Through Propriety: An Examination of the Social Conventions Dictating Expression in Selected Works and Letters of Jane Austen

by

Stephanie F. Chandler

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For my parents.

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Abstract

As a woman writer living in late eighteenth and early nineteenth century England, Jane Austen was acutely aware of the limitations involved in all forms of communication. Austen's personal letters as well as her mature novels, including *Sense and Sensibility*, *Persuasion* and *Pride and Prejudice*, illustrate the workings of mind gripped by the social restraints imposed upon females during this period.

This thesis is driven by a fascination mirroring Austen's, the focus of which then is the restraints placed upon women's communication in eighteenth century England. Austen, and all women of her era, is forced to define herself within and despite a strict set of rules governing decorous behavior. Chapter One delves into Austen's personal letters from the year 1796 until her death in 1817, attempting to discern how she managed her struggles with propriety. Chapter Two addresses women's communication—in the form of verbal expression and repression—as exhibited by two of Austen's heroines, Marianne Dashwood and Anne Elliot. Finally, Chapter Three addresses the gendering of propriety by tackling men's communication— including spoken and written expression—through the figures of Fitzwilliam Darcy and Frederick Wentworth. Together these three parts document a woman's ongoing struggle to achieve a harmonious balance between acquiescing to society's rules and being her own mistress.

What will emerge through this discussion is Austen, the conscious yet subversive critic, a woman and a writer examining the relationship between speech and silence, dependency and independence, and the ways in which females—herself included—must adapt themselves to survive and flourish despite the constraints of the double bind of being a *female* member of *civilized* society.

CONTENTS

Short Titles

Page references to Jane Austen's works inserted in the text are to

JAL: Chapman, R. W., ed. *Jane Austen's Letters to Her Sister Cassandra and Others*. 2 vols. Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1959.

P: Austen, Jane. *Persuasion*. 1818. Ed. Gillian Beer. London and New York: Penguin, 2003.

PP: Austen, Jane. *Pride and Prejudice*. 1813. Ed. Vivien Jones. London and New York: Penguin, 2003.

SS: Austen. Jane. *Sense and Sensibility*. 1811. Ed. Ros Ballaster. London and New York: Penguin, 2003.

Introduction: Defining Propriety

Jane Austen's personal letters as well as her mature novels illustrate the workings of a mind gripped by the social restraints placed upon females during her lifetime. This thesis is driven by a fascination mirroring the author's, the focus of which then is the constraints placed upon women's communication in late eighteenth and early nineteenth century England as exemplified in Austen's writing. Austen's heroines, like their author herself, are forced to create their own expressive spheres and to define themselves as individuals, and as women, within the restrictions governing decorous society or in other words, amidst propriety. Throughout Austen's novels, heroines and readers alike must traverse a labyrinth of social proprieties and personal responsibilities. Before prematurely delving into the pursuit of this topic, it is important to define some of the terms Austen employs when addressing those conventions that restricted communication for both sexes in her era. The most urgent question to be addressed then is what exactly are these *proprieties*?

Samuel Johnson's Dictionary of 1813 [orig. 1778]—a text to which Austen may have referred during her writing—provides an interesting definition of propriety as it was understood in the Georgian Era. This edition of Johnson's dictionary defines propriety in the following ways: "(1) peculiarity of possession, (2) exclusive right", or even, (3) "accuracy, justness. *Locke.*" [1] What is more curious about Johnson's definitions is that in his attempt to explicate meaning, he refers to different definitions of words as they as

[1] Samuel Johnson, *A Dictionary of the English language,* 2nd ed. (Philadelphia: Johnson & Warner, 1813), text-fiche, 6.

used by various authors. The definitions are presented along with respective sources as is seen here with the word "proper":

> Proper: 1. peculiar, not belonging to more; not common. Davies.—2. Noting an individual. Watts.—3 One's own. Milton—5. fit; accommodated; adapted; suitable; qualified. Dryden.—6. accurate; just. .—7. not figurative. It seems in Shakespeare to signify mere; pure. (Johnson 1813, 6)

What becomes evident as one peruses Johnson's dictionary, as Austen herself might have done, is that each author defines these words as he or she requires them for his or her own purposes. Definitions then are amorphous, shaped by the respective environment in which they are utilized. As Milton's definition of "proper" differs from Dryden's, Austen's definition of propriety is one that the author created for and applied to herself and her heroines. Although Johnson's definition provides valuable insight, Austen's definition of these proprieties cannot be understood by consulting any dictionary definition. Rather, Austen's propriety is best defined by engaging with her writing and extrapolating the definition of this term as it is used inter-textually.

In the strictest sense, Austen's propriety is somewhat analogous to decorum or social conventions, both words being defined as "a set of unwritten but generally acknowledged rules which define appropriate social behavior in everyday social situations."[2]

> In Jane Austen's time, according to the *Oxford English Dictionary*, propriety could mean 'conformity with good manners or polite usage,' in other words what is conventional and socially acceptable; or alternatively

[2] Jane Nardin, *Those Elegant Decorums* (Albany: State University of New York Press, 1973), 12.

> 'fitness, appropriateness, suitability. . .and conformity. . .with principle,' that is, what is morally valid. (qtd. in Nardin 1973, 13)

But Austen's propriety is not merely "civility," "decorum," or "manners." It is a much more complex, more multifaceted term than any of the aforementioned. "The definition of true propriety is to anticipate somewhat. . .a healthy respect for the conventional rules of social behavior, modified by an understanding that those forms are important, not as ends in themselves, but as means of regulating social intercourse" (Nardin 1973, 13). True propriety demanded more than blind adherence to a set of social conventions. The idea of individuality complicates Austen's propriety; the tension only heightens when one considers the interplay between gender and individuality, particularly, as will be illustrated, when that gender is female.

I will argue, in fact, that Jane Austen's vision of propriety is a veritable balancing act of finding a place where both individualism and conformity to social convention might successfully coexist, a difficult task requiring both a cognizant intellectual and moral decision-making process from her heroines. For an Austen heroine, merely to obey society's rules to the strictest degree is as potentially injurious to her personality—her individuality—as the expression of sentiments unchecked by *any* convention. Extremes, as readers quickly notice, are unpalatable to Austen. Propriety can only be fully realized when there is an appropriate balance between sincere commitment both to oneself and to others in society.

Austen was a woman and a writer who examined the relationship between speech and silence, dependency and independence, and the ways in which females—herself included—must adapt themselves to survive and flourish despite the constraints of the

double bind of being a *female* member of *civilized* society. Austen delineates this intricate balance between individuality and society not only in her mature texts *Persuasion*, *Sense and Sensibility* and *Pride and Prejudice*, but also in her personal letters. In the first chapter of this work, I examine Austen's personal letters in order to explore her struggle to achieve this balance, as she stages her own idiosyncratic rebellion against her domestic life upon the page, instead of enacting it within society. Dealing intimately with *Persuasion* and *Sense and Sensibility*, the second chapter elucidates the same struggle depicted through two of her heroines, Anne Elliot and Marianne Dashwood, as each is forced to master the delicate balance between self-command and self-expression. Acknowledging that communication for both men and women is constrained by propriety, the third chapter delves into an examination of men's communication, specifically that of *Persuasion*'s Captain Wentworth and *Pride and Prejudice*'s Fitzwilliam Darcy. By highlighting the more lenient rules restricting men's verbal professions and letters, this chapter serves to establish the extent to which gender dictated these restrictions. Together these three chapters not only delineate the labyrinth of social intercourse in Regency England, but also expose a woman's struggle to achieve the requisite balance between acquiescing to society's rules and being her own mistress.

Chapter 1: The Letters

Despite heavy editing by her family, the portrait of Austen conveyed by her letters bears striking resemblance to that described by her niece, Fanny Knight. In a letter of her own, Knight recollects Austen's true character: "Aunt Jane. . .was not so refined as she ought to have been from her talent."[3] Regardless of Austen's marked attempts to "put aside all possible signs of common-ness," and "be more refined" (LeFaye 2000, 38), Austen never completely dissembles. Austen's less "refined" and rebellious nature surfaces repeatedly throughout her extant letters. They are a testament not only to the extent of her emotional engagements between 1796 and 1798, but also to her more defiant nature. Critic Janis Stout offers important insight into Austen's employment of irony in her letters when she notes that irony "gave her a position of freedom from which she could both elucidate the ideology of the proper lady and criticize the way it shaped and deformed women's desires—all without violating the decorum of her own ladylike restraint."[4] In this chapter I will delineate the transformation from Austen's playful, light-hearted tone in her early letters to her later employment of irony.

Austen's letters then become the medium through which her own education—much like that of her heroines—is illustrated. Austen will grapple with society in order to discover an appropriate space where she might be content within its constraints. As readers shall also see in the next chapter on heroines Marianne Dashwood and Anne Elliot, Austen will learn to effectively navigate social convention while maintaining her individuality. By using her letters as the medium through which she stages her own

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[3] Fanny Knight, *Fanny Knight's Diaries: Jane Austen through her Niece's Eyes*, ed. Deidre LeFaye (Alton: Jane Austen Society, 2000), 38-39.
[4] Janis P. Stout, *Strategies of Reticence* (Charlottesville: University of Virginia Press, 1990), 49.

idiosyncratic rebellion against the mundane and trivial duties of her domestic life, Austen effectively prevents herself from enacting it within society.

Austen's early letters of 1796 are characterized by a light-hearted, playful tone and easiness. They display an aura of satisfaction with life and a youthful exuberance yet to be entirely governed by propriety. Austen was not unfamiliar with navigating the often precarious social spheres of late eighteenth century England, nor was she averse to the delights of the art of flirtation. As biographer David Nokes writes:

> she was already greatly admired among the young gentlemen of the neighbourhood, and it was become a moot point with her whether flirtation or novel writing afforded her the greater delight . . .on the whole, she rather inclined to believe that it must be flirtation; there was something so delicious about teasing Charles Fowle about the silk stockings he offered to buy for her; the flatteringly rich Mr. Heartley; or cheating Charles Powlett of a kiss and dancing with John Warren.[5]

But it was a young Irishman, whose character was worth more than any stockings or estates, who quickly commanded Austen's full attention. Mr. Tom Lefroy possessed a combination of wittiness, fun, and a slight edge that complimented Austen's own tastes. Her letters from early 1796 delineate her interest in Lefroy. This association that expediently provided an entertaining and critical arena for rebellion,—a rebellion Austen enacted through a few ephemeral moments of fierce flirtation during which she appeared to test the social conventions—seems to have allowed for a brief negation of behavioral norms.

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[5] David Nokes, *Jane Austen* (London: Fourth Estate Ltd., 1997), 157.

Although the extent of Austen's attachment only becomes evident in letters to Cassandra, her sister and closest confidante, dating from the latter part of 1796, early in this year Austen's letters recount the joys of new affection. In a letter dated 9 January 1796, Austen opens by informing Cassandra that "Mr. Tom Lefroy's birthday was yesterday, so that you are very near of an age."[6] Austen continues on in a very gay tone regaling how she had happily passed the previous evening at 'an exceedingly good ball,' which was so "exceedingly good," due to the presence of very pleasant company, undoubtedly Lefroy (*JAL,* 1). Although Austen's acquaintance with Lefroy had been very brief up to this point, their intimate behavior was quickly noted; as Austen jokingly remarks, "as to our having met except at the last three balls I cannot say much; for he is so excessively laughed at about me at Ashe, that he is ashamed at coming to Steventon" (*JAL,* 1).

Austen acknowledges her unorthodox behavior, confessing, "I am almost afraid to tell you how my Irish friend and I behaved" (*JAL,* 1-2). Why would Austen express fear in confiding in her sister unless the implication behind her statement was that she might be deserving of criticism for her behavior with her "Irish friend"? Or is Austen merely being coy? Although the precise meaning can never be known—my own explanations shall be explored later in this piece—critic John Halperin argues that there is something much more personal at work behind Austen's artful expression. "There is 'a sense of meaning withheld, a smile at something unseen,"[7] as Austen recollects her own minor rebellion and the pleasure it provided as she emerges from the page emotionally charged and attached to her "friend." No reticence seems to exist in Austen's freely flowing

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[6] Jane Austen, *Jane Austen's Letters to Her Sister Cassandra and Others,* ed. R. W. Chapman (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1959), 1. Cited hereafter as *JAL.*

[7] John Halperin, *The Life of Jane Austen* (Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University Press, 1986), 186.

discourse as she addresses her attachment and the behavior that accompanied it despite the proclamation that she is "afraid" to confess the extent of her behavior. She continues on this subject, adding "[i]magine to yourself everything most profligate and shocking in the way of dancing and sitting down together!" (*JAL,* 2).

