

**University of Canberra**

**Esther Packard Hill**

**Governing femininity: sisters in literature and gender performativity**

Abstract:

Sisters have proved an enduringly popular subject for literary representation and analysis. The most frequently represented relationship structure – a pair of sisters, dissimilar in looks, temperament or morality – highlights sisterly opposition and difference. The way gender is performed within the structure of this relationship remains, however, relatively understudied. That is, no one has attempted to analyse the ways in which archetypal pairs of contrasting sisters construct and regulate their performances of gender. This paper seeks to fill (some) of this gap; in conjunction with governmentality studies' theories, it employs Butler's theory of gender performativity to explore how being and having a sister affects the citation, embodiment and regulation of sociohistorically-specific gender norms. Examining two narratives that include paradigmatic examples of the paired, contrasting sister trope – Jane Austen's *Sense and Sensibility* (1811) and Margaret Drabble's *A Summer-Bird Cage* (1963) – this paper asks: how are gender performances constructed and regulated in novels featuring pairs of sisters; and in what ways are these practices sociohistorically contingent?

Biographical note:

Esther Packard Hill recently completed her Honours year. She is beginning a PhD at the University of Canberra in 2016.

Keywords:

Gender performativity – governmentality – regulation – sisters – femininity

## Introduction

Sisters have proved an enduringly popular subject for literary representation and analysis. The most frequently represented relationship structure – a pair of sisters, dissimilar in looks, temperament or morality – highlights sisterly opposition and difference. A gap in knowledge exists, however, in regards to how gender is performed within the structure of this relationship. That is, no one has analysed<sup>1</sup> the ways in which archetypal pairs of contrasting sisters construct, regulate and perform gender. This paper seeks to fill (some) of this gap through studying two texts that include paradigmatic examples of paired, contrasting sisters: the Dashwood sisters of Jane Austen's *Sense and Sensibility* (1811), and the Bennett sisters from Margaret Drabble's *A Summer Bird-Cage* (1963). In order to explore sisters' regulation of gender performativity, this research reads Butler's theory of gender performativity through the lens of governmentality studies; 'governmentality' is taken to mean the microlevel practices of self-regulation subjects undertake in order to meet a 'dominant or preferred mode of behavior' (Kontour 2012: 353). Both 'gender performativity' and 'governmentality' are examined in greater detail below.

The elder sisters of each pair – Elinor Dashwood and Louise Bennett – demonstrate a particular concern with governing their gender performativity so that they are seen to perform exemplary, normative femininity. Yet the governance of gender in these texts often extends beyond self-regulation: Elinor frequently attempts to sculpt the transgressive gender performances of sibling Marianne towards a normative ideal while Marianne simultaneously critiques Elinor's normative gender performances. The abjected outsider also shapes both pairs of sisters' gender performances: Elinor and Marianne rely upon the 'fallen' Elizas for construction of their gender performances while Louise and Sarah's performances are moulded in relation to the abjected gender performativity of their unwitting cousin, Daphne. Indeed, the relationality of gender is also significant as, at times, gender appears to behave relationally within the structure of the paired-sister relationship: both sets of sisters construct, regulate and govern their gender performances in relation to their sister, crafting their own performances as to appear distinct from her. Finally, this paper notes that in their gender performances, the pairs of sisters reflect, and are responsive to, contemporary feminist critiques of sociohistorically-specific gender norms.

## Sisters

The structure and dynamic of the sister relationship is represented in literature in a variety of ways. The most frequently employed configuration is, however, a pair of sharply contrasting sisters, dissimilar in looks, temperament or morality (Brown 2003; Cohen 1995; Michie 1989). Pairs of contrasting sisters were staggeringly ubiquitous in the nineteenth-century literature of Britain and America (Brown 2003; Cohen 1995; Levin 1992). Brown and Cohen offer sociohistorical accounts for this prevalence as Brown notes, 'The nineteenth century witnessed vital changes in the position of women and a correspondingly vigorous debate about women's proper role in society' (2003: vii); sisters, with their 'shared biological origin' (Cohen 1995: 23-4) offered a

neat structuring trope for illustrating the consequences of women's differing intellectual, social, or moral choices during tumultuous times (Brown 2003; Cohen 1995).

