ (50)

Marianne assumes that seven days are “more than enough” in getting to know Willoughby — but one wonders what happens after those seven days. That is, one week might be a sufficient length of time in getting to know Willoughby’s current “disposition,” but Marianne can have no way of knowing what his future disposition will be like one week from her retort to Elinor. Her defense of the acquaintance gives no allowance for changing circumstances, dispositions or yes, even changing weather. In fact, as their acquaintance intensifies, Willoughby idealistically asks Mrs. Dashwood to ensure that both her cottage and family, especially Marianne, will remain “unchanged”:

Tell me that not only your house will remain the same but that I shall ever find you and yours as unchanged as your dwelling and that you will always consider me with the kindness which has made everything belonging to you so dear to me. (64)

Willoughby holds Marianne “dear” and seeks the “kindness” of Mrs. Dashwood; yet Willoughby also holds social status dear and subsequently marries a rich socialite. This
circumstance dramatically alters his acquaintance with Marianne (it ends) and meanwhile functions as the catalyst for a tremendous personal transformation Marianne will undergo before the novel’s end.

After she recovers from a serious illness brought on by her grief over Willoughby, and poor weather, Marianne determines to modify her earlier project of outdoor exploration to “serious study” with outdoor ventures reserved for exercise:

‘When the weather is settled, and I have recovered my strength,’ said she, ‘we will take long walks together every day . . . I mean never to be later in rising than six and from that time till dinner I shall divide every moment between music and reading. I have formed my plan and am determined to enter on a course of serious study . . . by reading only six hours a day, I shall gain in the course of a twelvemonth a great deal of instruction which I now feel myself to want.’ (298)

Marianne takes her recovery from serious illness as an opportunity for mental and physical education. This patient, persistent Marianne who deigns to wait “when the weather is settled” to begin her new course is an altogether different character from the earlier Marianne who would hardly broach the weather as a topic of conversation, and who willingly dissipated her time with Willoughby. Marianne’s character undergoes a maturing process of transformation signified by shifting choices of employment that move from exterior to interior, from a desire to explore her surroundings to a desire to explore her mental and physical capabilities. The narrator laughs at such an extreme transformation and reveals that it is an exterior posture Marianne adopts in response to the extremities that resulted from her employment of outdoor exploration. In a long monologue, she admits that her past employments were selfishly motivated despite their apparent interest in the world beyond Barton Cottage:

‘Had I died it would have been self-destruction . . . Had I died, in what peculiar misery should I have left you, my nurse, my friend, my sister! You, who had seen all the fretful selfishness of my latter days; who had known all the murmurings of my heart! . . . Whenever I looked toward the past, I saw some duty neglected or some failing indulged. Everybody seemed injured by me.’ (300)
She admits that Elinor has been instrumental in listening to the “murmurings” of Marianne’s broken heart, but she has also been functional as the ever-present artist of realism, who “draws off” both clouds and sunshine in a landscape, and observes both faults and praises in Marianne and Willoughby’s behavior. Further, Marianne notes that she has been “neglectful” of “duty”—obligations owed to her family and neighbors inside Barton Park. Elinor, we will see in a moment, errs on the side of indoor “duty” while Marianne errs on the side of outdoor “pleasantness” when choosing how to employ their time on the estate.

Contrasting Willoughby’s earlier request that “everything belonging to Mrs. Dashwood remain “unchanged,” Marianne chooses a new form of employment, one that focuses on the indoor landscape of Barton Cottage:

“The future must be my proof. I have laid down my plan, and if I am capable of adhering to it my feelings shall be governed and my temper improved. They shall no longer worry or torture myself. I shall now live solely for my family . . . As for Willoughby, his remembrance can be overcome by no change of circumstance or opinions. But it shall be regulated; it shall be checked by religion, by reason, by constant employment” (302).

By accepting new employment, Marianne rejects Willoughby’s request that she and her family remain “unchanged.” As we have seen in Lady Middleton’s character, failing to develop “talents and tastes,” such as music or reading, can lead to mental stagnation and immobilizing boredom. Marianne may not consciously recognize the link between “unchanging” and boredom, but she is aware that recovery from illness and the memory of Willoughby will require new, “constant employment.”

The use of the word “torture” in this passage reveals a sinister strain beneath the narrator’s light-hearted ridicule of Marianne’s supposed transformation. Austen utilizes cracking language meant to depict Marianne whipping away the memory of Willoughby, and forcing her feelings to subside. In fact, the staccato repetition of the word “by” in this passage vaguely mimics the sound of repeated blows from a whip: “by religion, by reason, by constant employment.” With each “by,” Marianne “hits” upon subjects she believes would have prevented her predicament; but these subjects are also harsh and
laborious modes of employment that form the basis of Marianne’s new employment of self-regulation, a project that verges on punishment and self-torture. According to Michel Foucault in “The Body of the Condemned”:

It might be objected that imprisonment, confinement, forced labour, penal servitude, prohibition from entering certain areas, deportation . . . are ‘physical’ penalties. But the punishment-body relation is not the same as it was in the torture during public executions. The body now serves as an instrument or intermediary: if one intervenes upon [the body] to imprison it, or to make it work, it is in order to deprive the individual of a liberty that is regarded both as a right and as a property. (11)

By torturing herself with “forced labour,” Marianne punishes the liberty she took in allowing an excess of feeling, or “sensibility,” to drive a determined, almost ecstatic exploration of the outdoors surrounding Barton Park. The impetus for her outdoor exploration might have been to clarify one aspect of an indefinite new position stemming from geographic and social relocation. But her process of making known the unknown resulted in a broken ankle, a risky acquaintance, Elinor’s realistic disapproval of Willoughby and a near-fatal illness. The “constant employment” that will define her new regime sounds more like Foucault’s “imprisonment” and “confinement” indoors for the pejorative consequences of outdoor exploration than in a truly changed mode of employment. Self-torture develops from the aftermath of her project of outdoor exploration rather than from a new initiative. To stress this point, the linguistic initiator of Marianne’s “new” regime of study, devotion and exercise is ironically the last syllable in Willoughby’s name, “by.” “By” serves as the metaphoric “whip” that introduces the forms of employment Marianne will utilize to punish her ultimately disastrous adventure outdoors. Marianne, therefore, is still dwelling on Willoughby’s memory and is determined to “regulate” her behavior from within Barton Cottage — “it shall be checked,” it will (oh!) be — in order to prevent further disaster beyond its four walls.

As one might suspect from Marianne, we nonetheless learn that her project of self-regulation is temporary; Colonel Brandon approaches her in its throes to propose marriage.
Instead of falling a sacrifice to an irresistible passion, as once she flattered herself with expecting, instead of remaining forever with her mother and finding her only pleasures in retirement and study, as afterwards in her more calm and sober judgment she had determined on, she found herself at nineteen submitting to new attachments, entering on new duties, placed in a new home, a wife, the mistress of a family, and patroness of a village.

(330)

Marianne’s determination on retirement and study oddly keeps Willoughby’s request to remain “unchanged,” and thus “dear” to him, alive. Until she submits to a completely new attachment, one that reinstates her social position to the specific position of the military genteel, her employment choices reflect an attachment to driving out Willoughby’s memory with intense employment.
In this chapter, I investigate the ways that Elinor Dashwood’s employment choices contribute to a larger project of easing her family’s transition from dwelling inside Norland to dwelling inside Barton Cottage. This examination of her indoor caregiving extends my argument that employment manifests an unwillingness to emulate Lady Middleton’s example of aristocratic boredom. As Vickery states . . . female administration has received scant attention from the historians, perhaps because its most skillful exponents self-consciously expunge any impression of laborious attention. . . ‘the best sign of a home being well governed is that nobody’s attention is called to the little affairs of it.’ ” (131)

Elinor cares for the “little affairs” of Norland and Barton Park — the guest-room grate, a polite conversation with Fanny Dashwood, gifts for the servants. She may recognize that a woman’s “skillful administration” of such affairs can remove her from a class-indefinite, unjust living situation and into a socially-advancing marriage. However, the social assumption that a woman’s marriage “up” into the aristocracy automatically signifies total personal advancement is questioned in this chapter. Because Elinor’s primary goal is to increase the comfort of her houseguests at Norland and her dispossessed family at Barton Cottage, Austen portrays her character as one focused upon the busyness, labor and exertion needed to carry out her goal of caregiving, in contrast to her aristocratic neighbor’s “doing nothing.” Elinor adopts “sensible” employment choices like household management and stewardship of children (her mother and sisters) that define her caregiving, but I argue her exertion is more broadly driven by a powerful grief over the loss of her father and Edward, and at the injustice of her family’s relocation to Barton Cottage. Whether she is preparing the guestroom at Barton Cottage or preparing her family to move from their life-long home at Norland, Elinor employs her time by caring for the needs of her family and household.
Though the motivation for their employment choices is identical, the Dashwood sisters’ employments are distinct. Elinor favors activities that relieve the needs of her dispossessed family and thereby underlines their familial bond, while Marianne favors exploratory activities that relish a new landscape and new faces, but that separate her from family. Despite the differences that emerge from their similar situation, I am most interested in the “amazing” fact that both sisters employ their time through the adoption of specific projects (Johnson). To reiterate an earlier theme, what interests me is that the “cold insipidity” and “doing nothing,” the stagnation of one’s natural talents and deadening of intellectual curiosity that we have seen in Lady Middleton’s character, were condoned as conventional behaviors, while the Dashwood cottage, bustling with projects of outdoor exploration and indoor caregiving appears an “amazing” sight to Sir John Middleton.