Arguably, Austen's tone suggests her employment of comic exaggeration here. Even if Lefroy and Austen's dancing was not profligate and shocking to readers in comparison to, say, Lydia Bennet's elopement with Wickham in *Pride and Prejudice*, the terms Austen uses are similar. Through the use of these relative terms, Austen begins, artfully, to comment on society's control of individual feeling and behavior. Austen is undeniably too astute a critic of societal expectations not to have anticipated the commentary elicited by her interactions with Lefroy. Austen's letters suggest, however, that the parameters established by society did not entirely dictate her behavior. I will return later to this theme but, for now, suffice it to say that what astute readers begin to discern are the beginnings of Austen's ongoing struggle to ascertain the requisite balance between acquiescing to society's rules and being her own mistress.

So Austen continues, reveling in this small pleasure although she assures Cassandra that she "can expose [her] self, however, only once more, because he leaves the country soon after next Friday" (*JAL,* 2). Austen's tone offers no apology, nor does she appear to lament her actions, as her emotional attachment, her own small rebellion, appears to permit transitory negation of proper social behavior. Furthermore, Austen confesses that she will most likely indulge in similar behavior in the future, playfully adding however that this should not cause too much consternation as it can occur "only once more" (*JAL*, 2). Possibly even more remarkable is that while her letters delve further

into her recollections of Lefroy, potentially exposing her to additional criticism for behavior so "profligate and shocking" (*JAL*, 2), Austen's tone suggests no censure of Lefroy's character. In fact Austen praises Lefroy when she mentions, later in her correspondence, that "we received a visit from Mr. Tom Lefroy. . . [and] he has but one fault, which time will, I trust, entirely remove—it is that his morning coat is a great deal too light" (*JAL*, 3).

His "one fault?" Austen's severest critique of Lefroy is his coat? Is this the same discerning eye that so carefully expounds upon the strengths and weakness of heroes and heroines throughout six canonical novels? Surely this is Austen's witty exaggeration, shedding light upon the shallow judgments that members of society often impose based upon limited knowledge of each other. One wonders whether this overall divergence from her novels indicates a marked difference between the author and the woman. Or should we assume that the more playful, lighthearted tone imparted in these letters is merely a reflection of the happiness of a flirtatious romance and the subsequent minor acts of rebellion this time with Lefroy afforded her?

I will attempt an answer, if indeed one can be reached, throughout this examination of Austen's letters and her novels. However, perhaps it is prudent to insert a caveat here, and propose that this point in Austen's letters marks a potential meeting place between Austen the author and Austen the woman. Austen's letters illustrate the workings of a mind somewhat obsessed, as it would be throughout her mature novels, with the societal restraints placed upon females during this period. What emerges through Austen's letters is a subversive critic, a woman examining the relationship between speech and silence, dependency and independence, and the ways in which females—

Austen included—must adapt themselves to survive and flourish despite the constraints of the double bind of being a *female member* of civilized society. Bearing this overarching theme in mind, we return to Austen's letters to trace the apparent changes in personality caused by her brief flirtations and her familial responsibilities.

Austen's letters disclose her attachment to Lefroy as extending beyond flirtation at balls, as she confides in a letter dated 14 January 1796 that "I look forward with great impatience to it" (Austen here refers to the last ball she will be attending while Lefroy is still in town), "as I rather expect to receive an offer from my friend in the course of the evening" (*JAL*, 5). Austen's tone conveys a sense of anticipation and excitement, both conceivably attributable to the happiness that accompanies the contemplation of this prospective attachment. She even goes so far as to jokingly ask Cassandra to formally relinquish one of her suitors Mr. Heartley to another young woman when she says, "tell Mary that I make over Mr. Heartley & all his estate for her sole use and benefit in future & not only him, but all my other admirers into the bargain . . .as I mean to confine myself to Mr. Tom Lefroy, for whom," she mockingly adds, "I do not care sixpence" (*JAL*, 3-4).

Despite clear attempts through humor to lessen the seriousness of her attachment, Austen appears prepared to bind herself to Lefroy, whose own behavior when assessed in conjunction with her own actions, has allowed, if not elicited, the social criticisms Austen so fervently detests. But her writing retains its playful tone, attesting to Austen's happiness with the prospective situation; she jokingly adds, "I shall refuse him, however, unless he promises to give away his white coat" (*JAL*, 5). Refuse him on the basis of his wardrobe? Not his character? Or even his lack of connections? Surely this statement

alone is a minor rebellion against the shallowness of middle-class conventions, sarcasm or not.

Unfortunately, Austen's desired marriage to Lefroy never took place, allegedly due to intervention by both families. Lefroy's family apparently interposed to prohibit any additional contact, let alone an engagement, between them. Austen writes to Cassandra, "when you receive this it will be over," and her "tears flow as [she] writes, at the melancholy idea" (*JAL*, 4). Austen's tone here could be interpreted in a variety of ways: first, as sarcasm, suggesting that her attachment to Lefroy was merely a flirtation, the ephemeral nature of which does not concern her—although perhaps it should; second, as irony, commentating on just how typical such a familial intervention in the desired marriage of two individuals was at this time; and finally, it is possible that Austen's tone might in fact be serious. Biographer David Nokes proposes that for "Jane, the pain of losing Tom Lefroy was real enough" (Nokes 1997, 161). "Real enough" is the most appropriate way of phrasing Austen's response. Although one can never determine her exact feelings, from the letters that would follow one can deduce that this incident with Tom Lefroy did affect Austen's relationship with society, for "what was it, after all, but another case of the old well established grievance of duty against will, parent against child," or perhaps even child against established societal norms (Nokes 1997, 160). As evidenced later in her letters, the loss of this emotional attachment, act of rebellion or not, when combined with other family and personal events, appears to have had a substantial effect on Austen. The romantic attachment to Lefroy and the concomitant enjoyment that is expressed throughout her letters of 1796 become much less evident in later correspondence.

Following the letter to Cassandra dated 14 January 1796, Lefroy is not again mentioned until Saturday 17 November 1798. Then, Austen remarks that "Mrs. Lefroy did come last Wednesday . . .[and] I was enough alone to hear all that was interesting, which you will easily credit when I tell you that of her nephew (Tom) she said nothing at all" (*JAL*, 27). The shift in Austen's tone becomes quickly apparent. What was once the overwhelming subject of long, jubilant letters in 1796 has been confined to one minor paragraph inserted between mention of daily duties and her mother's health. The happy sentiments that filled letters in 1796 with recollections of a "very handsome gentleman," with only "one fault," who "excessively laughed," and was "shocking in the way of dancing and sitting down," and whose "offers" were awaited with "great impatience," have become much more serious, cool and distant in 1798. A visit from her once prospective aunt-in-law, who "did not once mention," Lefroy, elicits a confession that she was, "too proud to make enquiries" (*JAL*, 27). Austen's disengagement from the enlivening emotional life she once craved may have its inception in her lack of "an offer" from, and even an engagement to, Lefroy. Is it in her disappointment from this expectation that she resorts to a protective flattening in recounting her own emotions, thereby leading to the irony and sarcasm that permeate her later letters? Or is it less the man and more Austen's frustration with the circumstances that brought about their separation? Or is it, perhaps, her frustration with the utter lack of appropriate space in which she might speak about her feelings?

During her twenty first year, Austen's letters record the happiness of her emotionally charged life; and her rebellious nature, yet to be completely subdued, was allowed to find refuge in her flirtatious attachment with Lefroy. At the age of twenty

three, despite perhaps "feeling external pressure to conform to established canons of tastes and decorum" (Nokes, 1997, 103), Austen uses letters as a much more subtle refuge for her rebellion, masterfully camouflaged amidst an increasingly ironic tone and a distinct refusal to engage emotionally with any subject. As critic Angela Leighton reminds readers, "What is important about irony is that it always tells either more or less than the truth, and therefore requires the reader to be constantly attuned to that meaning which slips the evidence of words." [8] Austen's letters become "something finely satirical," an efficient subterfuge for a critique of her society "which were [it] not directed against," domestic duties and general news, might be seen as "almost malicious" (Halperin 1986, 186).

Emerging through the lists of daily tasks, accounts of pork roasts, and her mother's hypochondria which become the main subject matter of the later letters of 1798, Austen's witty, sarcastic spirit stages its own insurgency and thereby serves to express, as it conceals, Austen's severe contempt for these daily duties and domestic tasks. In her letter to Cassandra, dated Saturday 27 October 1798, Austen records the following account of her daily life:

> We met with no adventures . . .except that our Trunk had once nearly slipped off, & we were obliged to stop at Hartley to have our wheels greazed.—While my Mother and Mr. Lyford were together, I went to Mrs. Ryders, and bought what I intended to buy, but not in much perfection.—There were no narrow Braces for children, & scarcely any netting silk; but Miss Wood as

[8] Angela Leighton, "Sense & Silence: Reading Jane Austen Again," in *Jane Austen: New Perspectives*, ed. Janet Todd (New York: Homes & Meuer Publishers Inc., 1983), 139.

> usual is going to Town very soon, and will lay in fresh stock.—I gave 2s/3d a yard for my flannel, & fancy it is not very good; but it is so disgraceful & contemptible an article in itself, that its' being comparatively good or bad is of little importance. I bought Japan Ink likewise, & next week shall begin my operations on my hat, on which You know my principal hopes of happiness depend.—I am very grand indeed; I had the dignity of dripping out my mother's Laudanum last night. (*JAL*, 23)

This disconnectedness is very typical of Austen's remaining letters from this period. Typified by a monotonous tone perpetually undercut by sarcasm like "I am very grand indeed" and irony—"next week shall begin my operations on my hat, on which You know my principal hopes of happiness depend"—(*JAL*, 23), Austen characteristically juxtaposes lists of domestic duties and daily tasks with accounts of recent outings.

An important caveat, however, should be made here as one considers the nature of letter writing in the Georgian period. One question which serves readers to ask is whether Austen's aforementioned union of unrelated events was in reality an indication of her discontented mind, or a product of the time in which she was writing these letters? Paper was expensive; brevity was important, and in an effort to be efficient writers such as Austen might have tried to get the most out of those pages they did possess by covering everything they felt necessary in as brief a mode as possible. Although this does provide one explanation, it does not satiate the urge to understand why an author, who so significantly illustrated the intricacies of a few families in her novels, includes none of that same detail, that same devotion to the idiosyncrasies of individual lives, in her own

letters? There seems to be something more at work in Austen's letters than the arbitrary recounting of daily events. It becomes important to note not so much the daily accounts that she does share, but the way in which she discusses these events.

What becomes even more significant, even more interesting, then, is the manner in which Austen offers no differentiation in her discussion of any of the events in her life, large or small. Adventures become mundane and are treated with the same respect as greazing wheels, while the purchase of silk appears to be the bearer of Austen's "principal hopes of happiness" (*JAL*, 23)! Austen's understatement, often voiced by characters in her novels, emerges here from the author herself. Readers become cognizant of her affliction as she satirizes her own life and how it is dictated by societal conventions. Austen mocks her deferment to domesticity when she notes "I am very grand indeed, I had the dignity of dripping out my mother's Laudanum last night" (*JAL*, 23).

One of Austen's most memorable remarks appears in the letter of 27 October 1798 when she notes "Mrs. Hall, of Sherborne was brought to bed yesterday of a dead child, some weeks before she expected, owing to a fright. I suppose she happened unawares to look at her husband" (*JAL*, 24). Austen's tone highlights her apparent disdain for her own life. This comment could be read as Austen being overtly vicious but, if this were so, the question as to why Cassandra did not burn such a letter with those that she did destroy becomes pertinent. Perhaps then it is important to consider that Austen's object here is not spite any more than it might be missionary; it is the more desperate task of finding some acceptable existence for the expression of her critical attitudes.

