

## Regency Era Norms and Expectations of Mothers

### Responsibilities of the Mistress of the Estate - sourced from Maria Grace

- Depending on the size of the estate, role of a mistress was the equivalent of managing a small hotel to being the CEO of a major corporation.
- Oversaw the finances (CFO), food service, hiring and training of staff, procurement, charitable contributions, interior design of “corporate HQ”, and entertaining. Depending on her intelligence, she might assist her husband with the overall estate business. PLUS expected to raise the children and care for sick family members.
- Mrs. Rundell’s “A New System of Domestic Cookery” was a popular book that guided women on the process of managing the household budget, accounts, and credit.
- Most ladies had books of receipts and instruction into which they would add their newest receipts to those of their foremothers.
- She had to manage all the supplies for the home - what couldn’t be made was purchased - clothing for family and servants, the raising and preserving of foodstuffs and medicinal preparations.
- Servants
  - Men were legally responsible for hiring and firing the servants, the mistress oversaw engaging, instructing and supervising domestic servants.
  - Inefficient and dishonest servants were common, so close control and supervision were often necessary.
  - Servants were often only seeking short term situations, so with high turnover rate, the mistress had to be constantly on the lookout for new ones.
  - Was responsible to care for their needs, and usually kept herself informed about their families so she could provide assistance where needed - medical, clothing, some education.
- Role extended to the Community at large - to those who were her social equals and those below
  - On her level: Expected to host dinners and social gatherings, provide entertainment and social connections, and pay regular calls.
  - Below her level: she provided support.
    - She could be called upon to provide advice to sick and injured if a doctor wasn’t around,
    - if the village children needed to be educated, she would organize the dame school
    - At Christmas, she would provide gifts of clothes and blankets
    - Cared for the poor (sometimes coordinated with the local clergyman) -and would visit them, deliver food - usually leftovers, give advice and listen to their complaints.
- Children
  - Expected to have them and produce an heir
  - Hire nursery maids and a governess if the estate could afford it. If not, care for them herself.
  - Parenting was also carried out by grandparents, aunts and uncles, paid and unpaid carers
  - Responsible for their education whether she provided it or hired others to teach.

- Responsible for the moral education.
- Sons were often sent away at 12 or 13 - expected to be adults, and to get away from the potential harmful emotional influence of the mother.
- Daughters: make sure they acquired the expected accomplishments for their station in order to attract an appropriate marriage partner
  - Degree of a women's accomplishments reflected both her family's wealth and their commitment to having her marry well.
  - Female accomplishments included: singing, playing an instrument, dancing, speaking French possibly Italian, drawing, painting, sewing, decorative needlework, elegant penmanship, mathematics to manage household ledgers, and the ability to conduct polite education that revealed suitable knowledge of history, literature, and poetry.
  - Mistress of the house would tutor them in the skills she could and arrange for masters to be brought in to teach the rest if finances allowed. Girls could also be sent away to school to attain some of these accomplishments.

### **Georgian Period Expectations of Mothers (from Julia McLeod and Joanne Bailey)**

#### **Romantic Period**

The Enlightened Era of the 1700s which focused on Reason heavily influenced the Romantic Period (late 1700 to mid 1800s), which emphasised an individual's experience and feeling, particularly within nature, as the basis for true knowledge.

John Locke and Jean-Jacques Rousseau had significant impact on Georgians perception of childhood.

- Rousseau believed that children were born innately good and parents should think of children as being white paper or wax to be moulded and fashioned as one pleases. (Children should be left to their own devices)
- Locke took a more interventionists approach to parenting a believed that nurture not nature made the difference. "That all the men we meet with, nine parts of ten are what they are, good or evil, useful or not, by their education."
- Enlightenment philosophers believed children had the ability to reason, so parents were expected to harness this by teaching them both reading and writing, and the basics of right and wrong.

As part of the Romantic era philosophy, the home was now considered the initial place for fostering the future citizens of the British empire, therefore, a lot of emphasis was placed on the care and training of children.