The tropes established in the plethora of nineteenth century sister texts – sexual difference (Michie 1989), love-triangles (Brown 2003; Levin 1992), sororal fall and rescue (Brown 2003; Michie 1989) – reoccur in texts featuring pairs of sisters at the *fin de siecle* (Brown 2003: 88-103); the mid twentieth-century (Levin 1992); and the late twentieth-century (Giobbi 1992; Tolan 2007). That is, for nearly two centuries pairs of literary sisters have participated in reflexive intertextual dialogues with their earlier 'older sisters.' This dialogue also includes conversations about sisters' interactions with sociohistorically-specific gender norms and ideals.

### **Gender performativity and governmentality**

Butler suggests gender is not simply the social construction of biological sex differences (1993, 1999) and instead argues that gender is produced<sup>2</sup> through the performance of 'acts and gestures, articulated and enacted desires' (1999: 173) through which subjects embody certain ideals of femininity and masculinity. These ideals are, moreover, 'almost always related to the idealization of the heterosexual bond' (Butler 1993: 233). Constructing gender through performativity occurs via an *accretion* of gendered acts; a gendered self is *not* produced through a one-off performance (Butler 1993, 1999). Butler also emphasises that because gender performativity is not necessarily 'wilful, arbitrary choice' (1993: 187) but rather a specific form of power as discourse, subjects are compelled to reiteratively regulate and 'styliz[e]' (Butler 1999: 43) their sexually specific bodies in order to meet gender norms. These embodied, regulatory gendering acts are a way subjects 'govern' themselves towards meeting dominant social norms.

Foucault and his followers developed governmentality to 'describe the way in which the state establishes the field of action in which state subjects ultimately perform self-discipline' (Kontour 2012: 353). Although governmentality theory is typically deployed during macro-level analyses of political economy, as governmentality analyses 'the conduct of conduct' (Lemke, cited in Kontour 2012: 355) it can also be deployed to analyse at the level of the individual. Indeed, Ouellette and Hay characterize governmentality as 'the processes through which individuals shape and guide their conduct – and that of others – with certain aims and objectives in mind' (2008: 473). This paper utilizes this characterization of governmentality, examining the techniques of self the pairs of sisters undertake as they regulate their own, and sometimes their sisters' performances of femininity.

### ***Sense and Sensibility***

Austen's *Sense and Sensibility* (1811) is a relative latecomer to fierce contemporary political and public debates about 'appropriate' femininity. These debates facilitated the emergence of an 'entire body' (Poovey 1984: 15) of governmental conduct literature, which itself played a significant role in regulating the paradoxes of

normative femininity<sup>3</sup>. As this literature championed ‘sense’ based ideals of femininity – discipline, self-control, the avoidance of any display of desire (Poovey 1984: 10) – it was also, as Sulloway (as cited in Doody 2004: xii) points out, particularly concerned with curbing young women’s ‘sensibility’; sensibility’s traditional characteristic of emotional responsiveness was thought to easily ‘degenerate into sexual appetite’ (Poovey 1984: 18). Unlike earlier texts where aspects of normative femininity are clearly critiqued by feminists (see, Wollstonecraft [1792] 2006) or supported by conservatives (see the writings of Rousseau or Burke), *Sense and Sensibility* neither rejects emotional responsiveness in women nor holds up the emotional self-effacement encouraged by governmental conduct literature as the ideal.

Reflective perhaps of the contemporary explosion of governmental conduct literature, both Dashwood sisters are highly concerned with the self-regulation of their gender performances. Elinor particularly epitomises normative femininity’s emotional self-effacement as her gender performativity is informed by reiterative acts of figurative and literal concealment: she encourages the masking of emotions as she makes ‘very pretty...[fireplace] screens’ (2004: 176). When Marianne suffers an emotional breakdown in public, Elinor ‘tr[ies] to screen her from the observation of others...’ (2004: 132); using her own body to ‘screen’ her sister’s breakdown is, undoubtedly an act of sisterly protectiveness but it also demonstrates how Elinor is beholden to citing normative ideals of femininity whereby emotions are ‘screened’. Elinor has, moreover, so clearly ingested the regulatory ideals of governmental conduct books that in this moment she also attempts to govern Marianne’s conduct towards self-effacement, instructing: ‘Pray, pray be composed... and do not betray what you feel to every body present’ (2004: 131). While the advice may allow Marianne to save social face, Elinor’s second phrase echoes conduct manuals’ emotion-quashing (Poovey 1984) governmental techniques of self.