Her juxtaposition of unrelated events alone becomes a small insurgency that Austen subtly enacts within the written medium. Yet another example of Austen's apparent disdain appears, in a letter dated Saturday December 1 1798, as Austen, remarking on a recent alteration to her hair, says, "I have had it cut lately by Mr. Butler," quickly moving on to exclaim "there is no reason to suppose that Miss Morgan is dead after all," and finally to remark that recently "Mr. Lyford gratified us very much yesterday by his praises of my father's mutton" (*JAL,* 35). Readers, searching for any kind of discernable sequence of thought, remain perpetually frustrated as Austen continually refuses to commit to any topic and proceeds in a kind of detached stream of conscious style. But her disconnected style provides Austen an opportunity, through understatement, to work within a limited medium and express her disdain for the limitations imposed upon women by society.

Austen's remaining letters, from the years 1798 to her death in 1817, are full of this juxtaposition of unlinked, and often inappropriately joined, subject matter, all of which is undercut by her sarcasm and apparent lack of affect. Austen frequently appears to violate contemporary standards of decorum by exhibiting such a dearth of sympathy in her letters and through her disclosure of disjointed fragments of her everyday domestic life and social exchange. An important question emerges. Why this dramatic alteration, this embrace of the seethingly sarcastic? Granted, on the subject of Mr. Tom Lefroy, readers can sympathize with Austen's cool tone and reticent nature. But the surviving letters from 1798 do not address the subject of former attachments. These letters address familial relations, friends, everyday activities and Austen's day-to-day life. Yet Austen's

discussion of any of these events is perpetually undercut by a cool sarcasm or biting irony.

Austen's diminution of large matters, and subsequent elevation of the apparently trivial, expresses her disdain for the dull, socially dictated duties of her domestic life. Her letters reveal an intense awareness of the vacuous quality of her own discourse; as such, these letters represent a sharp divergence from those of 1796 addressing Tom Lefroy and the excitement and anticipation of relationships and interaction. Perhaps Austen's sarcasm and wit, which become apparent throughout the letters of 1798, are specifically designed to maintain the appearance of an external peace. Her letters appear to be the medium through which Austen combats the trivial and mundane with her wit and critical eye. Her letters become the battleground for her rebellion.

For example, Austen never explicitly remarks upon her mother's persistent state of hypochondria, but acute readers can sense both Austen's sarcasm and her frustration such as when she writes: "My mother made her entrée into the dressing-room through crowds of admiring spectators yesterday afternoon . . . .she has had a tolerable night, and bids fair for a continuance in the same brilliant course of action to-day . . ." (*JAL*, 34). Austen's letters provide a mechanism to divert any temptation for explicit rebellion against her mother she might possess. An interesting comparison presents itself here between Austen's struggle with domestic detention and Anne Elliot's—the heroine of Austen's last novel—speech on women's confinement. Anne states that men "have always a profession, pursuits, business of some sort or the other,"[9] to occupy them. Women, however, must "live at home, quiet, confined," where their "feelings prey upon" (*P,* 218), them. While men might have been able to alleviate their feelings through these

[9] Jane Austen, *Persuasion* (London and New York: Penguin, 2003), 218. Cited hereafter as *P.*

activities, women like Austen might have fallen "prey" to feelings of frustration were they not to be rid of them by enacting them within some accessible form. By releasing her frustrations through writing, she spares herself from enacting them in reality. The tension in the "implicitly rebellious vision within an explicitly decorous form,"[10] becomes evident. Thus, although Austen's letters become testament to the inner battles with decorum and domestic responsibility with which she dealt on a daily basis, they were still a testament to how far the hand of propriety could extend into a woman's private space.

Naturally then Austen's own anxiety about writing, the space of expression that authorship accorded one, becomes evident through those incidents from Austen's own life which are echoed in plots of her novels. Virginia Woolf comments that for Austen, a woman's confinement extended even to the seemingly private space of the written medium.

> . . .if a woman wrote, she would have to write in the common sitting room...she was always interrupted...Jane Austen wrote like that to the end of her days. "How she was able to effect all this," her nephew writes in his memoir, "is surprising, for she had no separate study to repair to, and most of the work must have been done in the general sitting room subject to all kinds of casual interpretations. She was careful that her occupation should not be suspected." Jane Austen hid her manuscripts or covered them with a piece of blotting-paper. . .[she] was glad that a hinge creaked, so that she

[10] "Jane Austen's Cover Story (And Its Secret Agents)" in *The Madwoman in the Attic: The Woman Writer and the Nineteenth-Century Literary Imagination*, ed. Sandra M. Gilbert & Susan Gubar (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1979), 158.

> might hide her manuscript before anyone came in. (Gilbert and Gubar 1979, 153)

This image of Austen quickly slipping her writing under the blotting-paper is analogous to that of Elizabeth Bennet, in *Pride and Prejudice*, quickly hiding a letter to her sister Jane upon Mr. Darcy's arrival in the sitting room of the Collins' home. "Elizabeth was sitting by herself the next morning, and writing to Jane. . .when she was startled by a ring at the door. . .under that apprehension [she put] away her half-finished letter that she might escape all impertinent questions."[11]

Therefore, what we see in Austen's letters of Austen the woman, echoes the writing of Austen the author, an individual centrally concerned with women's difficulty in evading conventions and labels that, in every sense, abase them. Despite the confinement from which Austen appears to subversively scream in her letters, Austen's "self imposed novelistic limitations" (Gilbert and Gubar 1979, 112), illustrate that, like her heroines, she demanded that she too find a secure space which she might both powerfully and safely inhabit. The Austen whose discomfort with daily duties emerges from her letters bears a striking similarity to those heroines in her novels, fighting to define themselves in a society dictated by propriety, politics and economics.

[11] Jane Austen, *Pride and Prejudice* (London and New York: Penguin, 2003), 173. Cited hereafter as *PP*.

Chapter 2: Expression and Repression: The Struggle for Balance

Throughout her letters and novels Austen seems to suggest that becoming a woman—as opposed to remaining a young girl—requires a complex accommodation of oneself to one's society, particularly male society, and the spaces that society provides. Marriage in Austen's novels becomes a crucial and accessible space for self-definition for women in society. As Elizabeth Bennet notes upon her first visit to Pemberley, 'and of this place. . . I might have been mistress!' (*PP*, 236).[12] Austen hints at the sense of both power and protection that marriage has the potential to accord women. The strategies Austen proposes her heroines employ to cope with female constraint are often difficult, demanding both modifications and acquiescence. A few of Austen's heroines, most notably perhaps Elizabeth Bennet and Anne Elliot do 'evade the culturally induced idiocy and impotence that domestic confinement and female socialization' (Gilbert and Gubar 1979, 183) had the potential to produce. But those women unable to effectively navigate this space were often labeled or relegated to more undesirable sectors of society by their former friends and neighbors.

Austen's heroines—like Austen herself—are forced to create their own expressive spheres and define themselves as individuals, and as women, within the constraints of decorous society. The happiness of Austen's heroines' depends on the successful reconciliation of the differing spheres of society's rules and their own individuality. In this section an exploration of the education of Marianne Dashwood and Anne Elliot from

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[12] Recognizing the importance of this moment in *Pride and Prejudice*, I must recognize and thank Professor Blair, without whom I might never have connected this moment to my thesis.

two opposing ends of the spectrum of self-expression and self-restraint will be used to elucidate the themes that emerged in Austen's letters.

In *Sense and Sensibility* Jane Austen tells the story of two sisters. Although strikingly different in their approach to love, society and their responsibilities, Elinor and Marianne's romantic situations run parallel courses. Both sisters gradually progress towards marriage with worthy men, but this advancement is complicated by the unscrupulous behavior of certain peripheral characters. Marianne Dashwood's passion and romantic displays get her into trouble when she falls in love with the handsome, yet unsuitable, John Willoughby. Elinor struggles to conceal her feelings for the shy, and slightly dry, Edward Ferrars who has been lured into a clandestine engagement with the conniving Lucy Steele. Although this work will focus its analysis on Marianne, it is important to possess this basic understanding of Elinor's character, as it is often through interaction with Elinor that Marianne's failings become most apparent.

Marianne Dashwood presents one of the most striking and difficult heroines in all of Austen's novels. Written at the beginning of her career, *Sense and Sensibility* is, in part, an examination of the punishment and subsequent education of Marianne Dashwood. In *The Proper Lady and the Woman Writer*, Mary Poovey suggests that "Austen's novels all culminate in marriage but this relationship serves chiefly to display the heroine's achievement of maturity."[13] Although Poovey's observation is appropriate in most cases, it fails adequately to explain the case of Marianne. I contend that, despite Marianne Dashwood's marriage in the closing pages of *Sense and Sensibility*, her marriage is a part of her punishment rather than a reward for her maturity. Marianne's

[13] Mary Poovey, *The Proper Lady and the Woman Writer* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1984), 46.

education is not complete at the end of *Sense and Sensibility*. Therefore, Austen does not grant her the happy marriage with which all other heroines, including Marianne's sister Elinor, are finally rewarded. Mooneyham states that "the educative goal in this novel is to teach sense to the overemotional Marianne," and so to achieve this goal and "gain sense, Marianne must renounce sensibility."[14] But as with Poovey's argument, Mooneyham's statement is incomplete for it belies a part of the complexity behind Austen's brilliant and complex design.

It is important to note here that Austen is not an absolutist. Marianne Dashwood's youthful exuberance and imagination are initially extremely attractive, so much so that the reader is enticed to find, "something so amiable in the prejudices of a young mind, that one is sorry to see them give way to the reception of more general opinions."[15] The changes she demands from her heroines require a subtle exploration of female feeling and intellect, as well as an awareness of the importance of balancing self-command and self-expression. Austen's ambivalent relationship with the necessity of female concessions to societal demands are perhaps nowhere more delicately expressed than in a notable moment in *Sense and Sensibility*.

Austen shows a glimmer of her own tribute to Marianne's sensibility when she allows Elinor, the figure of sense and restraint, to briefly experience Willoughby's potent attraction.

> Willoughby, he whom only half an hour ago she had abhorred as the most worthless of men, Willoughby, in spite of all his faults, excited a

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[14] Laura Mooneyham, *Romance, Language and Education in Jane Austen's Novels* (London: MacMillan Press Ltd., 1988), 31.

[15] Jean H. Hagstrum, "Sense and Sensibility" in *Sex and Sensibility: Ideal and Erotic Love from Milton to Mozart* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1980), 268-274.

> degree of commiseration for the sufferings produced by them, which made her think of as now separated for ever from her family with a tenderness, a regret, rather in proportion, as soon as she acknowledged within herself—to wishes than to his merits. She felt that his influence over her mind was heightened by circumstances which ought not to have weight,—by that person of uncommon attraction, that open, affectionate, and lively manner which it was no merit to possess; and by that still ardent love for Marianne, which it was not even innocent to indulge. But she felt that it was so, long, long before she could feel his influence less.[16]

What this incident suggests is Austen's own understanding of the complexities of women's characters. Nevertheless, Austen demands that her heroines manipulate and master the accessible space of self-definition. She refuses to allow her heroines to wallow in silence, or indulge in gluttonous self-expression; she demands that each be her own mistress despite, and within, the boundaries imposed upon her by society.

In her novels, "Austen is not opposed to feeling," or expression, "only to the excessive display," of either, "only to a lack of control, only to the abandonment of the whole being to its dominance."[17] Marianne Dashwood has sense. Austen, telling readers as much in her initial description of her heroine, notes that Marianne's

> abilities were, in many respects quite equal to Elinor's. She was sensible and clever, but eager in everything; her sorrows, her joys could have no moderation. She was generous, amiable, interesting; she was everything but prudent. (*SS*, 8)

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[16] Jane Austen, *Sense and Sensibility* (London and New York: Penguin, 1995), 311. Cited hereafter as *SS*.
[17] Stuart M. Tave, "Sensibility" in *Some Words of Jane Austen* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1973), 74-115.

Marianne Dashwood is not punished for a dearth of sense. Rather, she is punished for her exorbitant self-interest and her inability to reconcile self-expression with social responsibilities.

Austen's education of her heroine is best illuminated through a chronological examination of Marianne's character at specific points during the novel. Initially, Marianne's self-interestedness is most clearly displayed through her language; secondly, Marianne becomes aware of her selfishness when she realizes that Elinor has been silently suffering while she has been parading her own sorrows; and finally, in the description of Marianne Dashwood's fate at the end of the novel, Austen, believing that Marianne has not yet reconciled self-expression with self-command, makes evident why she cannot end her novel in the usual manner of a happy marriage.