- While mothers had the primary responsibility for the education and moral education of children, fathers were expected to have an emotional connection with their children. (Ok to show emotion and hug them).
- Shift in how to discipline their children from physical punishment to a more forgiving attitude that rewarded children for good conduct.
  - Wilful misbehavior was from children not knowing how to govern their emotions.
  - Parents were instructed to teach offspring to exercise their reason to achieve self-control.
  - No matter how unruly the child's behavior, parents were instructed to remain calm. Passion in parents will generate the same in children.

- Bad parenting was understood to breed badly behaved children. Parental influence during childhood was thought to have a profound impact upon an individual's personality and values in later life.
- Parents could find themselves held responsible for the criminal behavior of their young children.

With this new emphasis on the child was an increased debate over the role of mothers as child bearers and rearers, and writers during this period actively engaged in the arguments about motherhood.

The Romantic ideals of motherhood were based on a belief that women were naturally sympathetic, patient, and self-sacrificing and were uniquely equipped to nurture children

- however their emotional nature in extreme could be dangerous.

The debate about the nature of a mother's temperament, along with the increased emphasis on childhood as an important developmental phase, led to significant changes in child rearing during this time.

Because women could bear children, women were seen as possessing a biological power worthy of both admiration and fear.

The female body came under close scrutiny and as scientists sought to understand the female reproductive process, and parliament to regulate it. Many of these fears and ideals dominated the Victorian period and continue to influence us today.

The driving themes were:

- The ability to bear children was woman's foundational contribution to society, but also a concern since this power, if left unchecked, would pose a threat to social order.
- High infant mortality rates - 1 in 4 babies died before reaching their first birthday.
- The growth of the field of obstetrics and debates over reproductive power brought the private space of the womb into public debate. And marginalized midwifery.
- Debates over the importance of breastfeeding to ensure the health of children and the mother-child bond.
- Samuel Johnson in a letter in 1763 stated: "Nature has given women so much power, that the law wisely has given them little."
- Changes in legislation punished women if they concealed their pregnancy.
- If a marriage broke down (often from domestic violence), the fathers ALWAYS gained custody of the children and the mother had NO visiting rights.
- Not until 1839 Custody of Infants Act could mothers petition court for custody of their children under 7, and for periodic visits who were 7 and older
- 1834 Poor Laws denied relief to unwed mothers, because popular opinion was if unwed mothers received food and money for essentials, they would just be encouraged to have more children. Result was rise of infanticide rates.

Romantic literature indicates that there was a lot of fear about entrusting the nation's future to mother's care.

As you can imagine, conduct books were published on the topic of motherhood. Two common themes were the dangerously good mother and the naturally bad mother.

“Dangerously Good Mother: If she loved her children excessively, unchecked by the rational approaches to childrearing, she risked making them spoiled and selfish.

- Mary Wollstonecraft in *Vindication of the Rights of Women*, warned of the dangers of excessive maternal love. “It is want of reason in their affections which makes women so often run into extremes, and either be the most fond or most careless and unnatural mothers”.
- Mrs. Garner is rational with delightful children. Mrs Bennett has over-indulged Lydia. Lady Middleton is indulgent and incompetent and has horrible children.

Naturally Bad Mother: operated from her overly emotional constitution.

- If she was exceeding selfish mother, she lacked the ability to control her own feelings and desires so that she neglected or harmed her children.
- If she was the overly sympathetic mother - and in severe poverty, she could become murderous committing infanticide to protect her child from misery.
- Mary Wollstonecraft noted that some mothers did not enjoy motherhood and were neglectful
- Mary Musgrove - neglectful mother

**Conduct books/essays** aligned with standards for women regarding virtue, domesticity, charity, chastity and modesty. Society praised mothers who engaged in parenting without drawing attention to themselves as people with narratives of their own.