Elinor continues to exemplify normative self-effacement (Poovey 1984: 10) when her love-interest, Edward, is inexplicably full of ‘coldness and reserve’ (2004: 68) towards her. Elinor, while ‘mortified...vexed and half angry’ (ibid) nevertheless:

...resolved to regulate her behaviour to him [Edward] by the past rather than the present... she avoided every appearance of resentment or displeasure, and treated him as she thought he ought to be treated from the family connection (2004: 68).

Elinor’s reflexive self-governance clearly illustrates her determination to make inconspicuous her own feelings and suffering in order to maintain a ‘sensible’ socially sanctioned performance of femininity. Yet, in retreating into mundane ‘common-place inquir[ies]’ of Edward (2004: 24) she privileges, as Marianne later critiques, emotional deceit and suppression.

Marianne Dashwood, far less concerned than her sister with performing *normative* femininity, approaches her performances of gender very differently. Unlike Elinor who values the *suppression* of emotions, Marianne’s gender performativity regulation is founded upon the conscious *expression* of emotions:

Marianne would have thought herself very inexcusable had she been able to sleep at all the first night after parting from Willoughby... She was awake the whole night, and she wept the greatest part of it... Her sensibility was potent enough! (2004: 63).

Marianne's reiterative embodied acts – crying, sighing, illness – reflect and emphasise the emotional responsiveness of sensibility. Governing her performances of femininity via the ideals of female sensibility, which privilege emotional fragility and vulnerability, Marianne highlights a grim expectation of the heroines of immoderate sensibility: 'women abused in love are expected to die' (Johnson 1989: 165). Marianne's grief-induced 'death-like paleness' (2004: 165) recalls the similarly 'faded' (2004: 155) and fallen Eliza, a classic sentimental heroine of sensibility. The narratives of both Elizas, Marianne's 'shadowy double[s]' (Brown 2003: 61) further underscore how close Marianne's sensibility-heavy performances of femininity bring her to a tragic, rather than an 'extraordinary' (2004: 288) fate. The Elizas are significant for their constitutive relationality too: as fallen women they are social pariahs, their transgressive gender performativity abjecting them outside of subjecthood. Their 'outsiderness' is, however, as Butler (1993: 3) argues, necessary for the construction of 'valid' subjects like Elinor and Marianne<sup>4</sup>.

Aware of how easily Marianne could fall, normative Elinor sees 'with concern the excess of her sister's sensibility' (2004: 6) and makes multiple regulatory suggestions in her attempts to govern Marianne's gender performances towards the normative ideal. After Marianne's passionate, wide-ranging conversation with Willoughby, Elinor sarcastically asks: 'how is your acquaintance to be long supported, under such extraordinary dispatch of every subject for discourse?' (2004: 37). The 'extraordinary' is pejorative; that Marianne and Willoughby have spoken so freely on so many topics disrupts the restrained, emotionally-controlled speech acts of normative Regency femininity. Yet *Sense and Sensibility* is concerned with balance. Although Elinor's regulatory observation appears to articulate a familiar sentimental novel trope – the re-education of a woman of sensibility (James-Cavan 2001; Johnson 1989) – Marianne's retort is equally critical as she parodies the 'sense' based ideals informing Elinor's normative gender performances:

I see what you mean... I have been open and sincere where I ought to have been reserved, spiritless, dull, and deceitful: had I only talked of the weather and the roads, and had I spoken only once in ten minutes, this reproach would have been spared (2004: 37).

Marianne's criticism of Elinor's behaviour produces a somewhat subversive critique of normative femininity. Elinor is a model Regency woman – discreet, polite, accommodating – but her 'sensible' behaviour produces a performance of femininity riddled with inanities, deceit and hypocrisy, behaviours Marianne recognises and calls out. Marianne's sarcasm about how she 'ought' (ibid) to have behaved in a society which encourages passive, quiet – if not outright *silent* (Poovey 1984: 24) – behaviour in women, are ironic as she inverts the typically positive connotations of 'open' and 'sincere', casting them in a derogatory light.

The relationality of the sisters' gender performances is particularly apparent during social occasions: Marianne's uncompromising sensibility prevents her from

maintaining ‘every common-place notion of decorum’ (2004: 37) as she knowingly violates social norms and norms of femininity. Marianne’s transgressive conduct in turn forces pragmatic Elinor to regulate her own gender performativity to perform an even more polite, more disingenuous, more normative femininity to compensate. This relationship also enables Marianne’s avoidance of emotional dishonesty. After the obsequious Lucy Steele has praised Lady Middleton’s ‘sweet[ness]’ (2004: 92):

Marianne was silent; it was impossible for her to say what she did not feel, however trivial the occasion; and upon Elinor it therefore the whole task of telling lies when politeness required it, always fell (ibid).