If the relation of self and society is viewed as a spectrum, with self-interest and self-expression on one end and societal responsibility and self-command on the other, at the beginning of *Sense and Sensibility* Marianne Dashwood solely inhabits the former end. In the opening chapters of *Sense and Sensibility*, Marianne appears petulantly indulgent in her "feelings with a warmth which left her no inclination for checking her excessive display" (*SS*, 55), of both emotion and opinion. Marianne's self-interestedness becomes most evident here through her language. During a discussion with her mother of how much she requires from a potential suitor, Marianne makes statements such as "to satisfy *me*," and, "*I* could not be happy with a man whose taste did not in every point coincide with *my* own," and who "must enter into all *my* feelings," for "I require so much!" (*SS*, 19, my own emphasis). These present just a few of the copious examples Austen provides for readers of the way in which Marianne's language indicates an

obsession with her own self-interests, her own desires and her own feelings. Marianne is the center of her world and she demands that the rest of the world should indulge in her emotions or leave her to wallow alone; society should not disturb her melancholy.

When the man with whom Marianne has fallen violently in love (John Willoughby) abruptly quits his daily visits, Marianne, expounding upon the nature of her own misery, passionately states,

> No, no...misery such as mine has no pride. I care not who knows that I am wretched. The triumph of seeing me so may be open to all the world. Elinor, Elinor, they who suffer little may be proud and independent as they like—I must feel wretched—and they are welcome to enjoy the consciousness of it that can. (*SS*, 179)

Marianne's discussion with Elinor here highlights multiple issues for readers. This speech suggests that Marianne feels her own suffering to be in some way different, or more intense, than that of others and, additionally, emphasizes the belief that her feelings alone validate her behavior. Marianne always "expected from other people the same opinions and feelings as her own, and she judged of these motives by the immediate effect of their actions on herself" (*SS*, 191). She cares not that her behavior with Willoughby might have been imprudent, nor has she considered the strain her actions have placed on her family.

In light of the previous chapter on Austen's own letters, in is particularly interesting to note that, in her typical heedless fashion, Marianne Dashwood disregards propriety in a moment of exasperation, and actually writes to John Willoughby in an attempt to solicit the renewal of his attentions. Marianne only worsens her situation by

this unchecked expression, and Austen will promptly censure Marianne's self-indulgent behavior. For now, however, a second conversation between Marianne and Elinor illustrates not only the extent of Marianne's self-interest, but delineates how her self-centered vision of the world has occluded her ability to see those responsibilities to others that she neglects.

Upon receiving a letter of separation from Willoughby in response to her letter, Marianne again wallows in her misfortunes.

> Oh Elinor, I am miserable indeed. . .leave me leave me, if I distress you; leave me, hate me, forget me; but do not torture me so. Oh! How easy for those who have no sorrow of their own to talk of exertion! Happy, happy Elinor, *you,* have no idea what I suffer. (*SS*, 176)

In fact, Elinor suffers terribly due to her own unrequited love. Despite this fact, she remains mistress of herself when in the presence of others. Elinor's situation, in many respects, directly parallels Marianne's and, therefore, only throws Marianne's selfishness into sharper relief.

In the final example, Marianne's initial self-interestedness, and her subsequent disregard for societal responsibilities, becomes most evident when Lucy Steele praises Lady Middleton (whom Austen presents as completely devoid of character whatsoever). Lady Middleton is the vapid wife of Sir John Middleton, on whose estate the Dashwoods' cottage is situated and, in whose company the Dashwoods are often required to be. Thus when Lucy Steele praises this woman whom Marianne regards with utter contempt, Austen notes that "Marianne was silent; it was impossible for her to say what she did not feel, however trivial the occasion; and upon Elinor therefore, the whole task of telling lies

when politeness required it always fell" (*SS*, 117). The details surrounding this comment or why Marianne is silent are not crucial, for "Marianne abhorred all concealment . . .and to aim at the restraint of sentiments which were not in themselves illaudable, appeared to her not merely an unnecessary effort, but a disgraceful subjection of reason to common place and mistaken notions" (*SS*, 54). Marianne believes that her sensibilities grant her "a moral sense that is a far more infallible guide to truly reasonable and moral social behavior than the commonly accepted rules of propriety can provide" (Nardin 1973, 29). What is pertinent here is that Marianne can only indulge her own emotions. Her "behavior, at all times, was an illustration of [her] opinions" (*SS*, 54), and this indulgence places the burden on others. Marianne is overly expressive when she should be silent, while she is silent when social responsibility dictates the necessity for a polite response.

Not only does Marianne refuse to accept her duties as a woman in society, but also perhaps more importantly Austen notes that Marianne does not seem to understand the necessity of civil falsehoods. In a biting comment directed at Elinor, Marianne highlights her lack of understanding of the reasons for decorous responses:

> I see what you mean. I have been too much at ease, too happy, too frank. 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. (*SS*, 49)

As was suggested in previous commentary on her letters, Austen, like Marianne, often finds decorous behavior mundane or spiritless. But, what Austen notes in her novels

is the necessity of decorous behavior as a duty and a requirement of women in civilized societies. As such, Marianne must learn to balance the mundane decorous with the passionately personal. At this point however, Marianne's only concerns are her own feelings, her own self-expression. Marianne has no self-command. For this Austen will punish her, but only to begin to educate her heroine on the necessity of achieving a balance between self-expression and societal responsibilities.

Marianne awakens to her erroneous ways, in Chapter I of Volume 3 of *Sense and Sensibility*, through a conversation with Elinor. Elinor finally speaks of her own distress and subsequently forces Marianne to realize the extent of her previous selfishness. Elinor informs Marianne that for the past four months she has borne the knowledge that the man she loves has been secretly engaged. In one of the most powerful speeches from her sister, Austen forces Marianne to recognize her error, her selfishness, and thus denotes the beginning of Marianne's subsequent education. Elinor exclaims

> I understand you. —You do not suppose that I have ever felt much. —For four months, Marianne, I have had all this hanging on my mind, without being at liberty to speak of it to a single creature; knowing that it would make you and my mother most unhappy whenever it were explained to you . . . And all this has been going on at a time, when, as you too well know, it has not been my only unhappiness. —If you can think me capable of ever feeling—surely you may suppose that I have suffered *now*. (*SS*, 247)

For the first time Marianne is, quite literally, subdued. Her passion appears to fail her; Austen suspends her for this moment to consider the weight of her errors. Austen quickly forces Marianne to compare her behavior to that of Elinor.

It is important to note that Austen suggests that Marianne would never intentionally have hurt Elinor. Yet, due to her refusal to engage with anyone's emotions except her own, Marianne has been unable to see Elinor's pain and was unknowingly exacerbating this pain by not partaking of her own share of familial responsibilities. Marianne's moment of recognition is more poignant because Austen makes the conduit of Marianne's erroneous ways an individual whom she loves dearly. Marianne is left more dissatisfied with herself than ever when she compares Elinor's conduct to her own; she "felt all the force of that comparison; but not as her sister had hoped, to urge her to exertion now; she felt it with all the pain of continual self-reproach" (*SS*, 253).

Following this incident, readers see a dramatic shift in Marianne's character. When Elinor later inquires after her opinions regarding her previous behavior, Marianne responds, "I compare it with what it ought to have been; I compare it with yours" (*SS*, 322). Marianne begins to see her conduct as an act of imprudence toward herself and a deficiency of kindness for others. She becomes aware of the neglected responsibilities both to her family and to her society. Typically following the recognition of their error, Austen's heroines undergo a dramatic reversal to amend for these mistakes.

But Marianne's course, her education, proves more arduous than simply acknowledging former shortcomings. Austen demands her heroines achieve this delicate balance between self and society and nowhere is this more apparent than in the later chapters of *Sense and Sensibility,* particularly in Austen's notable final discussion of

Marianne's "extraordinary fate" (SS, 352). As noted previously, Austen's novels usually culminate in a marriage, which at that point displays the heroines' achievement of maturity by a reward. Marianne Dashwood is Austen's only heroine not to achieve this climax. But Austen is deeply entrenched with the notions of reward and punishment in *Sense and Sensibility*. Marianne's selfishness is contrasted sharply by Brandon's selflessness, and subsequently, where Austen punishes Marianne, she rewards Brandon.

Marianne's marriage to Colonel Brandon should be viewed more as a step on the trajectory of her education and maturity than a reward for her rehabilitation. Austen's strong language when discussing Marianne's fate outlines this fact:

> Marianne Dashwood was born to an extraordinary fate. She was born to discover the falsehood of her own opinions, and to counteract, by her conduct, her most favourite maxims. She was born to overcome an affection formed so late in life as at seventeen, and with no sentiment superior to strong esteem and lively friendship, voluntarily to give her hand to another. (*SS*, 352)

Marianne, formerly Austen's most passionate heroine—a heroine in love with passionate love—marries a man to whom she attaches "no sentiment superior to strong esteem" (*SS*, 352). "Strong esteem," and "lively friendship," despite both being admirable descriptions, certainly do not seem like grounds on which to enter into matrimony! And yet, Austen explicitly informs readers that Marianne "voluntarily gives her hand" (*SS*, 352) to Colonel Brandon.

What is equally interesting to note is Austen's language as she describes Brandon's reward in his union to Marianne. At the end of the novel, Austen notes that the

Dashwoods "each felt his [Brandon's] sorrows, and their own obligations, and Marianne, by general consent was to be the *reward* of all" (*SS*, 351, my own emphasis). Discussing the fate of Colonel Brandon, Austen's language is very deliberate. Speaking of an individual (Marianne) as a reward suggests that Austen strongly believed Brandon to be deserving compensation while Marianne must endure punishment. In other words, Austen is asking readers to consider the same scenario from two different perspectives. Austen additionally implores readers to consider seriously the nature of the reward by noting that "with such a confederacy against her [Marianne]—what could she do?" (*SS*, 351-352). But Marianne "voluntarily gives her hand" (*SS*, 352). The delicacy of Austen's design here is that Marianne is not forced; the decision—with some decided encouragement—is her own. Marianne's marriage to Brandon is an integral step in the progression of her punishment and subsequent education.

Austen desires her readers to understand that Marianne has learned enough to *know* that this marriage is a necessary step in her rehabilitation. She does not enter this marriage blind to its eventual benefits to herself per se. It is extremely important for readers to note Austen's delicate yet significant distinction: Brandon is not Marianne's punishment, although Marianne is Brandon's reward. Austen acknowledges Brandon's goodness, and speaks of his deserving this reward for "Colonel Brandon," upon marriage to Marianne, "was now as happy as all those who best loved him, believed he deserved to be;—in Marianne [his reward] he was consoled for every past affliction" (*SS*, 352). So Brandon's reward is an individual but, equally important is that Marianne's punishment is *not* the man, rather it is "not falling sacrifice to an irresistible passion, as once she had fondly flattered herself with expecting" (*SS*, 352). This perhaps, then,

suggests that Marianne has come to recognize not only the error of her previous disposition and lack of self-command, but moreover, the realization that she has yet to complete her rehabilitation.

Austen hints as to why she feels Marianne's education is incomplete by exposing Marianne's inability to be completely in command of her expressed emotions. When Elinor informs her of what Willoughby had said at their last meeting, Marianne, while not flying into a fit of passionate rage, is still not yet entirely her own mistress. Austen writes that Marianne

> said not a word.—She trembled, her eyes were fixed on the ground, and her lips became whiter than even sickness had left them. A thousand inquiries sprung up from her heart, but she dared not urge one. She caught every syllable with panting eagerness; her hand unknowingly to herself, closely pressed her sister's and tears covered her cheeks. (*SS*, 324)

In so doing, Austen indicates that Marianne has yet to master her indulgence in her own sorrows. Marianne still cannot exert the kind of appearance of control Austen expects of her heroines. Marianne admits that she has yet to be completely in command of herself as she exclaims that she "will be mistress of" (*SS*, 333), herself. Speaking to future endeavors as opposed to a past achievement, Marianne recognizes her responsibility and tells readers that she will fulfill this promise: "the future must be my proof—my feelings shall be governed and my temper improved. . .my spirit is humbled, my heart amended" (*SS*, 323).