The 1995 production of Sense and Sensibility directed by Ang Lee vividly illuminates the distinction between Elinor’s bustle for her family and Marianne’s melancholy seclusion from her family, and the “nothing” of Lady Middleton. The fact that Lady Middleton has no role in Lee’s production is a testament to her “doing nothing” in the novel. In contrast, Emma Thompson depicts Elinor busily making arrangements for the move from Norland, downsizing their staff of servants, preparing farewell gifts for the servants, accommodating her brother and sister-in-law, caring for her little sister Margaret, gardening and sewing at Barton Cottage, and generally exerting herself with activities that profit her houseguests and family.¹ And, the audience watches Kate Winslet as Marianne shunning Fanny and John Dashwood’s presence at Norland, exploring the landscape of Barton Cottage, ignoring other characters (mainly Colonel Brandon) when Willoughby is nearby, and walking to Allenham in the rain to morbidly view a home she had hoped to enter as a bride. Winslet plays out Marianne’s focus on what is “outside” the interior of her family’s circumstances: her father is dead but she still wishes him alive; Norland does not belong to her immediate family but she still wishes it was theirs; Colonel Brandon loves her but she wants to marry Willoughby; Barton Cottage is comfortable but she wishes to be mistress of Allenham. Her desire for the impossible mirrors Austen’s recognition that the ideal of Romantic transcendance had become a dominant literary theme during this time period (Day 45). Thompson’s
character may desire similar impossibilities but she portrays a woman who deals in the actual and the possible inside the new household — organization, order, subsistence, decorations, and household comforts.

When Mrs. Dashwood and her daughters first arrive at Barton Cottage from Norland, the three characters respond to the perceived injustice of their relocation in a different manner. Mrs. Dashwood and Marianne “encourage each other now in the violence of their affliction . . . they gave themselves up wholly to their sorrow, seeking increase of wretchedness in every reflection that could afford it . . .”(5). Elinor, on the other hand, literally works through her emotions with physical and social labor. “Elinor, too, was deeply afflicted; but still she could struggle, she could exert herself”(5). Whereas wallowing in emotional despondency serves to propel Marianne and Mrs. Dashwood through their grief and anger, Elinor chooses to work through her anger through rigorous action that directly impacts her family. She asserts the “administrative power” of the mistress of household” (Vickery 129). “She could consult with her brother, could receive her sister-in-law on her arrival, and treat her with proper attention; and could strive to rouse her mother to similar exertion, and encourage her to similar forebearance” (5). Interestingly, with Austen’s repeated use of the word “could,” this passage reads as a list of possible actions, rather than actual exertion. “Could consult,” “could receive,” and “could strive” indicate that Elinor’s busyness is as compulsive as her mother and sister’s emotional abandon. There is an analogous level of violent persistence between Elinor’s labor and Mrs. Dashwood’s and Marianne’s grief, as we see Elinor frantically grasping for something to do just as violently as they “seek [increase] of wretchedness.”

Austen portrays neither Marianne’s particular “sensibility”— pining for the impossible — nor Elinor’s “sense”— embracing tangible work — in a particularly positive light in this scene. Elinor may be just as afflicted by the news of her family’s eviction from Norland as Mrs. Dashwood and Marianne, but she channels her affliction differently, and I argue more productively, than her mother and sister. At the end of the day, Elinor may still detest her living situation as much as Mrs. Dashwood and Marianne; yet Elinor resolves to employ her time for the benefit of her family which produces, not swollen eyes and a headache, but rather: a consultation with her brother on the logistics
of his arrival at Norland; time with and attention to her sister-in-law; and a motivating speech to rally her mother’s spirits.

Ironically, part of Elinor’s “busyness” encompasses fulfilling the maternal duties that Mrs. Dashwood relinquishes. Elinor compensates for Mrs. Dashwood’s inadequate “stewardship of [her] children” (Vickery 285). On several occasions in the novel, Elinor corrects Marianne’s behavior when Mrs. Dashwood fails to do so, as we have seen with her chastisement of Marianne and Willoughby’s open carriage ride to Allenham. Part of Elinor’s project is to act as the “steward” of those who fill the “child” position in her family: Margaret, Marianne and Mrs. Dashwood. While Lady Middleton nominally fills the position of mother-as-steward-of-children, Elinor enacts one specific employment of motherhood as she checks Marianne’s behavior. When the relationship between Marianne and Willoughby begins to deteriorate, Elinor, again mother-like, rebukes Marianne for isolating herself in what she perceives to be excessively secluded contemplation.

One morning, about a week after his leaving the country, Marianne was prevailed on to join her sisters in their usual walk, instead of wandering away by herself. Hitherto she had avoided every companion in her rambles... But at length she was secured by the exertions of Elinor, who greatly disapproved such continual seclusion. (74)

Here, Elinor is attempting to rouse Marianne’s spirits after Willoughby leaves town just as she has attempted to encourage her mother when John and Fanny Dashwood arrive at Norland. Mrs. Dashwood’s natural inclination is to remain, child-like, beside Marianne in grief and despondency when she learns of their impending move from Norland. Thus, Elinor takes it upon herself to fill the vacant mother position and accommodate her brother and sister-in-law. Similarly, Marianne’s natural inclination is to remain isolated on the outside of the sororal threesome, rather than in her social space as middle sister. Elinor again fills the vacant mother position in Mrs. Dashwood’s absence when she encourages Marianne to be the literal middle sister by rejoining Elinor and Margaret on “their usual walk.” But in doing so, Elinor must vacate the eldest sister position; this self-created vacancy is indicative of a larger ongoing phenomena among the Dashwoods in which Elinor’s emotions (anger about the relocation; misery over Edward’s
engagement) are overlooked by her family. This is because Elinor is busy performing the social function, rather than biological position, of “mother” as steward of the Dashwood “children” and household mistress.

Lady Middleton on the other hand, who “does nothing” to perform the social function of mother, hasn’t the daily financial difficulties that Marianne and Elinor face. She admits to “doing nothing” worth noting within these roles. Elinor’s social status as a single, nearly impoverished young woman of the landed gentry is significantly inferior to Lady Middleton’s social standing, but she manages to busy herself by “doing something” to benefit her family despite the fact that no amount of labor can improve her financial situation. Her status as a member of the landed gentry is superior to the working class of dairymaids, seamstresses, servants, cooks, and the newly emerging positions in post-Industrial Revolution factories. This status prevents Elinor (and Marianne for that matter) from work that yields a weekly wage. Because her step-brother John Dashwood denies her family the financial support he had promised to provide as his father’s dying wish, Elinor’s only viable options for the financial betterment of her family are to marry well or to become a governess. If any character has reason for an ulterior motive when employing his or her time, it would be Elinor: she clearly has the energy, knowledge, and pragmatic sense to work for a wage within a domestic setting, yet the social hierarchy of Georgian England bars her from doing so. Nonetheless, Austen is careful to depict Elinor’s character as genuine, if somewhat excessive, in employment of caregiving, through managing the household, mothering and displaying her talents at drawing and needlework. As we see in just a moment, it is Elinor’s ability to remain composed, or maintain self-command, that allows her to accomplish so much for others.

Elinor has mastered taking on the role of “mother” within her family when this role is necessary to ensure connectivity and cohesiveness. However, she is clearly uncomfortable when Marianne separates from the group and forages into open “lanes” and “hills” where she cannot reach — Elinor cannot be both “mother” and “eldest sister” at the same time; she cannot perform simultaneous projects of outdoor exploration and indoor caregiving. If she were to join Marianne in her project of outdoor exploration, I argue that Elinor would lose a measure command and authority that she has gained inside Barton Cottage. Part of the impetus behind her employment of caregiving is to maintain
and exercise a definite position of social power during an indefinite period in her life. Therefore, one questions whether Elinor’s choice to employ her time through caregiving extended to her family is entirely altruistic. On the one hand, her project is necessary for survival: “what is at stake [for the Dashwoods] is survival” says Johnson (50). On the other hand, her two functions as “mother” and household manager underline Elinor’s self-command.