It is comically ironic that Marianne, who has criticised Elinor and normative femininity for privileging deceit in social interactions, actually forces her sister into reiteratively ‘telling lies’ (ibid). Despite the frequency of Elinor and Marianne’s regulatory critiques of each others’ conduct, their excessive ‘sense’ and ‘sensitivity’ informed gender performances are enabled by and constructed through the contrasting behaviour and gender performances of the other.

This relational gender performativity, however, increasingly facilitates dangerously unbalanced gender performances. As discussed above, as a result of her commitment to emotional extravagance and bodily lack of control, Marianne is weakened by her excessive grief-struck acts and nearly dies. Marianne’s dedication to her own suffering and emotions, moreover, makes her blind to the synchronous pain of Elinor. Doody argues that Elinor nearly does not survive her silent suffering (2004: xvii-iii): ‘Elinor comes dangerously close to flirting with her own good sense, her stoical comprehension, and denaturing it into something vicious.’ It is interesting that despite the regularity of the governmental criticism that feminine ‘sensitivity’ attracted, *Sense and Sensibility* makes clear that excessive ‘sense’ is dangerous too: it causes at best performances of femininity rife with polite hypocrisy and at worst pragmatic venality and emotional repression.

Although space does not allow for a discussion of the intricacies of this process, ultimately, Elinor and Marianne’s performances of femininity demonstrate a balance between the sensible, modest femininity encouraged by governmental conduct literature and the open, emotional responsive ideals of the sensitivity. That is, thanks to their sisters’ governance, by the end of the text, the two produce gender performances that achieve equilibrium between the two discursive constructs. The governance of gender performativity in *Sense and Sensibility* can be illustrated by the title itself: ‘sense’ and ‘sensitivity’.

### ***A Summer Bird-Cage***

Just over one hundred and fifty years after the Dashwood sisters grappled with the tensions of normative Regency femininity, the Bennett sisters of Drabble’s *A Summer Bird-Cage* wrestled with the contradictory double bind at the heart of early 1960s femininity. As the Bennetts are ‘girled’ (Butler 1993: 231) they encounter a seemingly inescapable paradox: to meet the compulsory regulatory ideal of motherhood means the apparently inevitable sacrifice of their physical beauty. Yet

beauty has, until motherhood, been a, if not *the*, key feminine ideal for women to cite. This ideal is historically enduring; in 1792 Wollstonecraft described the strictures of another ‘cage’ in which women find themselves: ‘[t]aught from their infancy that beauty is woman’s sceptre, the mind shapes itself to the body, and roaming round its gilt cage, only seeks to adorn its prison’ (2006: 181). Motherhood, however, brings inescapable changes to a woman’s corporeality. Thus an impossible double bind exists: at the same time that women are weight-gaining, breast-feeding, sleep-deprived mothers, they are nonetheless supposed to continue embodying normative corporeal feminine beauty. This paradox is at the heart of performances of normative femininity. But through their appearance-focused gender performances the Bennett sisters wilfully elide this double bind; while they reject motherhood, by undertaking technologies of self-governance that emphasise their hegemonic, corporeal femininity, they ensure that they ‘qualify and remain... viable subjects’ (Butler 1993: 232).

The elder Bennett sister, Louise, is, like elder Dashwood sister, Elinor particularly concerned with successfully citing hegemonic gender ideals in her performances of femininity. Beautiful, ‘serene’ (1979: 32) and ‘pure’ (1979: 33), Louise’s citation of normative feminine ideals is further emphasised by her marriage; the performative act is a regulatory celebration of normative, heterosexual femininity. Yet Louise’s performance of hyperbolic femininity is all surface. Younger sister Sarah, helping do up the ‘little buttons’ (1979: 27) of Louise’s silk wedding dress, notes Louise’s:

[F]ar from new brassière. I thought how like her, to wear a bra that is actually dirty on her wedding day. She must have been wearing it for the past week (ibid).