But Marianne cannot yet effectively balance her societal responsibilities with her need for personal expression. Although she is much better at exerting herself, Marianne

still requires guidance in this arena. Austen's union of Marianne and Brandon suggests that Marianne can count on Brandon's experience, friendship and devotion for assistance in the successful completion of her education. The fact that Marianne does indeed enter into marriage indicates, as Mooneyham rightfully notes, that Marianne "is capable of more than self-love...the act of binding [herself] to another represents a truth about psychological growth," and denotes an element of "assimilation and ordering of one's warring impulses" (Mooneyham 1988, 27).

Critic Janis Stout contends that "if Austen does finally chasten Marianne for her exaggerated sensibility and her disregard of decorum, she does not do so in such an extreme way as to scapegoat Marianne or deny her attractiveness" (Stout 1990, 46). Stout raises an important point in her commentary as Marianne *is* an extremely attractive character to readers, and it is commonly regarded that "Marianne is well received by readers and liked by Austen" (Stout 1988, 46). But her attractiveness should not belie her failings. Throughout the novel, Austen implies that Marianne must learn to navigate both the spheres of self-expression and self-command. She must *be* an individual, with opinions and emotions, but she must also be a member of society. Marianne must learn to balance effectively the responsibilities to herself and to her society, but because she does not achieve this by the end of the novel, Austen cannot reward her with the same kind of marriage she grants the rest of her heroines.

Critics have strongly debated Austen's ending to *Sense and Sensibility* with regards to the marriage of Marianne Dashwood. Tony Tanner argues that "Marianne move[s] gradually towards [a] desirable marriage,"[18] that will eventually depict "true harmony" (Tanner 1986, 79), in marriage. On the other side of the debate, Laura

[18] Tony Tanner, *Jane Austen* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1986), 78.

Mooneyham and others have suggested that Marianne's marriage to Brandon is highly problematic and unsuccessful, for "Marianne and Brandon not only do not educate each other;" rather "Brandon is only a pale reflection" (Mooneyham 1984, 32) of the type of character one imagines or desires Marianne to wed. Therefore, these critics argue that "the marriage fail[s] to interest" (Mooneyham1988, 32). I agree more with Tanner's position in that I contend, and I think Austen explicitly tells readers, that Marianne does eventually find happiness with Brandon. The difficulty for readers and critics like Mooneyham, who find this marriage unsatisfying, is that at the close of the novel the happiness that Austen projects Marianne to eventually obtain, is yet to be realized. Marianne's education is incomplete; she is still mastering the void and so our interest, our investment as readers, is not entirely satiated by Austen's ending. I think Austen suggests that Marianne, with her newfound understanding of societal and personal responsibility, will only be happy when *she* feels that she has achieved this self-mastery. Austen only offers readers a promise of future happiness, and it is this subtle distinction which may leave some readers most unsatisfied. But as Stout aptly notes, "the practice is thematically right, conveying as it does both Jane Austen's faith in the continuity between an individual's personal interests and those of society and her stress on the moral value of the widened perspective" (Stout 1990, 53), even if it is indeed considerably disappointing to emotionally implicated readers.

Marianne Dashwood's punishment must extend beyond the closing pages of the novel. It is interesting that the extension of punishment at the end of *Sense and Sensibility* parallels the beginning of *Persuasion,* as Anne Elliot's punishment commences before the opening pages. Readers might then begin to see the spectrum of Austen's heroines,

and the brilliance of the interconnectedness of themes throughout her career, that runs from her first novel to her last.

If Marianne Dashwood is punished for the selfish nature of her self-expression, for her inability to pilot successfully the spheres of expression and self-command as Austen feels a woman ought, Anne Elliot, the heroine of Austen's last novel *Persuasion*, illustrates that Austen is as opposed to the restraints of disinterested silence as she is to profuse selfish communication. The balance between propriety and individuality which Austen demands becomes more apparent when these two heroines are juxtaposed. "The rules of propriety," can be "as repressive and a person. . .who insists on following them to the letter may place excessive stress" (Nardin 1973, 46), on herself. "But they are (also) protective and helpful as well, for they provide individuals with generally workable ways of structuring their relationship to society" (Nardin 1973, 46). Marianne Dashwood's story delineates the dangers of too much self-interestedness and excessive self-expression; Anne Elliot's illustrates the opposite scenario, too little self-interest and too much silence. In contrast to the punishment of Marianne Dashwood, which occurs near the end of the novel, readers are introduced to the character of Anne amidst her seven-year estrangement from the man she loves. For her complete subjugation of her own desires and heart to societal responsibilities, Anne Elliot has been punished before the action of the novel even begins.

Poovey makes a beautiful observation when she argues that "Austen is as insistent as ever on the epistemological and ethical anarchy that unchecked individualism can produce" (Poovey 1984, 208). Such, I have argued, is the case in the character of Marianne Dashwood. In *Persuasion*, through the character of Anne Elliot, however,

Austen "is now more intent on showing how individual feeling can become moral and how it can—and must—make room for itself within the very social situations that threaten to destroy it" (Poovey 1984, 208). Where Marianne Dashwood's education is to teach her self-command, Anne Elliot must learn self-expression. If we return briefly to the image of the spectrum, with self-interest and self-expression on one end and societal responsibility and self-command on the other, we begin to see how Anne, in polar opposition to Marianne Dashwood, begins her education solely inhabiting the end of societal responsibility. When Marianne and Anne are juxtaposed, readers will begin to see how Austen demands an effective balance of personal and societal responsibilities from her heroines.

When readers first meet Anne Elliot, we are told that, seven years previously, Anne had been very much in love with a man of no property but plenty of character. Frederick Wentworth, now Captain Wentworth, has returned to Anne's immediate society in the company of a naval couple, Admiral and Mrs. Croft, who have recently rented Anne's former home, Kellynch-hall. Seven years previously, Anne, young and very much in love, was dissuaded from an engagement to Wentworth both by her father and, more importantly, by her friend and mentor, Lady Russell. It is perhaps important to note here that Anne's mother died when Anne was fourteen years old, and since that time, although never replacing her, Lady Russell has played a primary role in Anne's life. In Austen's time, during the marriage dance, mothers often played a pivotal role in discovering and procuring prospective suitors. Since Anne's mother was absent, she understandably turned to Lady Russell for advice on such matters. Although Lady

Russell sought to save Anne from "wearing, anxious, youth-killing dependence" (*P*, 28), Lady Russell did not know the extent of Anne's attachment to Wentworth.

In the emotional aftermath that followed, Anne's youth is spoiled anyway for "her attachment and regrets had for a long time, clouded every enjoyment of youth; and an early loss of bloom and spirits had been their lasting effect" (*P*, 28). It should also be noted that Anne's actions are not the result of selfish caution but rather, her decision was made under the auspices "of being prudent, and self-denying principally for *his* advantage was her chief consolation, under the misery of parting" (*P*, 27-28). Sadly the notion that she was helping him has not alleviated her own suffering to any marked extent. Austen notes that Anne Elliott "at seven and twenty," the age when readers first make her acquaintance, "thought very differently from what she had been made to think at nineteen" (*P*, 29). But although she thinks very differently in the beginning of *Persuasion* than she had previously, Austen will quickly illustrate that Anne has not yet learned to enact these thoughts by any form of action or self-expression.

Austen delineates Anne's overly submissive character throughout the opening volume of *Persuasion*. The most revealing incident appears in chapter seven, when Austen depicts Anne in a quintessential moment of submission to the opinions of others. Mary Musgrove, Anne's sister (whose name has changed with her marriage), recounts for Anne Captain Wentworth's remarks from the previous evening regarding Anne's transformation since last he saw her. Mary says, "when asked what he thought of you . . .he said, 'you were so altered he should not have known you again!' " (*P*, 57). More striking than this comment is Anne's reaction when she receives this information. Only to herself does she express shock when she exclaims, "Altered beyond his knowledge!" (*P*,

57). Austen informs readers that instead of protesting or displaying a glimmer of disdain "Anne *fully submitted*, in silent, deep mortification" (*Persuasion*, 57, my own emphasis).

Not only does Anne submit without contestation to Wentworth's harsh comments but, beginning to believe herself thus altered, Anne's perpetual silence is also a submission. Austen makes Anne's punishment and her sorrow more poignant because they are unexpressed; Anne chooses to bear silently the knowledge of her tremendous loss, but she also succumbs in stillness to the opinions of her family and society. Austen suggests that Anne is too ready to accept her position. She is trapped in a world of submission and therefore is unable to be mistress of herself. In another example, when it becomes prudent for the Elliots to leave Kellynch-hall and relocate, Anne grieves "to forgo all the influence so sweet and so sad of the autumnal months in the country" (*P*, 33). Yet despite her desires "to remain," Anne resolves that, "it would be most right, and most wise, and therefore, must involve the least suffering, to go with the others" (*P*, 33). The question subtly posed here is for whom this decision shall yield the least suffering. Anne allows others an almost totalitarian dictatorship over her actions and emotions. Part of Austen's education of Anne Elliot will be to teach her to find the middle ground between silent constraint and the unchecked expression she seems unable to fathom.

As is true for nearly all Austen's heroines, Anne's education, which up to this point has been painful in its poignancy, begins to allow her to span the void between silence and self-expression. Anne slowly starts to reconcile her desires with her societal responsibilities. Gradually becoming aware that Wentworth still harbors residual feelings for her, she gains courage to make small steps toward expressing her feelings to him. While attending a concert with family and friends Anne manipulates both her actions and

speech to enlighten Wentworth as to the true nature of her feelings. When he arrives and tries to pass her with only a bow, Anne steps forward saying, "How do you do?" (*P*, 171). Austen reminds us that Anne, despite this large leap to "direct" communication, never forgets her other responsibilities. Even when her efforts to speak to Wentworth are counteracted by the intolerable Mr. Elliot, who implores her to translate Italian for him, Austen informs readers that Anne knew she "could not refuse; but never had she sacrificed to politeness with a more suffering spirit" (*P*, 179).

Later that evening, when her interaction with Elliot has distressed Wentworth to the point he feels he must remove himself, Anne finds herself accosted by Wentworth: "in a reserved yet hurried sort of farewell 'He must wish her good night. He was going—he should get home as fast as he could' " (*P*, 179). Anne, forced by circumstance to find more of her voice, indirectly communicates her feelings by saying, "Is not this song worth staying for?" (*P*, 179), as she was "suddenly struck by an idea which made her yet more anxious to be encouraging" (*P*, 179). Wentworth hurriedly replies "'No! There is nothing worth my staying for;' and he was gone directly" (*P*, 180). Following this interaction with Captain Wentworth, Anne realizes that it is jealousy of Mr. Elliot that has driven Wentworth away from the concert. This provides Anne the courage she needs to complete the final portion of her education and communicate (even if indirectly) her own desires: "Their last meeting had been most important in opening his feelings; she had derived from it a delightful conviction; but she feared from his looks, that the same unfortunate persuasion, which had hastened him away from the concert room, still governed" (*P*, 207). Austen indicates that Anne's attempts at communication have not

been enough, that she is the arbiter of her own happiness, and even to attempt to achieve this happiness, she must *express* herself, and no longer submit to silence.

In the climactic scene of *Persuasion*, Anne Elliot finally finds a way to communicate her desires and successfully reconcile her societal responsibilities with devotion to her own happiness. Though she cannot speak directly—a very notable point with which both Austen and I take issue, but that I will take up in the next portion of this piece—the most important thing, at this point, is that Anne has successfully found her voice.

Through a conversation, regarding the nature of male and female love, with her friend Captain Harville, Anne manages to convey to Wentworth her love for him. What is interesting to note here, and will become increasingly important in the next chapter is that Anne is able to speak "freely" precisely, and I contend *only*, because she is not speaking directly to Wentworth. Nevertheless, Anne contests that she "will not allow it to be more man's nature than woman's to be inconstant and forget those they do love, or have loved" (*P*, 219). Anne states,

> I believe the reverse. I believe in a true analogy between our bodily frames and our mental; and that as our bodies are the strongest, so are our feelings; capable of bearing most rough usage, and riding out the heaviest weather. (*P*, 219)

Following this comment, Austen indicates, both to readers and to her heroine, that Wentworth overhears Anne's conversation. Despite the fact that he is not a participant in the conversation, Wentworth's clandestine eavesdropping on her conversation is revealed to Anne when Wentworth drops his pen following Anne's commentary on the endurance

of female love. This inadvertently awakens Anne to the possibility that Wentworth can hear her conversation. Austen has presented Anne with a medium through which she might be able to communicate her feelings without risking her sense of decorum, if she will dare to try.