In order for Elinor to perform effective caregiving in which she identifies and assists with the needs of her family and friends, she retains a certain level of command over her family and herself. Elinor’s consistent maintenance of “self-command” again causes one to wonder if her philanthropic agenda is entirely altruistic since it facilitates survival and power.  We first encounter Elinor’s propensity for “self-command” when Marianne falsely interprets Elinor’s feelings for Edward. Elinor informs Mrs. Dashwood “that there is no immediate hurry for [a new grate for the spare bedchamber]” (33). Her own mother, supposedly the mistress of Barton Cottage, has asked for Elinor’s opinion about the necessity of a minor household accommodation, a new grate for the spare bedchamber. On the one hand, this is Mrs. Dashwood’s indirect way of asking Elinor if Edward plans on visiting Barton Cottage soon. On the other hand, one wonders what more could possibly signify who actually has “command” over Barton Cottage than when Mrs. Dashwood seeks Elinor’s advice on a trifling household decision like the purchase of a new grate? Elinor’s response is authoritative “...there is no immediate hurry for it, as it [is] not likely that the room [will be]wanted for some time” (33). Not only does she have the final say-so about the grate, but this response indicates she is the one who keeps tabs on the guestroom of Barton Cottage, typically the function of a household’s “mistress-in-command.” Elinor’s brief, authoritative response also leads Marianne to believe that she is indifferent to “quitting Norland and Edward” and to the immediacy of Edward’s promised visit (33). Marianne remarks to her mother, “Even now her self-command is invariable. When is she dejected, or melancholy? When does she try to avoid society, or appear restless and dissatisfied in it?” (34). The activities that constitute Elinor’s “busyness” may be trifling, minor, even culturally perceived as mundane or boring, but they allow Elinor to maintain both a position of power within her family and
her self-command, while serving as a kind of therapy — she comes to an understanding of her emotions through work, not by avoiding it.

In an example of classic Austenian irony, Marianne follows Elinor’s lead when she regains the self-command she had sacrificed to Willoughby through disciplined study, music, and exercise. But for now, in Marianne’s estimation, a lack of “self-command” is signified by seclusion, dejection, melancholy, restlessness, and dissatisfaction—traditionally negative qualities that her own character wholeheartedly embraces. For example, when Marianne is awaiting the arrival of a letter from Willoughby in London, rather than joining her sister in reading a book, “the book was thrown aside; and she [returns] to the more interesting employment of walking backwards and forwards across the room . . .” (141). Rather than rejoicing that negative qualities like restlessness do not plague Elinor, Marianne’s diction indicates that the “appearance” of restlessness and dissatisfaction, and the attempt to “avoid society” are preferable over “invariable” socializing, animation, cheerfulness, restfulness, and satisfaction. In fact, she treats the “appearance” of agitation over the absence of Willoughby as a kind of enculturated feminine “duty.” Elinor notes “with the tenderest compassion” the “violent sorrow which Marianne [is] in all probability not merely giving way to as a relief, but feeding and encouraging as a duty” when Willoughby quits Barton for London (66). 4 It is the constancy of Elinor’s self-command that Marianne faults — she perceives it to be unnatural since Marianne cannot, or will not, realize such self-command herself. Conversely, Elinor’s “self-command” (consistently social, animated, and cheerful) is an integral part of her ability to remain actively employed.

In Chapter 19, the narrator informs the reader that Elinor finds ample time to ruminate the dissolution of her relationship with Edward:

Without shutting herself up from her family, or leaving the house in determined solitude to avoid them, or lying awake the whole night to indulge meditation, Elinor found every day afforded her leisure enough to think of Edward, and of Edward’s behaviour, in every possible variety which the different state of her spirits at different times could produce, — with tenderness, pity, approbation, censure and doubt. (90)
According to Marianne’s logic “it was impossible” for Elinor to have strong affections and simultaneously maintain “the business of self-command” (91). This logic is in keeping with Marianne’s inability to “perform to strangers” that she shares with Darcy and Elizabeth Bennet in *Pride and Prejudice* (150). We see that Elinor does indeed have “leisure enough” to direct a great deal of thought toward Edward but refuses to indulge in “determined solitude” as Marianne does because doing so would be unproductive. “Indulgent meditation,” and constant “thinking of Edward’s behaviour” would impede her top priority — “sensible” philanthropic employment — but they facilitate Marianne’s top priority — courting “misery,” self-improvement, and the “pleasantness of employment” outside of Barton Cottage (66).

It is my contention that Elinor does think about Edward Ferrars in the pockets of time before, during, between, and after she performs the tasks connected to her project of indoor caregiving at Barton Cottage. In opposition to Marianne’s claim of absent affection, Elinor does indeed “greatly esteem” Edward, but she does not allow her thoughts of Edward to command her time or current occupation and she does not lose her self-command. Rather than interrupting her employments, Elinor’s persistent thoughts of Edward accompany her multiple tasks in a kind of rhythmic partnership between thought and action, mind and matter. To take an imaginative liberty, I see “tenderness” emerging during tedious needlework; “pity” gushing when Elinor entertains Mrs. Palmer in the parlour; “approbation” issuing forth when she attends to Mrs. Jennings; “censure” coming out when she refuses new grates for the guest bedchamber; and “doubt” plaguing her at the drawing table. Elinor works through her thoughts and emotions “in every possible variety which the different state of her spirits at different times could produce” lest she lose her self-command (90).

Austen’s depiction of Elinor’s extreme silence upon the Lucy-Edward secret engagement is another example of the self-command she pursues to survive an indefinite new geographic and social position. Rather than isolating herself as Marianne does, or seeking someone to talk to about her disappointment in Edward Ferrars and her intense anger toward Lucy Steele, Elinor annihilates her authentic responses to the secret engagement by retaining these strong sentiments, simply because she has promised Lucy not to discuss the Steele-Ferrars engagement with anyone. Yet, Austen is careful to
portray Lucy Steele in a villainous light with her premeditated words and actions. According to Sir John Middleton, Lucy is “monstrous pretty” and “the children are hanging about her already as if she [were] an old acquaintance” (102). The audience watches as Lucy Steele does indeed utilize her beauty for a “monstrous” motive. “Her features were pretty and she had a sharp, quick eye and a smartness of air” that allowed her, under the guise of an instantaneous, “agreeable” friendship proffered to both the Middleton children and to Elinor. This supposed friendship is designed to gain the “valuable” admiration of Lady Middleton and Fanny Dashwood, while surreptitiously sneering, demeaning and thwarting Elinor’s attachment to Edward Ferrars (103).

If Elinor understands Lucy is deceptive, one wonders why she is adamant about “the necessity” of deceiving her mother and sister about the Lucy-Edward engagement:

The necessity of concealing from her mother and Marianne what had been entrusted in confidence to herself, though it obliged her to unceasing exertion, was no aggravation of Elinor’s distress . . . From their counsel or their conversation she knew she could receive no assistance; their tenderness and sorrow must add to her distress, while her self-command would neither receive encouragement from their example nor from their praise. She was stronger alone, and her own good sense so well supported her that her firmness was as unshaken, her appearance of cheerfulness as invariable, as with regrets so poignant and so fresh, it was possible for them to be. (119)

To breach the silence would be a breach of strength, or “self-command” which ensures a measure of definition within her unwonted dispossessed status at Barton Cottage. Elinor does address her “afflicted” heart, not through a speech-act but through rigorous action. She equates the weight of her silence on the Steele-Ferrars engagement with an increase in her “exertion.” The more emotion Elinor experiences, the busier she becomes. And the busier she is, the stronger she is, or the greater amount of “self-command” she displays. She considers “encouragement” and “praise” in terms of a weak-strong dichotomy: to “receive” her family’s help is a sign of weakness; to maintain her silent “self-command” is a sign of strength. This rigid view inevitably shatters: the breakdown
of Elinor’s self-command mirrors the approach of her re-entry into society from dispossessed former landed gentry to her marriage to Edward the clergyman.

The first step in the breakdown of Elinor’s self-command is her obvious need for “encouragement” to mollify her intense emotions — “mortification, shock, confoundment”— as she processes the shocking news of the Steele-Ferrars secret engagement “. . . with a composure of voice under which was concealed an emotion and distress beyond anything she had ever felt before” (116). When Lucy leaves, Elinor is alone and “at liberty to think and be wretched” (116). And, “as these considerations occurred to her in painful succession, she wept for [Edward] more than for herself” (118).