Once in the dress, however, Louise’s ‘dirty’ (ibid) ‘unfeminine’ efforts are hidden; she looks ‘perfect’ (1979: 32), making spectators outside the church ‘gas[p] in admiration’ (1979: 33). Sarah continues, ‘For them [the spectators], she was the real thing...By virtue of form, not content. Symbol, not moral’ (1979: 32-3). Louise’s pure white bridal gown coupled with dirty underwear reflects that her primary concern is *being seen* to perform normative femininity; the social acceptance of her performance is what matters<sup>5</sup>. Louise exploits her society’s obsession with female appearances; that she so epitomizes the *appearance* of the ideal, married, normative woman gives her latitude to *behave* in decidedly non-normative, ‘unfeminine’ ways such as actively avoiding motherhood.

Inferiority and failure pervade younger Bennett sister Sarah’s assessment of her own gender performances; while she is concerned to cite normative ideals of femininity, Sarah finds her own embodied performances of femininity lacking. Posing with Louise’s bouquet, Sarah thinks:

I wouldn't make nearly as good a bride as Louise. I stiffened my neck and tried to look dignified but I couldn't make it. I lacked grandeur; I looked too pink and fleshy for the white intactness of those flowers. I looked less intact than Louise... (1979: 28-9).

In feeling that she fails to measure up to Louise’s paradigmatic performance of ‘bride’ which is the expected ‘natural’ conclusion of being biologically female (Butler 1993: 233), Sarah feels that she also fails to achieve and perform ‘femininity’ in accordance with her society’s gender norms. Sarah’s mirror gazing also reveals one of the many

instances where she articulates her fear of pregnancy and childbearing: to be a woman is to 'be born with so little defence, like a soft snail without a shell... open and raw to all comers' (1979: 28). Louise, however, avoids appearing as unavoidably and 'horrifyingly pregnable' (ibid) as Sarah. As discussed above, through performing exemplary and exemplarily 'intact' (ibid) femininity, Louise draws all attention to the ideals of femininity she cites via her corporeality and thus eschews any reliance on motherhood to underscore her 'essential' femininity. Fearful of what 'what happens normally' (1979: 28) to women, the 'embroidery and the children and the sagging mind' (1979: 29) Sarah ultimately adopts this strategy too as she relies upon the social recognition and praise of her corporeal femininity in order to avoid engaging with other, less-palatable regulatory gender norms – particularly compulsory motherhood (see pp.29).

Such a strategy does not come easily for Sarah: inferiority continues to inform her self-regulation of her gender performativity, feelings that continue to be stoked by Louise's success. When Louise collects Sarah from the train station Louise's jersey is 'clear... and neat' (1979: 14) while Sarah, conversely, feels 'shabby and travel stained' (ibid). Louise's exemplary, hyperbolic execution<sup>6</sup> of gendering technologies of self 'always' (ibid) 'reduce' (ibid) Sarah to the diminutive 'school girl with a twisted belt' (ibid). Louise's competence makes Sarah's (relative) incompetence seem greater and vice versa; their contrasting performances of femininity thus constitute each other's performance. The Bennett sisters' relationally structured gender performances are similar – initially at least – to the Dashwood sisters' construction and regulation of gender performativity.

Unlike Marianne and Elinor Dashwood, however, Louise and Sarah do not attempt to govern each other's gender performances; throughout their vexed relationship, Louise and Sarah expend most energy on the regulation of their *own* gender performances. Yet another has regulatory governmental power over the sisters; both sisters construct and regulate their performances in reaction to their cousin, 'plain' (1979: 17), abjected Daphne. Although Sarah believes that 'Daphne is somehow a threat to my existence' (1979: 114) like the Elizas of *Sense and Sensibility*, Daphne is in fact necessary for the constitution of Sarah (and Louise's) 'legitimate' gender performances. Daphne's constitutive necessity is illustrated when Louise chooses matching bridesmaid dresses for Sarah and Daphne to wear at her wedding. As Sarah reveals an almost abject horror of Daphne's legs, which are 'shapeless round the ankles and covered in hairs and bluish pimples' (1979: 31), these very same legs exaggerate Sarah's own success: the 'short skirt' of the dress conversely 'suit[s]' (ibid) Sarah's 'nice legs' (emphasis added, ibid). While Sarah is shallow and cruel as she describes how Daphne has failed to effectively govern her gender performativity, she is also perceptively critical about the restrictions of normative femininity; she notes that, unfortunately, looking a particular way 'does matter' (1979: 168) and that 'one can't shut one's eyes and pretend it isn't so' (ibid).