- Thomas Gisborne’s *Enquiry into the Duties of the Female Sex* (1797) popular and Jane Austen read and liked per her letters to Cassandra.
  - Mothers supervise a child’s diet and exercise, avoid fashionable books, governess and schools in favor of substantive ones, monitor a child’s friends and associates including servants. He underscores the importance of shaping a child’s character - encourages mothers to develop relationships with their children so they confide in their mothers.
  - Believed the greatest danger is the artful, furtive child whose behavior prevents a mother from parenting properly. Warns against maternal behaviors that encourage duplicity in children such as partiality or promoting sibling rivalry.
  - Mothers should model virtuous behavior to guide their daughters successfully through courtship and adulthood.
- Hester Chapone, Hannah More, and Mary Wollstonecraft all recommended a course of serious reading as the most effective method of female education (how JA as well as most of her heroines receive their education)
- Madame De Genlis “*Adelaide and Theodore*” (mentioned in *Emma*), Maria Edgeworth, Hannah More, Clara Reeve, Jane West also authors of conduct novels and books widely disseminated - all these writers were conservative politically and highly orthodox theologically. Many of these authors were referenced in “*Letters*”.
  - Lady Susan uses these works - their language to justify her misconduct. It was the language of those who criticized her. Virtue is taught, according to Locke, and depends on absolute obedience. Therefore, when Lady Susan is outraged by

Frederica's disobedience, she can express her outrage to her enemies, because according to conduct books, she should be outraged. (Barbara Horwitz - Lady Susan: The Wicked Mother in Jane Austen's Novels)

- "Vindication of the Rights of Women" and "the Wrongs of Women, or Maria" by Mary Wollstonecraft: rational approach, educate children to understand patriotism - therefore, the mother must be a patriot. Breastfeeding was a moral and societal duty. Grief of mother could harm the fetus during pregnancy. Women are the victims of constant and systematic injustice.
  - Bitterly attacks girls being trained to use emotions to manipulate (like Lady Middleton's daughter, Annamarie). Women should be educated to be rational, moral creatures rather than frivolous, weak beings only capable of power through manipulation. I do not wish women to have power over men, but over themselves.
- "Sermons to Young Women" (1766) Reverend James Fordyce said it was through their mothering that women had the ability to diffuse virtue and happiness through the human race.
- "Emile by Rousseau", mothers who were overly indulgent toward their children (therefore neglectful of responsibilities as a parent) crippled a nation by producing citizens unwilling to sacrifice personal desires for the goals of a nation.
- "A Little Pretty Pocket Book" by John Newbery - Children's book with instruction (novel idea for the time)
- Essay on "the Nursing and Management of Children" (1748) by Dr. William Cadogan about the men who became "the puny insect" from staying too long with his mother, becoming overly effeminate - better to be hardened by the rigours of competition and boarding school life.
- "Don Juan" by Byron. Example of loving mothers becoming bad mothers when their strong attachment led to extreme actions to prevent harm to their child - which would lead to greater harm.
- Breastfeeding: William Roscoe's 1792 "The Nurse. A Poem", Maria Edgeworth's "Ennui", Dr. William Smellie's "A Treatise on the Theory and Practice of Midwifery" 1752 all extolled the dangers of a wet nurse and emphasised breastfeeding as a mother's duty and in the interest of a more healthy child. (and Wollstonecraft above)
- "The Sultane Mother" and "Indian Woman's Death-Song" poems by Felicia Hemans portray infanticide and a sympathetic and heroic action of desperate mothers in the face of fears about subjecting their children to lives of social injustice.

## What was Jane's relationship like with her mother?

**We don't know.**

**We know:**

- Her mother was in poor health and Jane took on a lot of the household responsibilities from her mother to help.
- Jane's father supported her extensive reading and writing. We don't if her mother did.
- It's believed Cassandra (mother) was witty and shrewd when young.
- Most of what we know is from Austen-Leigh's Memoirs, and he had limited knowledge and he glorified their lives.
- Annette Upfal and Christine Alexander "Are We Ready for New Directions? Jane Austen's The History of England and Cassandra's Portrait's" published in Persuasions upends the idea of a happy childhood from the a recent study by forensic scientists that Cassandra's portrait of evil Queen Elizabeth for A History of England was modeled after their mother.
- Lack of empathy for her mother in letters and hints of emotional distance. "I suppose my mother will like to have me write to her. I shall try at least."
- EM Forster was worried about the Rectory life because Jane was able to write about such an evil character as Lady Susan at such a young age.
- Other scholars have also wondered about Jane Austen's early years - maybe they were more stressful than we know because of how she has written about mothers in her novels.