Elinor’s commitment to caregiving is taken to the extreme in this passage. In an intensely painful moment, she cries for Edward rather than focusing on her own grief. Sedgwick argues that Elinor wills this manifestation of grief as an addiction to the manipulation of the signifier for will, the sphincter muscle:

A concept of addiction involves understanding something called “the will” as a muscle that can strengthen with exercise or atrophy with disuse; the particular muscle on which “will” is modeled is a sphincter, which, when properly toned, defines an internal space of private identity by holding some kinds of material inside, even while guarding against the admission of others. Marianne’s unpracticed muscle lets her privacy dribble away . . . the anguish she experiences. By contrast, in the moment of Elinor’s profoundest happiness, when Marianne is restored from a grave illness, Elinor’s well-exercised muscle guarantees that what expands with her joy is the private space that, constituting herself, constitutes also as the space of narrative self-reflection (not to say hoarding) . . .” (398)

To echo the language of Sedgwick’s argument, I contend that in the “moments of Elinor’s profoundest” sadness what contracts with her grief is the public sharing of her “narrative self-reflection.” Another analogy for this withholding, Sedgwick cites, is Foucault’s “repressive hypothesis” (401). Sedgwick maintains a Freudian interpretation of Elinor’s repression when she states its root stems from “withholding from herself the love of their mother” (399). In disagreement, I contend that Elinor’s “repression” results from denying the possibility of marriage to Edward through a “sphincter”-willed silence.
on his secret engagement. Elinor unquestioningly acquiesces to the confidentiality Lucy requests about the Ferrars-Steele secret engagement, and in doing so, annihilates for herself the possibility of happiness with Edward, leading to the slow shattering of her self-command.

Her self-command continues to dissolve until, at the moment Edward confesses his devotion to Elinor and the termination of his engagement to Lucy, Elinor continues to work rather than to speak. “I will be calm; I will be mistress of myself” the narrator reveals her thinking, but she maintains a rigid silence about her devotion to Edward (311). Her “will” to be “calm” and “mistress”—echoing Marianne’s earlier refrain that she “will” be checked by reason, religion and study—mirrors her weakening concentration on the employment before her. As Elinor inquires after the new Mrs. Robert Ferrars, she nonetheless “takes up some work from the table” (312). Elinor relies upon her old method of exertion under stress, of “grace under pressure” despite her currently impaired ability to concentrate (Gilbert and Gubar 112). Edward admits the source of her exertion is gone:

‘Perhaps you do not know—you may not have heard that my brother is lately married to—to the youngest—to Miss Lucy Steele.’ His words were echoed with unspeakable astonishment by all but Elinor, who sat with her head leaning over her work, in a state of such agitation as made her hardly know where she was. (312-13)

The fact that “she hardly [knows] where she [is]” signifies the crumbling of Elinor’s self-command. “Elinor could sit it no longer. She almost ran out of the room, and . . . burst into tears of joy . . .”(313).

His announcement removes the impetus of Elinor’s constant exertion and signifies the end of her need to maintain self-command. Only when she has been in a disempowered position—fatherless, class-less, poor, angry, or obligated to secrecy—has Elinor sought empowerment through exertion. But Edward’s announcement that he is not married, and therefore implicitly free to marry Elinor, empowers her and removes the source of her distraction. Interestingly, what we do learn about the Dashwood-Ferrars marriage from Elinor’s perspective is that “. . . [as] happily disposed as is the human mind to be easily familiarized with any change for the better, it required several hours to
give sedateness to her spirits or any degree of tranquility to her heart” (316). Elinor’s acknowledgement of the good to come of her “change for the better” does not quite convince her heart that this is the case.

Why is Elinor not convinced by the possibility that marriage to Edward will automatically bring social redemption and happiness? In a candid conversation shared by the couple about Lucy Steele, Elinor states that “if nothing more advantageous” had occurred for Lucy, “it would be better for her to marry [Edward] than be single” (320). This statement jestingly reveals Lucy’s avarice and determination to marry up, but it also hints at Elinor’s own doubts about Edward. After all, Elinor is Edward’s second choice and their living will be small. Austen reveals another reason why marriage might not truly be a “change for the better:”

They were brought together by mutual affection with the warmest approbation of their real friends; their intimate knowledge of each other seemed to make their happiness certain; . . . [but] they were neither of them quite enough in love to think that three hundred and fifty pounds a year would supply them with the comforts of life. (321)

“Mutual affection” and the seeming certainty of their happiness do not outweigh absent “comforts” in the favor of a marriage, although in the end they do not prevent one either. Perhaps it is Elinor’s own sentiments that she expresses in her remark about Lucy, that “it would be better for her to marry [Edward] than be single” (320). I argue that Elinor enters this union with a full awareness of the inherent fallacy in assuming marriage will improve her living situation. It may reinstate her social position as “genteel,” but with uncertain material comforts and dubious devotion from Edward at the inception of her marriage, Elinor might yet rely on caregiving as a source of satisfaction and empowerment when she and Edward step away from the wedding altar.
Concentration on employments such as outdoor carriage-riding and exercise and indoor household management and mothering appear to stave off boredom and to fill otherwise empty hours spent within the confines of Barton Park. By portraying complex female characters like Marianne and Elinor who seek to employ their time on the estate, Austen simultaneously invites her audience to also consider male responses to boredom within this shared space. We see Sir John Middleton’s preference for the hunt, Colonel Brandon’s picnic-planning and Mr. Palmer’s newspaper reading employ their time on the estate. However, these three male characters also have positions as town patrons, military officials and members of parliament. Their time on the estate is spent in leisure, rather in the performance of aristocratic, military or governmental duties. Furthermore, I argue that the estate functions as a nexus, a common ground where established members of these exclusively-male social institutions intersect and connect through shared leisure time. Yet, what employs the time of an unestablished male estate resident who is subject to the same kind of boredom that Marianne and Elinor resist? In this chapter, I examine Edward Ferrars’ response to boredom on the estate and his subsequent choice of employment. Just as Marianne and Elinor resist the prescribed behavior of boredom indicative of social advancement that Lady Middleton models, so Edward resists prescribed employments that the estate-nexus has established as signifiers of the kind of status Sir John possesses. Both male and female residents of the estate, then, must wrestle between adopting prescribed or self-determined employment, and the implications of choosing both.

**A Note on Leisure and Duty**

In this chapter, I interrogate the social and psychological conditions of leisure and duty that male and female members of the landed gentry experienced in Georgian England. I argue that leisure, signified by Austen’s use of words like “freedom,”
“idleness,” “comfort,” “ease,” and “listlessness,” is a potential catalyst for boredom and its ensuing erratic behaviors, such as Edward Ferrars pursuing a secret engagement with Lucy Steele. And, I argue that duty, signified by Austen’s use of words like “obligation,” “propriety,” “necessity” “consent” and “constraint,” is a potential catalyst for employment and its ensuing animated behaviors, such as Elinor's managing a household.

I question the accuracy of contending that a character's erratic behavior (such as soliciting a secret engagement) is necessarily the result of a condition of leisure, and the accuracy of suggesting that a an active behavior (such as managing a household) results from a condition of duty. If an individual member of the landed gentry assumes a stance of leisure, he or she might still experience “exertion” and “employment” and if he or she complies with a perceived duty, he or she might still experience “listlessness” and “boredom.” That is, when a character lives under the social conditions of leisure, that character is concurrently under a social obligation to behave in a particular way in order to remain classed as being “at leisure.” Peter Bailey has defined leisure as follows:

> In the bourgeois ideology of the reformers, leisure was less the bountiful territory in which to site Utopia, than some dangerous frontier zone beyond the law and order of respectable society. Traditionally it dispensed its own license, and it was its abuse which had imprinted itself most deeply in middle-class consciousness, in a work-oriented culture it represented an invitation to idleness and dissolution—the weakness of an ill-disciplined working class, the badge of an unduly privileged aristocracy. (Spacks 17)

Once Lady Middleton becomes a “lady” according to the hierarchical social sense of the word, she abandons her musical pursuits and eventually succumbs to a psychological and social state of boredom. Despite the fact that she undertakes the role of mother, this is a role she passively fills at her leisure and convenience, rather than a consistently active part that she plays. Similarly, because Elinor strives to comply with the sociological roles of “responsible eldest sister” and “head of household” that she perceives she is under obligation to fulfill, she undertakes a great deal of rigorous activity in order to meet the standard duties of these roles. I question the assumption that, because the majority of women of the landed gentry in Georgian England did not hold political, military, or
business positions, they were automatically participants in the culture of leisure and the “inactive” attitude of boredom.¹ I will conversely challenge the assumption that, because the majority of men of the landed gentry did hold political, military, or business positions, they were automatically participants in a culture of duty and the “active attitude” of employment.²

I am interested in the ways that the phenomenon of compliance with categories of leisure and duty and the subsequent states of boredom and employment produced by each condition can occur across gender boundaries, affecting both men and women in Georgian England. In this last chapter, I examine Edward Ferrars’ employments in juxtaposition to the Dashwood sisters.’ As the male counterpart of Elinor and Marianne, Edward is also fatherless, roughly the same age and in a parallel social position to the Dashwood sisters.³ Despite their similar familial and class backgrounds, accessibility to employment opportunities beyond the physical boundary of the Georgian estate increases for Edward as he grows older.