Louise, while less horrified by Daphne than Sarah, similarly governs her performances of gender so that they are distinct from her cousin's. Through a cutting extended metaphor, Louise likens Daphne and her 'type' (1979: 164) to 'those tame shabby animals in zoos, odd gnus and cows and things, so docile and herbivorous'

(ibid). Although Louise never attempts to actively govern Sarah's gender performances, she is at times dismissive of her younger sister's femininity. Hence, it is significant that Louise aligns both herself *and* Sarah with the 'flesh eaters' (ibid), the corporeal alpha females of their society; she emphasises how the 'carnivorous' Sarah and she have a symbiotic relationship to women like 'herbivorous' Daphne who are less successful at embodying ideals of femininity:

'If you mean that my way of life – our way of life – exists through the existence of theirs... well, yes, I suppose [it] does...'

...

'And we can't live without the herbivores?'

'How could we? We live by our reflection in their eyes' (1979: 165).

Without Daphne's failed femininity, neither Sarah nor Louise would appear so 'successful' in their own gender performances. Daphne is a relational tool for them; her unhegemonic, unappealing 'slack and dull' (1979: 168) femininity helps facilitate the governance of their own, mighty, glossy performances; without her, they cannot be reflected in all their glory.

Throughout *A Summer Bird-Cage* Sarah and Louise Bennett are aware that as they perform femininity, they are compelled to meet two key regulatory gender ideals: motherhood and beauty. The Bennetts are, however, simultaneously aware that their society values women by their appearances and have a united distaste for the expectation that all women will become mothers as being a 'mother' results in the seemingly unavoidable sacrifice of one's looks. Recalling a visit to a friend, pregnant with her second baby, Louise argues that becoming a mother ends in 'catastrophe' (1979: 204); her friend's corporeality, which was, pre-motherhood hegemonically feminine ('blonde, soft... a beauty *au naturel*' (ibid)) now echoes the abjected corporeality of Daphne:

[S]he hadn't brushed her hair, or worn make-up for days, I shouldn't think, and she hadn't any stockings on although it was cold and she hadn't bothered to shave her legs, they were all blue and cold (1979: 205).

Louise and Sarah's decidedly ambivalent relationship to motherhood underscores their awareness of the tension inherent in becoming a normative woman. Without motherhood, it is only by performing a hyperbolic form of corporeal femininity that they remain valid, autonomous subjects. Through the hyperbolic 'adorn[ing]' (Wollstonecraft 2006: 181) of their bodies and use of non-normative, abjected foils like Daphne, Louise and Sarah avoid normative femininity's impossible double bind.

### **Reflection(s) of contemporary feminist arguments**

Cohen argues that plot-significant sisters in literature typically signal the investigation of feminist issues in the text (1993: 98). Through examining the Dashwood and Bennett sisters' performances of gender this paper adds that plot-significant sisters also reflect and indeed sometimes are overtly reflexive about contemporary feminist critiques of sociohistorically specific regulatory gender norms.

An instance of this reflection is the way the Dashwood sisters respond to aspects of Mary Wollstonecraft's treatises against sensibility. It is important to note that normative Regency femininity was beset by contradictions and paradoxes (Poovey 1984). That is, while 'sense' based feminine ideals were encouraged in governmental conduct literature, influential conservative thinkers in the late eighteenth century (when the first draft of *Sense and Sensibility* was written) (James-Cavan 2001; Doody 2004) also encouraged in women the cultivation of sensibility-based ideals: emotional responsiveness, weakness, gentleness, docility and littleness were all features of normative femininity (Johnson 1989: 170).

Contemporary feminist Wollstonecraft exposes the double bind inherent in this governance of gender. The gender performances created by meeting sensibility's ideals produce performances of femininity beset by frailness and helplessness, which, she archly points out, served to facilitate claims of women's 'natural' weakness and inferiority (2006: 171). Wollstonecraft highlights the perversity inherent in the fact the traditional 'feminine' elements of sensibility requires the 'suppression of women's health and resilience' (Johnson 1989: 164). This critique is similarly reflected in *Sense and Sensibility* as Marianne's extravagant commitment to emotional expression nearly causes her death as a result her prolonged and hyperbolic embodied suffering.

The Bennett sisters are similarly reflective of contemporary feminist critiques. In the same year that *A Summer Bird-Cage* was published, 1963, American feminist Betty Friedan published *The Feminine Mystique*. In it, Friedan explored how contemporary women were increasingly dissatisfied with their restrictive, domestic lives. Similarly, the Bennett sisters are deeply critical of contemporary gender norms, namely the expectation of women's compulsory domesticity and motherhood. As mentioned above, Sarah notes that 'what happens normally' (1979: 28-9) to women, the 'embroidery and the children and the sagging mind' (ibid) leaves her feeling 'doomed to defeat. I felt all women were doomed' (ibid). Sarah's observation articulates a particularly second wave feminist awareness of the limitations and restrictions in contemporary women's domestic lives.