Conversation is

> always an experiment, whose results are never guaranteed. It involves risk . . . What matters is whether [one] is willing to think for [oneself] and say what [one] thinks. Many people cannot, either because. . .they assume they have nothing of importance to say, or because they have received too many knocks from life. But. . .people can suddenly come out with the most amazing statements when they find courage. . . what matters most is courage.[19]

This explanation seems highly appropriate to the discussion of Anne Elliot who has been silenced essentially for a third of her life due, in part, to the amalgam of emotional knocks she has sustained. At the scene at the White Hart, Austen grants Anne an unexpected opportunity to articulate her feelings—indirectly of course—but, more importantly, for the first time Anne finds the courage to take the risk, and engage in this conversation.

Anne's final triumph is within constraint at the end of *Persuasion*, for Anne manages, by calling attention to the fact that decorum may prevent her from speaking freely, to claim for her own sex the capability of persevering in an apparently hopeless love. Anne then, in the most indirectly direct way possible, tells Wentworth of her

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[19] Linda Bree, "Belonging to the Conversation in *Persuasion*" in *The Talk in Jane Austen*, eds. Bruce Stovel and Lynn Weinlos Gregg (Edmonton: University of Alberta Press, 2002), 162.

longstanding devotion to him through her conversation with Captain Harville. Anne bravely states, "all the privilege I claim for my own sex (it is not a very enviable one, you need not covet it) is that of loving longest, when existence or when hope is gone" (*P*, 221). "Anne's conversation has fulfilled its secondary, and more important function through the response of someone who both does and does not belong to it" (Stovel and Weinlos Gregg 2002, 163), and following this confession Austen informs readers that Anne "could not immediately have uttered another sentence; her heart was too full, her breath too much oppressed" (*P*, 231). Thus, the conversation ends with Anne in full knowledge of how much, for the first time, she has professed to Wentworth.

Anne Elliot has found her voice; she has completed her education. Anne has successfully become mistress of herself, reconciling self-command with self-expression, and for this Austen rewards her with Wentworth's letter that confesses his longstanding love for her, and ensures their subsequent engagement. The final scene of Persuasion concludes on a note of female triumph, ending with "an expression of Anne's position both as individual, steadfast lover, and as a woman articulating,"[20] her own desires within the social restrictions that limit her sphere of action. In *Persuasion*, Austen carries her readers from the total subjugation of desire to the effective expression of one's own feelings within societal parameters. In so doing, *Persuasion* emphasizes the power of principled feeling and provides readers with an idea of how this power's triumph might actually arise. The imperatives of verbal repression, which Austen first demands in *Sense and Sensibility* through the character of Marianne Dashwood, are as important as the obligation of communication that Austen presents through the character of Anne Elliot.

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[20]Ann Gaylin. *Eavesdropping in the Novel from Austen to Proust* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2002), 51.

Jane Austen values judicious communication, silence as well as expression. Austen's heroines must view social intercourse as a balance, a sort of equilibrium that must be obtained between conforming to society's rules and defining one's own individuality. The reconciliation of self-command and self-expression is a very delicate but important task. Austen's heroines—like Austen herself—are forced to create their own expressive sphere and define themselves within the constraints of decorum. Austen's heroines' happiness depends on the successful reconciliation of these difficult spheres of influence.

What Anne Elliot achieves by the end of *Persuasion*, Marianne Dashwood has yet to conquer and, therefore, cannot be awarded the same kind of happiness Anne achieves in her engagement to Wentworth. Both Anne and Marianne are fascinating characters, spanning the spectrum of devotion to both strong social and personal duties. Interestingly *Sense and Sensibility* and *Persuasion* mark the beginning and end of Austen's writing career. Austen demands a harmonious balance from her heroines, but the fact that she was examining similar themes at the commencement and finale of her career suggests how important these issues were to Austen both as a writer and as a woman. As Janis Stout emphatically argues,

> Austen and her heroines are confined not only by the prevailing expectations governing polite social behavior, but also by these more stringent ones governing the proper behavior of women. Both sets of expectations are enormously complex and deeply involved in every aspect of the self and the literary text. (Stout 1990, 45)

Chapter 3: Gender and the Conventions Governing Communication

Moving from the discussion of her heroine's individual struggles to master the delicate balance between self-command and self-expression, the following section shifts focus to two of Austen's principle male characters, Frederick Wentworth and Fitzwilliam Darcy. Thus far this work has been confined to *Persuasion* and *Sense and Sensibility*. However, due to the nature of the following argument, this chapter discusses *Persuasion* and *Pride and Prejudice*, as these two texts present the richest studies in principal male characters and their modes of communication.

Although not always explicitly labeled a feminist writer, critics from both ends of the feminist spectrum have attempted to categorize Austen, or, at least, categorize her writing. But critics cannot seem to agree whether she was in actuality more of the feminist or conservative mentality: critics such as Sandra Gilbert, Mary Poovey, and Susan Gubar depict Austen "as a closet rebel in an oppressive male-dominated society," [21] while, in diametrical opposition, critics including Elaine Showalter, mimicking Charlotte Bronte's infamously open contempt for Austen, argue that by the middle of the century, "Austen's name had become a byword for female literary restraint" (Looser 1995, 5). What has become evident through the previous discussion of Austen's letters and the lives of two of her heroines, is that Austen's work does offer substantial commentary on what it meant to occupy the position of a woman (albeit a middle-class white heterosexual English woman) in early nineteenth century Britain. But this immediately raises the subsequent question which asks to what extent the rules of propriety were gendered. The following section will address the questions of whether

[21] *Jane Austen and Discourses of Feminism* ed. Devoney Looser (New York: St. Martins Press, 1995), 5.

men—although still constrained by some, but certainly not all, of those societal restrictions previously shown to confine women in Austen's era, enjoy the possibility for freer communication.

Through an examination of spoken and written communication employed by the heroes in *Pride and Prejudice* and *Persuasion*—that is by Fitzwilliam Darcy and Captain Wentworth—the liberties men were permitted while expressing themselves are examined and subsequently compared with those proprieties which limit women's communication. Under the general themes of listening, speaking and letter writing—as established modes of communication—this section will progress in the following fashion: first, I will begin with a brief discussion of the necessity of both men and women "overhearing," and eavesdropping; second, I will analyze the freedoms enjoyed by Darcy and Wentworth in verbal discourse; and finally, the permissibility and potential for frank expression that are accorded to men in the form of letters are delineated through discussions of both Wentworth's letter expressing his long-standing devotion to Anne, and in Darcy's letter defending his actions to Elizabeth.

It is perhaps important to begin with a discussion of how both men and women are constrained by societal restraints in order to establish that there indeed were restrictions on communication for both sexes. In Austen's society becoming well acquainted with "someone of the opposite sex was often frustrated by the difficulty of finding opportunities for private interaction" (Gaylin 2002, 29). Austen was acutely aware of these confines and, as such, "Austen's novels can often demonstrate how eavesdropping can be enabling, allowing individuals to overcome" (Gaylin 2002, 28), the isolation forced upon them by societal regulations. At certain points in many of her

novels, both male and female characters are observed eavesdropping. For example, in the opening chapters of *Pride and Prejudice*, Elizabeth Bennet, prying on a conversation between Mr. Bingley and Mr. Darcy, "had been standing near enough for her to overhear a conversation between him and Bingley" (*PP*, 13). In this exchange Bingley begs to understand why Darcy insists on "standing about by [himself] in this stupid manner" (*PP*, 13), refusing to dance. Darcy then goes on to offer his opinion on how "it would be insupportable" (*PP*, 13), for him to stand up with any woman "at such an assembly as this" (*PP*, 13). This conversation, overheard by Elizabeth, sparks her dislike of Mr. Darcy as her pride was "mortified" (*PP*, 21), by his comment that she was "tolerable; but not handsome enough to tempt" (*PP*, 13) him into dancing.

Ironically just moments after remarking about the lack of beauty at this assembly of men and women, Darcy notices that Elizabeth's visage "was rendered uncommonly intelligent by the beautiful expression of her dark eyes" (*PP*, 24). Therefore, despite his wish to "know more" (*PP*, 24), even a man "having ten thousand a year" (*PP*, 12), is subjected to the rules of formal conversation. Thus having not been properly introduced Elizabeth had to resort to attending to her conversation with her dear friend Charlotte Lucas "as a step towards conversing with her himself" (*PP*, 24-25).

In a somewhat less covert instance of overhearing, Captain Frederick Wentworth, possessing a strong desire to know if Anne still harbors feelings for him, also becomes an eavesdropper. Wentworth is finally informed of the constancy of Anne's feelings in *Persuasion* by listening to a conversation she conducts with her friend Captain Harville. From a more ignorant perspective, the conversation ensuing between Anne and Harville discusses the nature of men and women's relative fidelities. But for Wentworth the

conversation is the mechanism by which he is finally able to really suspect that Anne's devotion to him has been constant despite their estrangement. Amidst Anne and Harville's conversation,

> . . .a slight noise called their attention to Captain Wentworth's hitherto perfectly quiet division of the room. It was nothing more than that his pen had fallen down, but Anne was startled at finding him nearer than she had supposed, and half inclined to suspect that the pen had only fallen, because he had been occupied by them, striving to catch sounds, which yet she did not think he could have caught (*P*, 219).

In the previous chapter, I discussed Anne Elliot's final breaking of her own longstanding silence when she "speaks" to Captain Wentworth. But, the interesting point to take note of here in light of this discussion surrounding men's communication, is that Anne only ventures to really express herself (this term is used very liberally) once Captain Wentworth has acknowledged that he is indirectly "participating" in this conversation by overhearing. Critic Tony Tanner raises a particularly interesting point regarding this interaction between Anne and Wentworth. When Wentworth drops his pen, Tanner argues that, whether conscious or not, "Wentworth's slip in dropping the pen at that moment is perhaps the most important signal—or unvoiced communication—in his entire relationship with Anne," because he "let go that instrument which is at once a tool and a symbol of men's dominance over women" (Tanner 1986, 241).

Regardless of whether one takes Tanner's point or not, Austen writes that by the slip of Wentworth's pen, Anne is awakened to the fact that he is eavesdropping on her conversation with Captain Harville. In that brilliant moment, Anne occupies the position

of dominance when she finally announces her feelings, saying, "All the privilege I claim for my own sex (it is not a very enviable one, you need not covet it) is that of loving longest, when existence or when hope is gone" (*P*, 221). Anne's profession is enough for Wentworth to act upon his own longstanding feelings, a point which I shall address later in this section. The emphasis here lies in Austen's delineation of the notion that regardless of whether eavesdropping is desirable or not to other parties, overhearing is a mechanism by which both men and women can evade certain social restrictions. Austen indicates that although overhearing might not be the best way to procure knowledge, in that eavesdropping often "presents an incomplete or faulty relay of information that leads to erroneous conclusions" (Gaylin 2002, 28), eavesdropping is, nevertheless, at times an avenue by which individuals might exert themselves within the confines of convention. Austen, "as a woman writer presenting the difficulties of female utterance, repeatedly uses moments of eavesdropping to figure this kind of mediated or oblique communication" (Gaylin 2002, 45), in a way that is appropriate both for her characters and for herself.

In discussing just these few isolated incidences, readers quickly become aware of the societal restraints that Austen acknowledges dictated the appropriate interactions of both men and women. Nevertheless, despite conceding that decorum constrains all individuals, I contend that through her novels Austen suggests that men enjoy a much greater degree of liberty in those modes of communication which are accorded to them; women are restrained by being both women and women in society, while men are subjected only to the latter.

Austen's principal male characters, Mr. Darcy and Captain Wentworth, enjoy much more freedom in their own verbal discourse than their female counterparts, Elizabeth Bennet and Anne Elliot. When Fitzwilliam Darcy, for example, realizes that he is in love with Elizabeth Bennet, he barges into her cousin's home to tell her so. Arising at almost the precise center of the novel, Mr. Darcy makes a somewhat shocking proposal to Elizabeth Bennet. The manner of Darcy's first proposal presents a perfect study in the freedom accorded to men, particularly men of property, with regards to how much they *may* say. Following a brief inquiry after her health, and a longer period of somewhat awkward silence, Mr. Darcy launches into his proposal. "The matter of Darcy's proposal," conveys "his own egotism" (Stout 1990, 35), as his emphasis during this notable scene is placed primarily upon his own feelings and struggles as he says, "in vain have I struggled. It will not do. My feelings will not be repressed. You must allow me to tell you how ardently I admire and love you" (*PP*, 185). But in addition to outlining the struggles of a wealthy man, he goes on to add that it is his expressed wish that he did not care for her as "his sense of her inferiority," led him to regard this union as "a degradation" (*PP*, 185). How is an individual, a woman, to respond to such a proposal?