**Edward’s Employment Choices**

In two key scenes at the beginning and end of the novel, Jane Austen plays with the double meaning inherent in Edward Ferrars’ use of the word “engagement.” First, when Edward confesses that he is neither engaged to, nor married to Lucy Steele, Elinor understands that his purpose in visiting Barton Cottage is to deliver a message of freedom from engagements — Edward is free from the duty that had obliged him to remain engaged to Lucy Steele and he is now free to marry Elinor. In the other sense of the word engagement, Edward is free to do what he chooses with his time — he has no immediate engagements, or employments of his time, that distract him from his immediate purpose in visiting Barton Cottage and proposing to Elinor. However, if one considers Edward's attitude toward employment throughout the novel, one realizes that his new freedom is problematic. It was his lack of engagements, or employments that drove Edward to seek Lucy’s hand in marriage in the first place. His interest in her as a young, idle man had accelerated into a confining engagement. Now as a supposedly more mature, soon-to-be-employed 24-year-old, one wonders if Edward is sincere in seeking engagement to Elinor. That is, when Austen depicts Edward as being "free" and "unengaged" in the
following passage, one questions how genuine his current intentions to become engaged to Elinor are, if his first engagement to Lucy Steele evinced from a similar condition of freedom.

After Elinor has sped from the drawing room in a state of emotional distress, the narrator briefs the audience on Edward’s current circumstances:

. . .it was certain that Edward was free: and to what purpose that freedom would be employed was easily predetermined by all; for after experiencing the blessings of one imprudent engagement, contracted without his mother’s consent, as he had already done for more than four years, nothing less could be expected of him in the failure of that than the immediate contraction of another. (313)

Austen is playing with the variety of meanings of the words free and freedom meaning both “at leisure” and “unconstrained,” in opposition to words like consent and expected which indicate a level of constraint, or a lack of individual free will that is coupled with socio-familial obligations and duties. The last thing Mrs. Ferrars expects of Edward is to “contract” another engagement to a young lady. What she and her daughter Fanny Dashwood do expect is for Edward to begin pastoring the parish that Colonel Brandon has offered him. The difference between Edward’s current “engagements”—both proposed matrimony with Elinor and up-and-coming ministry in Colonel Brandon’s neighborhood—and his four-year engagement to Lucy Steele is the concepts of freedom and leisure.

Four years before his proposal to Elinor, Edward is unemployed and obligated to his mother. Edward is dependent upon his mother for financial subsistence before commencing his studies at Oxford, and is therefore unemployed in both the modern sense—he does not earn his own wages—and in the 19th century sense—he has no activities, exertions, projects, and so on, with which to fill his time. Regardless of his employment status during this period, it is certain that Edward is nonetheless engaged to a fiancé, but is not engaged with a profession. It is Edward’s lack of specific, meaningful, self-determined activities with which to fill his time that led to his engagement with Lucy Steele—he has nothing better to do with his time than to seek a secret engagement and, I argue, he has allowed boredom to overtake him. As he explains...
his actions,

‘. . . It was a foolish, idle inclination on my side,’ said he, ‘the consequences of ignorance of the world and want of employment. Had my mother given me some active profession when I was removed at eighteen from the care of Mr. Pratt, I think—nay I am sure it would never have happened; for though I left Longstaple with what I thought at the time, a most unconquerable niece, yet had I then had any pursuit, any object to engage my time and keep me at a distance from her for a few months, I should very soon have outgrown the fancied attachment. . .’

(314)

The first phrase Austen stresses in this selection is Edward’s reference to his “idle inclination” that instigates a “foolish” engagement with Lucy Steele. He clearly views his own desires, or “inclinations” as substandard and “silly.” We realize why he negatively views his own predilections when we read that he “wants,” or lacks, “employment” not because of an absence of desire for employment but because it is his mother, and not himself, who has the power to provide him with an “active profession.” That is, although Edward clearly informs Elinor that he desires employment —“an active profession” that will engage his interest and constructively employ his time — he also reveals the position of financial obligation and dependency he fills in relation to his mother. According to Edward, it is not within his own power to obtain employment. He is dependent on his mother for “subsistence-assistance.” Yet one wonders to what extent Edward is truly powerless to employ his time in this situation. Is his passivity a function of his membership in the landed gentry, a class that specifies there is a duty, or obligation, to remain bound by parental and pedagogical authority until a certain age — approximately the ages between 18 and 25? Or, is he behaving “idlely,” to use a 19th -century term and “lazily” to use a 21st -century term? Edward does stress that two factors — youth and inexperience with women — lead to his engagement with Lucy Steele. This indicates that he is aware of his culture’s practice of implementing parental and pedagogical guidance until a youthful individual (typically a male individual in Georgian society) is capable of constructively employing his own time, earning his own wages, and “experiencing” the opposite sex.
Regardless of any imminent estate inheritances, or assigned professions, it is clear Edward Ferrars desires employment yet lacks it. Lucy Steele, an “object” from which Edward needs to be distracted and distanced, is not the real source of his problem, but it is rather his “want of employment,” his desire for and lack of employment. Ironically, Edward laments that “had [he] then had any pursuit” or “any object to engage [his] time” to distract and distance him from Lucy, he “should very soon have outgrown the fancied attachment.” Lucy is his “pursuit,” the “object” that “engages” his time—in fact she “engages” his time for four years and to the brink of marriage. Edward has clearly chosen a mode of “employment,” judging from the word choices surrounding his attitude toward Lucy Steele: “a most unconquerable niece” (314). She poses a challenge to him, and he fixes on her as a goal to “conquer.” Words such as “active profession,” “pursuit,” “attachment,” and most significantly “object” precede Edward’s description of Lucy as fiancé, and create the sense that he equates her with such desired “objects” and “pursuits.”

Edward objectifies Lucy and equates her person with that of an object of employment, a time-filler, a thing, rather than an individual person. In the following line of Edward’s defensive soliloquy, however, Edward is apparently doing the opposite, when he describes Lucy as a person and not as an employment: “Lucy appeared everything that was amiable and obliging. She was pretty, too. At least I thought so then and I had seen so little of other women that I could make no comparisons and see no defects” (315). On the one hand, Edward’s objectification of Lucy is a defense mechanism — he must be careful with language when stating his case to Elinor. To objectify Lucy and view her as “pursuit” and “thing” rather than person would certainly be gratifying in Elinor’s eyes and soften her heart toward him during an important speech in which he justifies his past behavior to her. But on the other hand, it is clear that Edward had employment on his mind as an 18-year-old, and was then more interested in filling his time with self-assigned objects, pursuits and engagements than engendering an authentic relationship with a woman, which could potentially make Elinor more cautious in her acceptance of his later marriage proposal. However, his description of Lucy as “everything” that is “obliging” and “defect”-free is troubling, when we consider the fact that he is obliged to his mother for a work assignment, and that his mother finds defects
with his later choice to be an undistinguished country pastor.

In the next passage, we see that Edward rejects the concepts of financial and familial “obligation.” One would assume that if Edward is willing to accept the pros and cons of his individual choices to employ his time, that he would be more willing to speak about Lucy as an individual equally capable of making her own decisions and who is also not “obliged” or “obliging” anyone. Yet, I view Edward’s pejorative description of his engagement with Lucy (Lucy as employment) and his engagement to Lucy (Lucy as defective fiancé) as a single rhetorical maneuver. These speech choices possess a certain level of defensiveness, indeed, but they also contain hints at self-effacement. While Edward is successful in securing Elinor’s favor by describing the consequences of his state of leisure — boredom, erratic behavior and engagement with a “defective” object—he is unsuccessful in uplifting his own ability to choose wise, worthwhile employment. He might do Lucy Steele a disservice by objectifying her and equating her with a pastimes and “objectives,” but he also does himself a disservice by showing that his choices as an 18-year-old to pass the time have “since proved” to be “foolish” and substandard according to his family’s judgment but apparently, not according to his own judgment as we see in the next portion of his defense speech to Elinor:

. . . But instead of having anything to do, instead of having any profession chosen for me, or being allowed to choose any myself, I returned home to be completely idle; and for the first twelvemonth afterwards, I had not even the nominal employment which belonging to the university would have given me; . . . I had nothing in the world to do but fancy myself in love;’ considering everything, therefore, I hope foolish as our engagement was, foolish as it has since in every way been proved, it was not at the time an unnatural or an inexcusable piece of folly. (314-315)