The Bennett sisters have, moreover, a united frustration with the expectation that all women will become mothers; Sarah has a fear of looking 'horrifyingly pregnable' (1979: 28) likewise, Louise states that she will 'Never... Never' (1979: 205) have children as she 'want[s] her life... wants it now [and] do[esn't] want to give it to the next generation' (ibid). Louise's assertion is profoundly similar to the one Friedan argues is made by suburban housewives who suffer 'the problem with no name': "I want something more than my husband and my children and my home" (1971: 32). Interestingly, as Cunningham argues, however, Sarah's (and Louise's) points are made 'before any great resurgence of feminism had begun in Britain: [they are] experiencing the conflicts first hand, not through the medium of an already existing movement' (1982: 135). Hence, there is a particular immediacy to the critiques of normative femininity in *A Summer Bird-Cage* as both Bennett sisters, through their performances of gender, reveal the limitations and restrictions in contemporary women's lives.

## Conclusion

This paper begins an investigation into the problematic that occurs in the intersection(s) between literary representations of sisters, gender performativity and governmentality. Aspects of the representations of the construction and regulation of sisters' gender performances occur in both *Sense and Sensibility* and *A Summer Bird-Cage*. A first observation is that the texts' elder sisters, Elinor and Louise, are more concerned with and successful at, producing *normative* gender performances than their younger sisters. This is not to say that Marianne and Sarah do not meet gender norms; they too ultimately succumb to the 'normative force' (Butler 1993: 188) of gender performativity.

While each of the sisters studied here reiteratively, and often reflexively regulates and governs their own gender performances, a second commonality is that the gender performances of the sisters are, at times, governed by another who possesses regulatory power over them. Elinor and Marianne Dashwood both repeatedly attempt to govern each other's gender performances; the Bennetts' cousin Daphne has significant regulatory power too, as the sisters govern their gender performances in relation to their cousin's.

A third observation is that each sister examined here performs gender that is discrete and, at times, constituted both in relation to her siblings' gender performativity and abjected 'non' subject. The tradition of opposition and difference, so frequent and note-worthy in novels featuring pairs of sisters, clearly extends to Elinor and Marianne's and Louise and Sarah's construction and regulation of gender performativity.

Finally, this paper reveals how each of the texts engages with and reflects some contemporaneous feminist critiques of normative femininity; as Wollstonecraft denounces female sensibility, *Sense and Sensibility* weighs up the efficacy of sensibility and of normative, 'sense' based femininity; likewise, as Freidan censures compulsory motherhood and domesticity, *A Summer Bird-Cage* reveals the fundamental double bind at the heart of 1960s normative femininity. While Brown (2003) asserts that pairs of sisters in literature are typically represent and illustrate the consequences of women's differing choices, this paper uncovers that pairs of sisters also interrogate sociohistorically specific gender norms at the same time that they reflect and respond to contemporary feminist critiques of those very same gender norms. It will be intriguing to see what other observations further research into the governance of sisters' gender performances will reveal.

## Endnotes

<sup>1</sup> Blackford (1998) comes close when she explores three film adaptations of Alcott's novel, *Little Women* (1880). Arguing that each sister's discrete 'role' in the family illustrates the construction of femininity (1998: 33), Blackford's conclusions are, however, limited as she frames her argument around a reasonably monolithic, ahistorical 'femininity.'

<sup>2</sup> Although Butler uses the term 'produced' she also discusses the 'construction' of gender. For Butler 'construction' refers not to radical constructivism: 'construction is neither a single act nor a casual

process initiated by the subject and culminating in a set of fixed effects. Construction not only takes place *in time*, but is itself a temporal process which operates through the reiteration of norms...’ (original emphasis 1993: 10). This understanding of ‘construction’ will be used throughout this paper.

<sup>3</sup> Poovey emphasises (1984: xii) that this conduct literature was produced by and for the growing middle classes; working class women’s performances of femininity did not attract the same level of scrutiny or attention.

<sup>4</sup> Butler describes the abject as being ‘Those who do not enjoy the status of the subject, but whose living under the sign of the ‘unlivable’ is required to circumscribe the domain of the subject. This zone of uninhabitability will constitute that site of dreaded identification against which – and by virtue of which – the domain of the subject will circumscribe its own claim to autonomy and to life’ (1993: 3).