Now whereas prior to the completion of their educations, Marianne Dashwood might have laughed at Darcy's lack of true passion and Anne Elliot might have submitted in silent deep mortification to Darcy's words, Elizabeth Bennet is both a more balanced and a more spirited heroine. Austen is particular here as she conveys, through Elizabeth, an understanding of the conventions which restricted a woman in such a position as Elizabeth Bennet finds herself here. Elizabeth begins:

> In such cases as this, it is I believe, the established mode to express a sense of obligation for the sentiments avowed, however unequally they may be returned. It is natural that obligation should be felt, and if I could *feel* gratitude, I would now thank you. (*PP*, 186)

Darcy's immediate reply expresses distress at the nature of Elizabeth's expression which is not at all how he expected a woman to respond to a proposal such as his: "this is all the reply which I am to have the honour of expecting! I might, perhaps, wish to be informed why, with so little *endeavor* at civility, I am thus rejected" (*PP*, 186). Darcy's question attunes readers to the unconventional nature of Elizabeth's reply. Readers here might find it helpful to substitute the word "civility" with "propriety," or a response suitable for a woman. When considered in the light of men's and women's self-expression, Austen is making a distinct contrast here between Darcy's speech and Elizabeth's response. Pertinent to note here is that Austen is careful to allow Elizabeth a retort only after Darcy has opened the conversation and successfully offended her. It is only after he has started the conversation and transgressed the boundaries of decorum that Elizabeth is able to indulge in a response such as she does, fighting back with a flash of rhetorical brilliance suited to a woman of her wit and intellect. The rules dictating the nature of her response effectively alter after the offense has been made.

Elizabeth "roused to resentment by his subsequent language . . .lost all compassion in anger" (*PP*, 185), and in the midst of her anger, her reticence evaporates. But she never interrupts him. Darcy had to open up the space for this communication to subsist between them, but Elizabeth's response—although perhaps not unwarranted—must be acknowledged to have been very atypical: "Mr. Darcy . . .seemed to catch her

words with no less resentment than surprise" (*PP*, 187). Using the offensive nature of Darcy's proposal as the justification for her retort, Elizabeth is allowed to express, to the fullest extent, her own opinions which otherwise would be termed inappropriate for a woman. She passionately states that she might inquire why "with so evident a design of offending and insulting me, you chose to tell me that you liked me against your will, and your reason, and even against your character?" (*PP*, 186). Austen protects her heroine. The liberties Darcy takes during the expression of his own sentiments admits potential for a response such as Elizabeth's when she says, "Was this not some excuse for incivility if I was uncivil? But I have other provocations" (*PP*, 186), adding that "the mode of your declaration affected me in any other way, than as it spared me the concern which I might have felt in refusing you, had you behaved in a more gentleman-like manner" (*PP*, 188).

Further evidence substantiating how Darcy's position and proposal elicit and allow for Elizabeth's response can be seen through a brief comparison with Elizabeth's response to Mr. Collins' proposal earlier in the novel. Despite his exasperating presence and somewhat officious proposal, he annoyingly expounds

> I am not now to learn. . .that it is usual with young ladies to reject the addresses of the man whom they secretly mean to accept when he first applies for their favour; and that sometimes the refusal is repeated a second or even a third time. I am therefore by no means discouraged by what you have just said, and shall hope to lead you to the altar ere long. (*PP*, 105)

However, Elizabeth remains polite and reserved. She replies, "I do assure you that I am not one of those young ladies (if such young ladies there are) who are so daring as to risk

their happiness on the chance of being asked a second time. I am perfectly serious in my refusal," and, "I wish you very happy and very rich, and by refusing your hand, do all in my power to prevent your being otherwise" (*PP*, 105), for "You could not make me happy, and I am convinced that I am the last woman in the world who would make you so" (*PP*, 105). Although Elizabeth's objections to Mr. Collins are still strong, she cannot appropriately offer the full weight of her opinion of him—as she does to Mr. Darcy. Mr. Collins does not offend her openly in his proposal and, therefore, she can only politely decline his offer and leave the room to express the firmness of her decision, which is exactly what she does.

Despite the somewhat unorthodox nature of the first proposal scene between Elizabeth and Darcy, direct communication is normally dampened by society's rules. As critic Tony Tanner helps us to understand, what is not available to Austen's characters through direct verbal discourse may often times be uttered in writing. Although I agree with Tanner's argument, I wish to expand this idea slightly, adding that what is not available through direct verbal discourse, may often be said by *men* in their letters. Women are not afforded the same freedom of expression even within supposed privacy of the written medium. Tanner suggests that

> In essence a letter is written and read in retirement from the social scene; this is certainly true of Darcy's major epistolary clarification. The letter enables him to formulate things and convey information in a way which would not be possible on a social occasion where public modes of utterance necessarily restrict the more private ones. (Tanner 1986, 122)

Immediately following the proposal scene between Elizabeth and Darcy, Austen writes, "Elizabeth awoke the next morning to the same thoughts and mediations which had at length closed her eyes. She could not yet recover from the surprise of what had happened" (*PP*, 190). Darcy, in contrast, is granted a more immediate relief of mind. Through a lengthy letter, Darcy procures a means by which to defend himself against the accusations laid upon him by Elizabeth the previous evening. By expressing himself through the written medium, Darcy is permitted a means by which to transform "action into words which may then be reflected on in a way which is impossible while one is actually involved in the action" (Tanner 1986, 122). Darcy's opening is telling: "Be not alarmed, Madam, on receiving this letter" (*PP*, 191), going on to state that his "character required it to be written and read" (*PP*, 191), and thus she must "pardon the freedom with which I demand your attention. . .but I demand it of your justice" (*PP*, 191). Austen's word choice is telling as she allows Darcy to "demand" Elizabeth's attention, as if it is his right as a man, just as it is his right to write Elizabeth a long letter, although she could never (or should never) do the same. In addition, as critic Janis Stout astutely notes,

> his lengthy letter of explanation does not have to bear the same censures of pretense or insincerity that Austen attaches to long speeches because, first, it is a convincing explanation (part of his dealings with Wickham) and, second, when writing a letter one is relieved of the emotional pressure of personal presence and therefore free to be fully detailed and rational, and frank without breach of decorum. (Stout 1990, 36)

These letters would usually have been written and read in seclusion from the rest of society, and therefore secure an element of privacy to both author and recipient. Although

not common practice, an unmarried man is permitted to write to a woman without this seeming like an indecency. Furthermore, as the content of his letter is known only by a limited number of people, his reputation—although perhaps speculated upon—is protected. In contrast, regardless of its content, at this time it was generally acknowledged to be most inappropriate for a young unmarried woman to write to a man.

In Jane Austen's novels, characters such as Elizabeth Bennet often misapprehend their own feelings or mistake those of others and, as such, this miscommunication is quite often reconciled by a character's having to listen or read as opposed to having to speak. Elizabeth Bennet is, to a marked extent, forced to listen to Mr. Darcy twice: first, during his offer of marriage and, second, in his letter which addresses those charges laid upon him by Elizabeth during her response. Even more interesting is that whereas Elizabeth is granted a reply to Darcy's verbal communication with her own verbal retort, she has no medium for reply to his letter. Elizabeth is left only to read and react to Darcy's letter within her own mind. As Susan Fraiman observes, "Darcy's letter saps her power to comprehend, disables her attention. She is addressed as reader—,"[22] and he is able to command the moment while leaving her without means of response.

Furthermore, the letter Darcy delivers to Elizabeth soon occupies her entire mind, and thus monopolizes the progression of the novel for the next seven pages. This letter simultaneously forms the hinge on which both Elizabeth's impressions, and subsequently those of the readers, are placed under scrutiny. Elizabeth's passionate verbal retort to Darcy's proposal of marriage the previous day is dispelled in light of her own error. Darcy is allowed in his letter to recount all his dealings with the nefarious Mr. Wickham,

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[22] Susan Fraiman, "The Humiliation of Elizabeth Bennet" in Jane Austen, *Pride and Prejudice*, ed. Donald Gray (New York: W.W. Norton & Company, 2001), 362.

as well as to provide his own justification for his actions regarding the delicate situation surrounding Elizabeth's elder sister Jane and Darcy's friend, Mr. Bingley.

Just as Darcy exerted his own verbal freedoms with Elizabeth Bennet in his first proposal scene, the hero of *Persuasion*, Captain Frederick Wentworth also enjoys certain liberties in his spoken communication. Whereas Anne perpetually "said what was proper" (*P*, 36), Wentworth is not so constrained and, on occasion, says what might not have been particularly gallant. Mary Musgrove, Anne's sister, recounts Wentworth's words saying, "Captain Wentworth is not very gallant by you, Anne, though he was so attentive to me. He said, 'you were so altered he should not have known you again'" (*P*, 57). Austen goes on to tell readers that indeed "Frederick Wentworth had used such words, or something like them, but without an idea that they would be carried round to her. He had thought her wretchedly altered, and, in the first moment of appeal, had spoken as he felt" (*P*, 57). Austen contrasts a woman saying "what was proper" (*P*, 36), with a man being able to enjoy the capability of vocalizing "as he felt" (*P*, 57).

It is indeed arguable that if, as I suggest, the restrictions placed upon a man in society at this time were much fewer than those placed on women, then Wentworth could, or even should, have openly expressed his anger towards Anne. He might have told Anne how he felt she treated him, for his disappointment in her "using him ill," and "deserting and disappoint[ing] him" (*P*, 57). Perhaps it is important to make the distinction that, like Darcy, Wentworth exhibits an element of pride here for it is, I contend, not that Wentworth *cannot* speak but that he *will not* speak to Anne. Society is not Frederick Wentworth's primary restraint in expressing his anger, he will not address Anne directly because he chooses not to address her, not because he could not: "They had

no conversation together, no intercourse but what the commonest civility required" (*P*, 59). In fact, as Ronald Hall rightly comments on the interaction between Anne and Wentworth:

> What do their audible exchanges amount to? Anne says the Musgrove sisters are upstairs with Mary; in the crisis at Cobb, she recommends a surgeon and makes a few other practical suggestions; months later, in Bath, she expresses her preference for walking in the rain, she says she is waiting for Mr. Eliot and, not needing Wentworth's assistance wishes him good morning. This is literally all from Anne. And besides his few lines in the same exchanges, Wentworth's total direct speech offerings are the following words: 'I beg your pardon, madam, this is your seat.' This is virtually the sum total of what we hear them say to each other in the first 19 of 24 chapters. (Stovel and Weinlos Gregg 2002, 142-143)

Still one can hardly forget the scene at the White Hart in which Anne and Wentworth, both seemingly desperate to express to the other the truth and longevity of their emotions and to determine if there remains any chance of reconciliation after their long estrangement, finally communicate. Where Anne must find a way to communicate ostensibly indirectly via a third party in the person of Captain Harville, Wentworth is afforded much more freedom, clandestinely scribbling his passionate feelings in a letter to Anne. Like Mr. Darcy in *Pride and Prejudice*, Wentworth takes advantage of his ability to express himself openly through letters.

Wentworth's letter includes some of the most passionate language found in any of Austen's novels. What Anne was forced to attempt to convey through a third party, Wentworth is allowed to say in a letter. With lines such as "You piece my soul," "I am half agony, half hope," and I am every instant hearing something which overpowers me" (*P*, 222), one can clearly begin to see how much more freedom men are accorded even within the medium of letter writing. Letters in Austen's novels play an integral role in the progression of the plot and often elicit, as in the case of both Wentworth and Darcy's letters, considerable changes in the nature of individuals' feelings. However, what Austen makes evident is that while men's letters may express more serious emotions, the nature of women's letters is nearly always much different.