The pejorative terms “inexcusable,” “unnatural,” and “folly” not only minimize Edward’s opinion of Lucy as a person, but they also minimize one of the few examples of Edward’s active choice of employment as diminutive and “foolish.” It is true that Edward’s relationship with Lucy is not a "profession,” in the 19th century use of the word but it is an employment of otherwise empty hours, and therefore fits the kind of employment this paper examines: a self-determined activity having personal significance.
that filled the hours of a member of the landed gentry’s day in Georgian England.⁴ Pursuing a relationship with Lucy Steele results from an autonomous choice of Edward’s rather than from his mother’s choice. In this passage, Edward is clearly not submissively waiting for Mrs. Ferrars to assign him some kind of duty, “profession,” job, or errand; rather, he proactively and self-determinedly employs his time by engaging himself with and to Lucy Steele. Edward makes an attempt, through his employment-relationship with Lucy, to rebel against the passive position of waiting for employment to be granted to him from a person in a position of financial and social power over him — Mrs. Ferrars. As an 18-year-old, Edward is accustomed to being told what to do with his time. Understandably, because of his youth and transitory status as student, it is little wonder that Edward waits to receive a professional assignment from Mrs. Ferrars. He is in a position of “obligation,” and “duty,” to her parental authority, is no longer under Mr. Pratt’s tutelage, and is not yet able to identify himself with the “nominal employment” of “membership” at Oxford University.

Edward is accustomed to receiving work from pedagogical (Mr. Pratt) and parental (Mrs. Ferrars) sources, and his unusual use of the passive voice in the preceding passage inflects the parallel position of passivity he experiences as an 18-year-old ex-schoolboy, future Oxford scholar, son of a woman of the landed gentry, and future estate-owning gentleman. He states that if a profession had been “chosen for me,” or if he had “been allowed to choose” a profession for himself, the engagement with Lucy might not have occurred. On the surface this is a standard use of the passive voice, with “profession” rather than “I” operating as the subject of the clause; on the surface it appears that he is indeed passively waiting to receive some professional direction. However, a close grammatical analysis of the entire sentence in which this clause appears reveals that Edward is in fact using the active voice, indicating that he is aware of his own autonomy when it comes to making decisions about how to employ his time:

. . . But instead of having anything to do, instead of having any profession chosen for me, or being allowed to choose any myself, I returned home to be completely idle; and for the first twelvemonth afterwards, I had not even the nominal employment which belonging to the university would have given me; . . . I had nothing in the world to do but fancy myself in
love; considering everything, therefore, I hope foolish as our engagement
was, foolish as it has since in every way been proved, it was not at the
time an unnatural or an inexcusable piece of folly. (314-315)

Grammatically, what Austen does in this sentence is not to utilize the passive
voice, but to utilize the two nominal gerunds of “having” and the one nominal gerund
“being” as the objects of the adverbial prepositional phrase “instead of”; and, each of the
three “instead of” adverbial prepositional phrases describes the active voice actions of the
same “I” (Edward) that chooses to “return home to be completely idle.” That is, “I”
returns “in order to,” or for the express purpose of, being “completely idle.” “Being -
completely idle,” then, is the active choice of “I” in this sentence. Austen has thus
constructed the words “anything,” and “profession,” as the direct objects of the gerund
“having.” “To do” is an appositive infinitive phrase describing the kind of “anything” “I”
does not choose “to do,” and “chosen for me” is a passive voice dependent clause
describing the kind of profession “I” does not “have” or possess. In other words, the first
part of this sentence, up until the word ‘I” is modification describing the alternatives to
the active choice to be idle that Edward makes.

If the dependent clause “chosen for me” were converted into the active voice,
which would read “[instead of having] X choose any profession for me,” we would still
glean the sense that “I” expects an outside entity to “choose” a profession for “me” so
that “I” “has” or possesses a “profession.” It is interesting that Austen chooses the word
“having” in conjunction with the words “profession” and “anything to do” as though
“profession” and “doing anything” are kinds of possessions that one “has” rather than
forms of proactive employment that one performs. It is as though what Edward desires is
not the performance of employment, the actual physical and mental exertion, but rather
“nominal employment,” the ability to profess to others that he “has” a specific
“profession” (i.e. Oxford scholar). Therefore, profession as possession rather than a
required performance, emerges as the theme of this sentence based upon a close
grammatical analysis of it.

Yet Austen also uses the oxymoronic passive-gerund “being allowed to choose”
as the object of the last prepositional use of the phrase “instead of” to describe the actions
of “I.” Edward is in essence stating that, “rather than himself allowing (or waiting) for X
to give him permission to choose a profession,” he creates an autonomous space for himself, his own “instead,” by actively choosing to remain “completely idle.”

Hypothetically, Edward might construct a sentence here that states, “Instead of waiting around for Mrs. Ferrars to grant me a profession, I am going to do the only autonomous thing I can think of and go home to be idle.” The culture of leisure might condone his financial ability to be idle “for a twelvemonth” but I argue that he views this decision as an active, if not rebellious choice to employ his time. True, waiting for a profession to be assigned to him, choosing a profession himself, or having something to do would have appeared to be more productive by Georgian society’s terms, but the decision to remain “completely idle” and to secretly engage himself to Lucy Steele are the independent goals of 18-year-old Edward’s, and assertive decisions as an individual to employ his time.

Austen’s usage of the essential gerund “being allowed to choose any myself” indicates that profession-possession is a component in the formation of Edward’s individual 18-year-old “being.” “Having” a profession granted to one by an authority figure, rather than acting out self-determined employment is one facet in the formulation of individual identity in Georgian England. That is, had Mrs. Ferrars assigned Edward a profession, had he chosen one himself, or had he “anything to do” at all, these “nominal employments” would have sufficed as his responses to the basic questions: “What do you do” or “Who is Edward Ferrars?” Whether he actually “does” anything-- i.e. physically or mentally exerts himself--within the chosen employment of time is irrelevant, apparently, because what matters in Georgian England is “nominal employment”--the ability to vocalize that one “has” or “possesses” an employment-identity, and not necessarily the ability to accomplish great feats of personal or social beneficence within that position.

Edward’s choice of words when retrospectively explaining his past behavior to Elinor reveals that he is still experiencing some conflicting thoughts about his engagement to Lucy. He states that “our engagement” has “since” “been proved” to be “foolish” but that “at the time” it was not an “unnatural” or “inexcusable” “piece of folly” (315). “Been proved” is of course another example of Edward’s use of the passive voice, which reads in the active voice, “X outside entity has proved the engagement to be foolish” but he himself has not. What he has actively, if less than candidly, admitted to is
that the engagement was not equivalent to “unnatural” and “inexcusable” pieces of “folly,” indicating that at some level he presently believes that a past secret engagement is natural and excusable behavior in an 18-year-old fresh out of school. Moreover, his present choice of words reveals that while “outside entities” (i.e. Elinor, Mrs. Ferrars, and Fanny Dashwood) perceive his secret engagement as the adjectival “foolish,” he rather deems it as the nominal “piece of folly.” Moreover, the adjectival “foolish” indicates that, while others continue to presently pass judgment on the foolishness of his past behavior, the secret engagement, his use of the nominal “piece of folly” is grammatically aligned with a specific time frame, “at the time” of his initial acquaintance with Lucy Steele. It is only “since” his initial acquaintance with Lucy that others have “proved” the engagement to be “foolish,” but both at the time of his initial acquaintance with Lucy and “since” this time is he aware that he equates “it” to a “piece of folly.” Judgment of his actions continues up until today, the present visit to Barton Cottage; the truth of what the engagement is in Edward’s mind, “a piece of folly,” begins in the past but still holds true “today.” Clearly, what Edward wanted “at the time” was “a piece of folly.” He actively pursued such “folly,” it ended, and now in an equivalent state of leisure before his pastor-employment commences, he desires an engagement with Elinor.

We can glean three more topics relating to employment, leisure, and duty in another scene describing Edward’s first visit to Barton Cottage.

1) There is a level of expectation in his language he “expects” to be provided with a job, because he assumes that his mother, the social figure who manages his finances, will provide for all his needs. I argue that this expectation of his is a function of the duties and obligations Georgian society ascribes to a gentleman of the landed gentry. That is, his family expects him to “have” a distinguished profession, but he expects this “profession-possession” to be granted to him at by an outside entity.

