Antecedents and Successors

Three of Austen’s novels end with marriages that have incestuous overtones. In *Mansfield Park*, Fanny and Edmund are first cousins; moreover, they have been brought up as brother and sister in the same household. In *Emma*, the heroine marries her brother-in-law, Mr. Knightley, who throughout much of the novel shares a fraternal relationship with her. In *Sense and Sensibility*, Elinor, like Emma, marries her brother-in-law, Edward Ferrars. And in the same novel, Colonel Brandon tells Elinor the story of his desire to marry Eliza Williams, a sister-in-law brought up as his sister.

In presenting such endogamous relationships, Austen was following a pattern well-established in English novels of the eighteenth century. The literary legacy passed down to Austen was laden with undercurrents and instances of brother/sister incest—incest evaded, suggested, or committed. Moreover, the obsession with such forbidden love was not limited to particular subgenres of the novel or to specific ideologies; it crossed boundaries, emerging in reactionary and radical works, in gothic, sentimental, parodic, conventional, and innovative novels. Indeed, the incest motif crops up in so much of the literature of Austen’s period (especially in English Romantic poetry of the early decades of the nineteenth century) that it becomes almost a formula, even a code. Although Austen scorned and endeavoured to avoid the conventional methods of a great deal of popular literature, she exploited the fashionable topic of incest, the hallmark of numerous contemporary works, and challenged, metamorphosed, and transcended the subject. Instead of generating an entropic vision of society, or creating a sense of fear and chilled fascination in the reader, Austen’s incestuous unions are, for the most part, positive and therapeutic. The marriages of consanguineal relatives such as cousins and of close affines are metonymic; that is, they stand for Austen’s carefully wrought system of moral and intellectual discrimination.

In order to define the nature of incest in Austen’s novels, it is

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necessary to consider the powerful fraternal relationships between her characters and society's conception of the relationships. In *Totem and Taboo*, Freud comments on the prohibition of incest in ancient tribes:

... exogamy linked with the totem effects more (and therefore aims at more) than the prevention of incest with a man's mother and sisters. It makes sexual intercourse impossible for a man with all the women of his own clan (that is to say with a number of women who are not his blood-relatives) by treating them all as though they were his blood-relatives. It is difficult at first sight to see the psychological justification for this very extensive restriction, which goes far beyond anything comparable among civilised peoples. It may be gathered from this, however, that the part played by the totem as common ancestor is taken very seriously. All those who are descended from the totem are blood-relations. They form a single family, and within that family even the most distant degree of kinship is regarded as an absolute hindrance to sexual intercourse.¹

Freud stresses the great sensitivity of the tribe to incest, and how it replaces blood-relationships with 'totem kinship'. He goes on to suggest that the linguistic usage in totemic communities is also relevant to a consideration of incest, since the terms used by members of a tribe to refer to each other do not imply so much a relation between two individuals as a relation between an individual and a group. Thus, a man might use the word 'sister' not only for his blood sister but also for all the other women who may be considered his sisters according to tribal law. In this way, the kinship terms used by tribal members do not necessarily indicate any consanguinity but instead represent social rather than blood relationships.²

Although, as Freud points out, such extensive taboos do not exist in civilized society, it is nonetheless clear that in Austen's time some of these prohibitions, whether conscious or unconscious, existed in an attenuated form. In eighteenth-century England, marriage between first cousins, though authorized, was often discouraged. Middle-class and aristocratic families were aware of the taboo at least to some extent. In Austen's novels, the lingering and attenuated taboo surfaces, for example, when Mrs. Norris says near the beginning of *Mansfield Park* that it is 'morally impossible' (MP,