<sup>5</sup> This performance of normative femininity ‘for show’ is indicative of Louise’s behaviour throughout *A Summer Bird-Cage* (see p.120, pp.130-2, p.182); motifs of theatricality pervade the text.

<sup>6</sup> Butler highlights that performances of gender never meet the hegemonic ideal: ‘To the extent that gender is an assignment, it is an assignment which is never quite carried out according to expectation, whose addressee never quite inhabits the ideal s/he is compelled to approximate’ (1993: 231).

## List of works cited

- Austen, Jane 2004 [1811] *Sense and Sensibility*, Oxford: Oxford University Press
- Austen, Jane 2001 *Sense and Sensibility*, K James-Cavan (ed) Ontario: Broadview Literary Texts
- Brown, Sarah-Annes 2003 *Devoted Sisters: Representations of the Sister Relationship in Nineteenth-Century British and American Literature*, Aldershot: Ashgate Publishing Limited
- Butler, Judith 1999 [1990] *Gender Trouble: Feminism and the Subversion of Identity*, New York and London: Routledge
- Butler, Judith 1993 *Bodies that Matter: On the Discursive Limits of “Sex,”* New York and London: Routledge
- Butler, Judith 2004 *Undoing Gender*, New York and London: Routledge
- Cohen, Michael 1993, ‘First Sisters in the British Novel: Charlotte Lennox to Susan Ferrier,’ in J Stephens Mink, J Doubler Ward (eds) *The Significance of Sibling Relationships in Literature*, Bowling Green: Bowling Green State University Popular Press, 98-109
- Cohen, Michael 1995, *Sisters: Relation and Rescue in Nineteenth-Century British Novels and Paintings*, London: Associated University Presses
- Cunningham, Gail 1982, ‘Women and Children First: the novels of Margaret Drabble,’ in T Staley (ed) *Twentieth-Century Women Novelists*, New Jersey: Barnes and Noble, 130-152
- Doody, Margaret 2004, ‘Introduction’, in J Kingsley (ed) *Sense and Sensibility*, Oxford: Oxford University Press, i-xxviii.
- Drabble, Margaret 1979 [1963] *A Summer Bird-Cage*, London: Penguin
- Friedan, Betty 1971 [1963] *The Feminine Mystique*. London: Gollancz
- Giobbi, Guiliana 1992, ‘Sisters beware of sisters: sisterhood as a literary motif in Jane Austen, A.S. Byatt and I. Bossi Fedrigotti’, *Journal of European Studies* 22: 3 (Spring), 241-258
- Kontour, Kyle 2012 ‘The Governmentality of Battlefield Space: Efficiency, Proficiency, and Masculine Performativity.’ *Bulletin of Science, Technology & Society*, 32: 5 (Autumn), 353-360
- Levin, Amy 1992 *The Suppressed Sister: A Relationship in Novels by Nineteenth- and Twentieth-Century British Women*, Lewisburg: Bucknell University Press

- Johnson, Claudia 1989 'A 'Sweet Face as White as Death': Jane Austen and the Politics of Female Sensibility', *NOVEL: A Forum on Fiction*, 22: 2 (Winter), 159-174
- Michie, Helena 1989 "'There is no Friend Like a Sister': Sisterhood as Sexual Difference' *ELH*, vol. 56: 2 (Summer), 401-421
- Michie, Helena 1992 *Sororophobia: Differences Among Women in Literature and Culture* New York: Oxford University Press
- Nardin, Jane 1973 *Those Elegant Decorums: The Concept of Propriety in Jane Austen's Novels*, Albany: State University of New York Press
- Ouellette, Laurie and Hay, James 2008 'Makeover Television, Governmentality and the Good Citizen,' *Continuum: Journal of Media and Cultural Studies* 22: 4 (Summer), 471-484
- Poovey, Mary 1984 *The Proper Lady and the Woman Writer: Ideology as Style in the Works of Mary Wollstonecraft, Mary Shelley, and Jane Austen* Chicago: University of Chicago Press
- Tolan, Fiona 2007 *Margaret Atwood: Feminism and Fiction* Rodopi: Amsterdam
- Wollstonecraft, Mary 2006 [1792] 'A Vindication of the Rights of Woman: Introduction,' in S Greenblatt (ed) *The Norton Anthology of English Literature* New York: Norton 170-189