2) Edward still, as a 24-year-old struggles with conflicts that arise between parental/familial pressures when he makes decisions to employ his time. He is still cognizant and sensitive to their desires for him — but has more power to act autonomously now. But his adherence to familial pressure to perform a profession is likely, judging from the vocabulary he has adopted to label his choices of employment as “foolish” “fanciful” and their choices as smart and proper.
3) Living within a patriarchal society as a privileged member of the landed gentry influences Edward’s decision to remain idle for a twelvemonth as an 18-year-old. I speculate whether or not he is aware that he will enjoy patriarchal rights — an estate, a job, social status — according to his future status as a "gentleman" of the landed gentry when he chooses to return home to be completely idle. To address these three issues, I will investigate a conversation between Edward Ferrars and Mrs. Dashwood upon his first visit to Barton Cottage. During the visit, he appears to be “out of spirits” and feeling “powerless.” Mrs. Dashwood questions the source of his depression and powerlessness in an effort, I argue, not to interrogate him, but to encourage him to discover answers to the two nagging conditions (of depression and powerlessness) through candid responses to her questions.

First, in an effort to distract Edward from an apparently downcast mood that she believes is the result of “some want of liberality in his mother,” Mrs. Dashwood asks, “What are Mrs. Ferrars views for you at present, Edward? . . . are you still to be a great orator in spite of yourself?” (78). According to the language Mrs. Dashwood has chosen, Edward’s fate is in the hands of an outside entity, his mother, rather being up to his own discretion. His negative reply, that he has no designs for a public life, inspires Mrs. Dashwood to, tongue in cheek, remind him that “famous you must be to satisfy all your family; and with no inclination for expense, no affection for strangers, no profession, and no assurance, you may find it a difficult matter” (78). Mrs. Dashwood is ironically observing the fact that nothing but “fame” will satisfy the high standards of his family, but that the logistical fact is that his skills and interests—the absent desire for wealth, socializing, or employing his time with a profession — are not at all designed for a famous public life. Further, she is implicitly stating that while Edward might have an obligation, or “duty” to comply with his family’s desires for himself, his own desires and talents are at odds with their wishes. Edward states, “I shall not attempt it. I have no wish to be distinguished” (78). Here he asserts his ambition, but it soon becomes clear that “duty”—obligation, expectation—impedes his personal ambition. In fact, Mrs. Dashwood misreads his lack of desire for being “distinguished” for his “genius” and “eloquence” as a lack of ambition at worst and as instead possessing “moderate” wishes at best.
I argue that Mrs. Dashwood does recognize ambition in Edward, but that she has played devil’s advocate in order to cause him to voice a desire for his own kind of greatness rather than remaining his family’s puppet: “I wish as well as everybody to be perfectly happy but like everybody else it must be in my own way. Greatness will not make me so” (78). I might add that neither “greatness,” nor adhering to the demands of his family, nor following his own inclinations (free will) can make Edward “perfectly happy.” What will make him “perfectly happy” or at least satisfied, and free from the negative effects of boredom and leisure, is constructively employing his time with an interesting, self-determined, active, purposeful employment of his choosing.

To address the second topic, I read Edward’s character as continuously having to negotiate between his own desires for employment to be a country pastor and his family’s wishes that he be a famous orator, politician, or military officer. The fact that he even allows this debate to go on in his mind is a sign that he is conflicted and hesitant to forfeit his family’s wishes or his own entirely — he continuously fights between the two claims. He attempts to assert his personal power/autonomy/free will when he states that “like everybody else [it] must be in my own way,” but he also appears to be willing to contend in the game of “family duty,” when we read his willingness to negotiate the demands of greatness from his family with his less public personal desires for employment. Edward has positioned himself in a rebellious stance against the social condition of duty in favor of the condition of leisure by allowing the dissipation of his time to occur rather than fulfilling the “wish to be distinguished.” Austen portrays this tension in the following passage:

The shortness of his visit, the steadiness of his purpose in leaving them, originated in the same fettered inclination, the same inevitable necessity of temporizing with his mother. The old well-established grievance of duty against will, parent against child, was the cause of all. Austen’s use of the word “temporizing” indicates that Edward humors the conditions of family and his class. Edward’s objective is to be “perfectly happy,” and he knows that complying with his family’s wishes, or positioning himself within the confines of the social structures of familial and social duty will not bring him such happiness. If complying with familial duty does not bring “perfect happiness” then the natural
... the ordinary pursuits which had given to Norland half its charms were engaged in again with far greater enjoyment than Norland had been able to afford since the loss of their father. Sir John Middleton, who called on them every day for the first fortnight, and who was not in the habit of seeing much occupation at home, could not conceal his amazement at always finding them employed. (34)

The Dashwood family embraces and then enacts employment, which shapes each member’s daily attitude and actions. Theirs is a household of enjoyment, interest, and bustle. But it is Sir John’s literal “amazement,” broaching on discomfort, at discovering such determination that interests me. The implication of his reaction is that what inspires amazement is automatically erratic and unconventional. And, in Sir John’s view, that which is erratic, irregular, unconventional, eccentric behavior among a group of females is not matchmaking, money-grubbing, manipulating, or simply doing nothing, but rather “engagement,” “enjoyment,” “pursuits,” “occupation,” and “employment.” Through Sir John Middleton’s character, Austen transmits the aristocratic, patriarchal views that shaped 19th-century England’s attitude toward female employment: pure amazement. Yet Austen’s satiric treatment of Lady Middleton’s character highlights the writer’s own amazement that such a talented woman contents herself with “doing nothing,” an employment that submits to, rather than resists, the social construct of boredom.

According to Patricia Spacks in Boredom: The Literary History of a State of Mind, 18th- and 19th-century women read, wrote, and embraced a variety of employments in order to combat the psychological effects of boredom ascribed to their tedious social positions that were physically confined to domestic spaces: “listlessness of mind, inability to employ oneself, generalized insipidity,” (Spacks 72). Women authors of the landed gentry like Austen, in the very act of writing, resist what Spacks deems as the “normalization of boredom,” which was the “social prohibition for women of many forms of meaningful action,” (189). Literary critics have traditionally expressed an explicit “tone of contempt for the typical bored woman . . . women do not wish to identify with this unattractive figure; men find her hardly worth noticing” (180).
concluding supposition is that complying with his own wishes, to not be “distinguished,” will bring him “perfect happiness.” However, if he rejects the offerings of “nominal employment,” “profession,” and “fame” that persons to whom he is obliged (i.e. Mrs. Ferrars) desire for him, then his other option is to adopt a lifestyle of leisure. If Edward complies with his own wishes by adopting a low profile, “undistinguished” leisurely lifestyle, this decision can be equally harmful (just as unrewarding as following orders would be), simply because living a lifestyle of leisure has the potential to produce the psychological and social state of boredom.

In fact, we witness some of the psychological effects a state of boredom can produce during his visit at Barton Cottage. Austen depicts Edward as awkward, stammering, lacking confidence, depressed, anxious, and generally lacking self-esteem, signifiers that he lacks personal power. As a remedy for his depression, Mrs. Dashwood advises Edward to have “hope”:

Come, come this is all an effusion of immediate want of spirits, Edward. You are in a melancholy humour and fancy that anyone unlike yourself must be happy. But remember that the pain of parting from friends will be felt by everybody at times, whatever be their education or state. Know your own happiness. You want nothing but patience.; or give it a more fascinating name: call it hope. Your mother will secure to you in time that independence you are so anxious for; it is her duty, and it will, it must ere long, become her happiness to prevent your whole youth from being wasted in discontent. How much may not a few months do? (89)

And, as a remedy for his boredom, Mrs. Dashwood suggests that he actively seek employment rather than waiting for a profession to be assigned to him by a person in a position of power.

‘I think, Edward,’ said Mrs. Dashwood as they were at breakfast the last morning, ‘you would be a happier man if you had any profession to engage your time and give an interest to your plans and actions. Some inconvenience to your friends, indeed, might result from it: you would not be able to give them so much of your time. But (with a smile) you would be materially benefited in one particular at least: you would know where
Finally, to address my third observation listed in the introduction of this section, we again see Edward’s expectation that because of his privileged status as a member of the landed gentry, he will be “given” the possession, or status, of a profession, but this “possession” nonetheless does not resolve the problems of depression, boredom, and lack of personal power that proactive, self-determined employment would. Edward manifests a victimized self-view:

‘It has been and is and probably will always be a heavy misfortune to me that I have had no necessary business to engage me, no profession to give me employment, or afford me anything like independence. But unfortunately my own nicety and the nicety of my friends have made me what I am: an idle, helpless being. We never could agree in our choice of a profession.’ (88)

In a sense, Edward really is in the “helpless” position he professes. Several pairs of eyes are upon Edward in a panopticon-like manner; he perceives himself as the center of a series of controlling female gazes: his mother’s, sister’s and Lucy’s. When he visits Elinor on the edge of the estate and seeks a secret engagement with Lucy, one can read his desire to be beyond the sight of these controlling gazes. However, though his choice to become a clergyman allows him to demure from political, government, commercial public views, he will nonetheless be at the center of a series of congregational gazes looking at him in the pulpit. Harold Perkin suggests that

In raising the standards, self-respect and independence of the profession, the Evangelical and Oxford movements were for once on the same side, the first by demanding a more sober standard of conduct of morality, speech and dress than the average gentlemanly cleric of the 18th century, the second by emphasizing the sacerdotal character of the clerical office which segregated them from the laity and freed them from lay control.” (Perkin 255)

As a member of the early 19th-century genteel class, Edward’s “freedom” from lay control would be anachronistic: he is on the cusp of a shift in the cultural attitude toward “their” country clergy as independent professionals. Edward’s perception of himself as an
an “idle, helpless being” could very well be a function of the clergy’s then-dependence upon “the few rich” in the neighborhood that had not yet shifted to “an increased demand for his services” from “many comfortable clients of his own social standing” (Perkin 254).