As critic Janis Stout aptly notes, "examples of constrained expressive action are everywhere" (Stout 1990, 45), a primary example being "Elizabeth's inability to simply write to Darcy and tell him she knows she was wrong" (Stout 1990, 45). A woman with any discretion could not write a note, much less a letter, to a man to whom she was not engaged. The impropriety of Marianne Dashwood's writing letters to John Willoughby following his sudden absence from Barton Cottage reverberates throughout this discussion. Austen reminds readers of the indiscretion of Marianne's behaviors through the socially conscious Elinor's comments when she notes, "a correspondence between them by letter could subsist under a positive engagement, could be authorized by nothing else" (*SS*, 128). Therefore a major obstacle becomes quickly evident, as social constraints on women effectively usurp the letter as a conduit of communication. Elizabeth Bennet is more attuned to the potential hazards of not adhering to society's rules than Marianne Dashwood and, thus, when she suddenly realizes the error of her

previous judgments she finds herself with no means of effectively communicating the realization of these errors. In comparison with men's liberty within the written medium, women remain constrained even within the supposed privacy of penmanship.

One is reminded here of how similar the language is between Wentworth's letter and one of Jane Austen's own letters to her sister Cassandra. Although the language is analogous, the subject to which it is directed differs sharply and highlights the contrast between the freedom of men's letter writing and that of women's writing. Wentworth writes to Anne saying, "I am half agony, half hope" (*P*, 222) as he goes on to plead that he has loved no one but Anne. Where Wentworth's happiness depends upon Anne's feelings for him, Jane Austen writes in a letter to her sister, "next week shall begin my operations of my hat, on which You know my principal hopes of happiness depend," (*JAL*, 23); Austen's happiness depends upon her hat? This is arguably comic understatement but the fact that Austen, a masterful and deliberate commander of language, employs the same language to describe operations on a hat as the expression of a man's love perhaps is suggestive of some of Austen's more general sentiments.

Men can express their emotions regarding love; women often are forced, even in their own personal letters, to express sentiments of things such as domestic duties. This comparison is suggestive of Austen's conception of the amount of control men and women can, in actuality, exert over their own lives. When one considers just how precise Austen is with her language it is, at the very least, important to reflect upon what these similarities of language and differences in object might indicate about her sentiments regarding the constraints placed upon men versus those placed upon women in society.

Wentworth can attempt to secure the woman he loves. Although he will arguably never exert total control over Anne's final decision, the fact that he is not constrained by society in attempting to express himself on this most important subject in his life, suggests a great freedom. This freedom is only exacerbated when Austen suggests in her own letters that control of her own life extends to "dripping out my mother's Laudanum last night" (*JAL*, 23) and "operations of her hat" (*JAL*, 23). The spheres of influence which men and women may exert over their own lives are suggested here by Austen's language which, although cutting across mediums, is quite suggestive.

In a final example highlighting the differences between men's and women's letters, readers are again reminded of Wentworth's employment of the language of sentiment in his letter to Anne Elliot. Astute readers will note that at the time of Darcy's entrance into the parlor of the Collins' home to profess his love, Elizabeth had ironically "chose[n] for her employment the examination of all the letters which Jane had written to her since being in Kent" (*PP*, 184). As Darcy prepares to confess, Elizabeth must scour Jane's letters in an attempt to discover if Jane was discontented in London. Jane's letters, "contained no actual complaint, nor was there any revival of past occurrences, or any communications of present suffering" (*PP*, 184), which if one recalls, precisely mimics Darcy's language in his speech: "In vain I have struggled" (*PP*, 185). But Austen goes on to write that despite a dearth of explicit complaint,

> there was a want of that cheerfulness which had been used to characterize her style, and which, proceeding from the serenity of mind at least with itself, and kindly disposed towards every one, had been scarcely ever

> clouded. Elizabeth noticed every sentence conveying the idea of uneasiness. (*PP*, 184)

To her own sister, Jane Bennet cannot, or will not, express some discontent. This might be due to the nature of her character, being unlikely to complain or harbor feelings of resentment, let alone express such sentiments. Jane's displeasure is implicit, vaguely hinted at between the lines composing her writing. Her letters, like Austen's own, stand in sharp contrast both to Darcy's proposal and his letter, as well as to Wentworth's letter. The language which men may employ in both their written and spoken communications are missing from women's communication, even in their most intimate letters to their sisters. It is likely that Austen deliberately places this image of Elizabeth scouring Jane's letters moments before Darcy's speech and his subsequent letter. Austen uses the novel to set up explicit contrast between men's and women's communication while brilliantly maintaining her own propriety in expressing her frustration with these differences.

Conclusion: Women's Chosen Silences

The differences between those conventions restricting men's and women's communication, particularly when considering the passion of Wentworth's letter to Anne, raise questions with respect to Austen's most frustrating silences. Why is it that Austen seems to resist seizing the opportunity for liberating women's communication by including scenes involving the frank expression of sentiment, or intimacy, in her novels? After struggling to achieve the requisite balance between individuality and propriety, between self-command and self-expression, why, in a moment where women might indulge in self-expression and individual sentiments, are her heroines silent?

During Darcy's first proposal scene, readers are privy to the conversation between Darcy and Elizabeth to such an intimate extent that it is understandably only frustrating when, at the climax of the romantic plot, readers are entirely shut out from the conversation. Readers hear Darcy request permission to speak to Elizabeth, again saying,

> You are too generous to trifle with me. If your feelings are still what they were last April, tell me so at once. My affections and wishes are unchanged, but one word from you will silence me on this subject for ever. (*PP*, 346)

Austen then moves into a distant, passive narrative that effectively glosses over the expression of those sentiments that readers have spent the previous pages, in slow-building anticipation of hearing. All Austen offers readers at this most crucial moment is that Darcy, "expressed himself on the occasion as warmly as a man violently in love can be supposed to do," while Elizabeth "immediately, though not very fluently, gave him to

understand that her sentiments had undergone so material a change, since the period to which he alluded, as to make her receive with gratitude and pleasure, his present assurances" (*PP*, 346). But can this really be all?

In words that echo those spoken by Darcy, Wentworth expresses similar sentiments in his letter to Anne Elliot. He writes,

> I must go, uncertain of my fate; but I shall return hither, or follow your party, as soon as possible. A word, a look will be enough to decide whether I enter your father's house this evening, or never. (*P*, 223)

Although *Persuasion* is regarded to be her most openly emotional work, Austen still sustains her habit of subduing the most poignant, the most personal, moments of the novel. Later when Anne and Wentworth do finally speak directly to one another, like Elizabeth's response to Darcy,

> their arrival at an understanding is not only offered through the convention of indirect discourse, but is marked by brevity, passive verbs, generalization, and formal syntax, all of which are means of dissipating the immediacy and the emotional impact of the proposal scene itself. (Stout 1990, 58)

Austen limits Anne and Wentworth's exchange when she writes "there they again exchanged those feelings and those promises which had once before seemed to secure everything but which had been followed by so many years of division and estrangement" (*P*, 225).

Interesting to note that both Darcy and Wentworth request "one word" (*PP*, 346) or "a word" (*P*, 223) from the heroines who command their affections, and yet Austen

never permits her readers access to those words which must have been uttered by Elizabeth and Anne in order to ensure their following unions. Jane Austen appears to persistently avoid directness in each proposal scene between her heroes and heroines. The logical question readers must ask then is why does Austen do this? Is the austerity of her proposal scenes, as Stout argues, "a result of deliberate aesthetic choice, [and] not simply the manifestation of Austen's own anxieties or emotional limitations" (Stout 1990, 59)?

There are varieties of potential and, in reality, elusive answers to these questions. Critics such as Tony Tanner and Janis Stout have suggested that the curtailing of the language of love in Jane Austen's novels portends her belief that language is perhaps, in reality, insufficient to appropriately convey the expression of strong emotion. That indeed "certain kinds of emotions have a quality of infallibility," which place "them beyond the representation afforded by everyday speech" (Stout 1990, 60).

Although this argument is well founded, perhaps something more is at work here in Austen's artful design. As Tony Tanner himself reminds us:

> For the most part people are as fixed and repetitive as the linked routines and established social rituals which dominate their lives . . . everything tends toward the achieving of satisfactory marriages—which is exactly how such a society secures its own continuity. (Tanner 1986, 105)

Perhaps this—in the delicate yet significant balance between a successful transaction that can be both intensely public and yet deeply personal (or private)—is where Austen inserts her most important silences. By granting her heroes and heroines privacy in their conversations and expressions of their feelings, she grants these individuals, through marriage (an appropriate avenue in society), the means through which, to a limited extent,

one might evade those social restrictions that had, for so long, confined them. In these moments, when readers most desire to hear her characters, but particularly her heroines, speak—now indeed that they can converse without fear of societal scorn—they assert themselves, becoming essentially silent to readers. The option for silence is exploited now that they *may* speak. In essence, Austen grants her heroines (and heroes) the control over themselves which, until now, has been fairly elusive. Austen will provide her heroines both the silence and privacy, the intimacy of conversation, which until this point, being both a woman and a woman in society, had been restricted from them. When women wanted to speak they could not (Elizabeth Bennet), should not (Marianne Dashwood), or did not know how (Anne Elliot). But now that they can speak, that readers might be privy to those expressions which previously had to be checked, these heroines do not to speak. One of women's most powerful moments is offered and realized through these silences. Austen accords all her characters, but particularly her heroines, an authority through privacy that has been previously denied.

In the latter half of this century there has been an effort by certain feminist critics "to make a comprehensive critique of the oppressiveness of the marriage plot, this ancient narrative structure that creates closure by pairing off male and female protagonists" (Looser 1995, 70). But Austen is much more demanding of her heroines. Her novels express her belief that women must take an active role in controlling their own individuality and be mistress of themselves within the confines of society. This belief in the oppressiveness of the marriage plot seems then to be too negative an outlook for Austen. "There seems to be a "truth of possibility," for "her message is not a negative one—concealment, repression and accommodation—but a positive one," offering the

possibility of both "personal freedom and happiness" (Looser 1995, 70). Austen's novels end with some element of hope bound up in the potential of happiness, in part thanks to the control that marriage accords women. Austen's readers never actually partake in the marital happiness between hero and heroine, but the projection towards the future—the possibility of this equality—is effectively presented by Austen in ending all of the mature novels with marriage.

Nowhere does Austen offer such a projection of hope as in the closing pages of *Pride and Prejudice*. It is telling that in one of the final scenes of this novel, readers see hero and heroine, in the world of Pemberley—a society in which an individual, a woman even, can experience freedom of conversation as well as commitment to her societal obligations. One is briefly reminded here of the magical moment in which Elizabeth Bennet first visits Pemberley and quietly says to herself "and of this place . . .I might have been mistress" (*PP*, 236). This moment, when Elizabeth acknowledges "that to be mistress of Pemberley might be something!"(*PP*, 235), illustrates Austen's acknowledgment of both the power and protection that marriage has the potential to accord women. Marriage in her novels becomes a crucial and accessible space for a woman's self-definition and self-exertion. As Mooneyham aptly notes,

> In Darcy and Elizabeth's last scene together, after the two lovers have achieved a linguistic rehabilitation and have accepted each other's declarations, we see a reunion of language: Darcy and Elizabeth writing letters, side by side, neither intruding on the other, but penning the news of their engagement to their respective aunts in an equable and friendly silence. (Mooneyham 1988, 55)

Thanks to her marriage to Darcy, Elizabeth has found herself a space in which she has her own letters to write and is not relegated to "sit beside [him] and admire the eagerness of [his] writing as another young lady once did" (Fraiman 2001, 250). Although there is a pleasing equality and contentedness in this scene of hero and heroine happily writing letters to their relations, Austen pays one final tribute to the differences in convention for married and unmarried women.

Through the character of Georgiana Darcy, Fitzwilliam Darcy's younger sister, Austen highlights the differences between the conventions dictating women's communication in the marriage space. Georgiana's reaction to Elizabeth's language in conversing with Darcy when they live as husband and wife at Pemberley, attunes readers to the hope, the power and the potential for women who can work within and despite the conventions of being a female member of civilized society:

> Georgiana had the highest opinion in the world of Elizabeth; thought at first she often listened with astonishment bordering on alarm, at her lively, sportive manner of talking to her brother. . .Her mind received knowledge which had never before fallen in her way. By Elizabeth's instructions she began to comprehend that a woman may take liberties with her husband, which a brother will not always allow in a sister more than ten years younger than himself. (*PP*, 367)

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