Austen satirizes Edward’s despondency over the “heavy misfortune” of lacking “necessary business to engage” him. But her satire appears to be historically accurate: Edward laments his era’s lack of an organized group of professional clergy that, in a few decades, will indeed “afford [something] like independence” to its specialized members. Edward desires an independence that supersedes what is historically available to him within the traditional positions in government, politics, etc., that the estate-nexus can offer its members. Unlike his geographically confined female counterparts, Edward may be able to travel in and out of the public/private spheres at will, but these dichotomous spheres are contained by the estate-nexus.
CONCLUSION

The categorization of an individual’s employment as erratic, amazing, boring, or interesting is a cultural construct created by persons in positions of financial and/or social power, while the execution of the employment derives from an individual’s motivation or compliance with constructs of leisure and duty. For example, Sir John Middleton can deem the Dashwoods’ busyness as “amazing,” and view Lady Middleton’s boredom as normal. But I question how cognizant Elinor is of her behavior being particularly “amazing” as she scrambles to arrange Norland for her step-brother and sister-in-law’s arrival, or how normal Lady Middleton feels when she cannot discuss satire with the Dashwood sisters.

Elinor’s employment choice of caregiving is motivated by a particular household need, and a perceived duty to meet that need. And Lady Middleton’s “doing nothing” is motivated by the lack of demands on her time, and her perception of complete leisure. Marianne’s project of outdoor exploration, like Elinor’s “indoor” focus, is motivated by a desire to adjust to her new home at Barton Cottage. Finally, while Edward has the freedom to travel within all the available spheres of the estate-nexus—public, private, and their intersections—his choices of secret engagement and ordained ministry are what he sees as the best routes for achieving a level of independence within a confining system of employment opportunities appropriate to genteel young men.

None of these characters particularly desires to dismantle the “amazing” and “normal” categorizations of employment, they simply desire a sense of purpose within a limited set of choices. Austen’s consistent use of the word “employment” conveys the impulse of contemporary society to seek meaningful action within an often stagnant and isolated atmosphere on the Georgian estate. Her satiric representation of Lady Middleton exposes the social injustice of a condoned atmosphere of boredom, while her examples of the Dashwood sisters’ outdoor exploration and indoor caregiving propose a viable alternative available to women residing on the estate. Paralleling Edward’s character with the Dashwood sisters, Austen indicates that boredom and employment manifest in both sexes, and can take place inside both public and private spheres within the estate-
nexus. Finally, Austen’s candid look at the employment choices available to all residents of a typical Georgian estate, represented by Barton Park, reveals a collective 19th-century desire to remain active, alive and interested in the employments that organically stem from one’s ever-changing circumstances.
INTRODUCTION


CHAPTER ONE

1 Austen biographers have traditionally struggled with the tension created from her family’s determination to remember her as “the picture of perfection,” causing “nothing being said in the inscription on Jane Austen’s tomb about the fact that she also wrote novels” (Nokes 526). Similarly, Lady Middleton’s “insipid propriety” can be interpreted as a narrative maneuver that overlooks this character’s potential to deviate from the “propriety” the narrator presents.

2 The assertion that involvement with the world may signify interest, but it also assumes one’s interests can only be found beyond the self. It also fails to explain the complex intersections of public, private, self and society on a typical Georgian estate. Austen is infamous for “self-effacing anonymity and her modest description of her miniaturist art” which “imply a criticism, even a rejection, of the world at large (Gilbert and Gubar 108). Lady Middleton’s lack of interests can be read as her dissatisfaction with the world beyond Barton Park.

3 In this passage, Spacks draws a comparison between Lady Dedlock in Charles Dickens’ *Bleak House* and Lady Middleton in *Sense and Sensibility*. Both ladies’ “refusal to find or make the world interesting marks the languor of a group that feels entitled to its difference” (Spacks 197).

4 Lady Middleton’s “style,” or maintenance of an elegant countenance, can be read as a project according to Miller. “…style presupposes a deliberately embraced project. Insignificance might only befall one; whereas style, as the active *materialization* of insignificance, one must choose, pursue, perform.” (*Secret*, Miller 17) This raises the counter-argument that Lady Middleton has in fact adopted deliberate employment by completing a “project” of style.

5 According to Spacks, “those who work feel contempt for those who do not” (197). I read Marianne and Elinor’s commitment to employment as the source of their contempt for Lady Middleton, and the reason they find her uninteresting.

6 Marilyn Butler points out that “Jane Austen clearly argues that we do not find the right path through the cold, static correctness of a Lady Middleton, but through a struggle waged daily with our own natural predisposition to err” (Butler 192). Marianne and Elinor share in this coldness with their complete rejection of Lady Middleton.
CHAPTER TWO

1 Five years later in Romantics, Rebels, and Reactionaries Butler maintains that “part of the logic behind [Sense and Sensibility’s] structures is the defence of the old system . . . with a plot that was already much in use by conservative, Christian novelists . . .” (Butler 103). Austen’s use of a traditional plot in a historic period of turmoil (1795-8) actually supports Butler’s earlier claim that a similar situation in plot (i.e. conservative and traditional plot) will show “dissimilarities” or subversions from the tradition during the time in which the plot is produced.

CHAPTER THREE

1 “The government of servants was a full-time job” (Vickery 135). Elinor approaches this as one undertaking a daunting business venture which involves the downsizing of a staff.

2 According to Vickery, “the habitual self-projection of most was of upright strength, stoical fortitude and self-command. To be mistress of oneself was paramount — genteel ladies aimed to be self-possessed in social encounters, self controlled in the face of minor provocations, self-sufficient in the midst of ingratitude, and, above all, brave and enduring in the grip of tragedy and misfortune” (Vickery 8).

3 Elinor may be acting out a cultural trend by focusing on benevolent caregiving. “The institutionalization of fashionable benevolance constructed altogether new arenas for the expression of female conviviality and benevolence” (10).

4 “May women exhibited a craving to do their duty as ardent as any hunger for narrow, personal gratification” (83). Elinor appears to be no exception.

CHAPTER FOUR

1 In his chapter on “The Tendency Toward Mutual Infiltration of Public and Private Spheres” Jurgen Habermas notes that “The bourgeois public sphere evolved in the tension charged field between state and society. But it did so in such a way that it remained itself part of the private realm” (Habermas 141).

2 Habermas also notes in the “Polarization of the Social Sphere and Intimate Sphere” “the intimate sphere, once the very center of the private sphere, moved to its periphery to the extent that the private sphere itself became deprivatized” (152). A more obvious distinction arose between family and work. Here I state that both “family” and “work” spheres are potential grounds for employment and boredom. It depends on the individual’s compliance with leisure and duty whether employment or boredom will be enacted.

3 The Dashwoods and Edward share a common lifestyle and kinship networks. Their “work habits” are distinct. “A class is characterized by a coherent social and cultural
existence: members of a class share a common life style, educational background, kinship networks, consumption pattern, work habits, beliefs” (Ehrenreichs 11).

4 “Specialization was the PMC member’s chief selling point, the quality which justified his or her claim to a unique niche in society, but it acted as a centrifugal force on the class as a whole” (Ehrenreich 27).

5 In Foucault’s “Panopticism” he writes that “...it is at once too much and too little that the prisoner should be constantly observed by an inspector: too little for what matters is that he knows himself to be observed; too much, because he has no need in fact of being so” (201). Edward both desires and rejects this series of controlling gazes.
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Katherine Yaun completed her Bachelor of Arts with Honors in May 2001 at Baylor University where she majored in English and minored in Spanish. After graduating, she worked as a staff writer and photographer at the Lake Norman Times in North Carolina before commencing graduate studies at Florida State University. Katherine presented her work on figurative language in Cold Mountain at the College English Association’s national conference in March 2004 where she was awarded Best Graduate Paper. Katherine is currently employed by the Florida Attorney General’s Communications Office.