

Marriage, the Letter and the Novel:

Letter Writing as an Analogy for the Portrayal of Marriage in *Emma* and *Sense and Sensibility*

by

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Abstract

At first read, it appears that in her novels, Jane Austen does little more than write about marriage. Austen's novels do consistently follow the trajectory of the traditional marriage plot, as young marriageable men and women seek out eligible mates. However, a closer look at her novels reveals that while Austen's narrators and characters regularly partake in gossip on people getting married, they are also unable or unwilling to speak about what being married in early modern England would be like. In other words, while Austen is perpetually concerned with the topic of getting married, she is not concerned with representing in her work what married life would look like from the inside. In order to separate what can and cannot be said about marriage in her novels, Austen employs the common form of the familiar letter in innovative ways.

The familiar letter as form and marriage share a common model for intimacy, as both straddle the boundary between the public and private, categories that McKeon and Habermas explain were formally separated around the time that Austen wrote. In the first chapter, I will explain the ways the familiar letter maintained its role as a private method of communication, while taking on a substantial public function through the general use of letter writing manuals. In the second chapter, I will address the ways Austen models the public and private facets of marriage in her own private epistolary correspondences. Finally, in the last two chapters, I will examine the ways epistolary correspondences and marriages are similarly posed in *Emma* and *Sense and Sensibility* as practices that may be discussed publically, but remain partially occluded from full disclosure in the public realm. Thus, I argue that while Jane Austen establishes the parallel between letter writing and marriage, she does so in order to explain to the reader that the nature of marriage dictates that while marriage plots and ceremonies may be visited in her novels, the details of private married life must remain hidden from the public eye.

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Introduction

Jane Austen and the marriage plot are an inseparable pair: each and every work Jane Austen wrote comments in some way on the topic of marriage. However, while Austen is perpetually concerned with the topic of marriage, she is not concerned with representing in her work what married life would look like from the inside. While we follow Elizabeth through every step of her courtship with Charles Bingley in *Pride and Prejudice*, the romantic feelings Edmund Bertram and Fanny Price develop for each other in *Mansfield Park*, and the reunion of Anne Elliot and Captain Wentworth in *Persuasion*, we are not given a single image of the interior lives of these characters past the point of their unions. In this way, Austen implies that married life is something that eludes description within the novel and resists disclosure to a reading public. However, there are clearly distinct elements of married life that are indeed presented in the novel and talked about openly in the public sphere. For example, gossip on rumored engagements and romantic attachments saturate Austen's novels. To illustrate marriage as a private institution that also governs public discourse, Austen employs the form of the familiar letter in an innovative way within her novels. Austen uses the familiar letter to model intimate relationships, and specifically to suggest that intimacy is never completely hidden from a public audience. We find upon closer inspection that the familiar letter, marriage and the novel all function to a similar end. All three function as private entities: the letter as an intimate form of communication sent between two individuals, marriage as a companionate bond between man and wife, and the novel as form as a means to peek into the interior minds of its characters through tools such as free indirect discourse. However, all three are also topics for broader social discourse, and thus address in some way a larger audience. In the next few chapters, I will show

how the overlap of the letter and marriage within Jane Austen's novels not only complicates, but strengthens the model she creates for the private as something that is always partially public.

It is common to imagine the letter as a means of privileged correspondence, its contents private and viewed only by addresser and addressee. However, the fact is that since the height of epistolary correspondence in England in the seventeenth, eighteenth and nineteenth centuries until today, epistolary correspondence holds just as important a public role as a private one. Specifically, in addition to its function in the private realm, as a method for the exchange of information between individuals, letters play an equally significant social role. In fact, in the seventeenth, eighteenth and nineteenth centuries, the act of writing letters was quite commonly spoken of and publically recognized as the key method of communication for all types of people. Moreover, private letters were so present in the public realm that they were often read aloud to friends and family or became fodder for gossip. These letters, which were written to mimic the style of spoken conversation, were therefore a primarily private means of exchange, but one with functions and forms that were publically recognized by many.

In essence, marriage in the seventeenth, eighteenth and nineteenth centuries took on a similar constitution to letter writing, as an institution which at its core is a private experience, but which has significant presence in the public sphere. According to Lawrence Stone, marriage at this time was essentially based on a private conjugal bond, rather than an emphasis in previous centuries on more distant familial relations across generations. While this may be the case, married life was hardly excluded from public discussion. Quite to the contrary, discussion of romantic attachments was as ubiquitous in gossip and the social columns of newspapers like *The Spectator* as is the repetition of the marriage plot in Jane Austen's novels. However, while Austen consistently writes about the process of getting married, she separates this sort of public

discussion from the more private details of what being married would be like in early modern England. More specifically, while Austen allows her narrators and characters to take part in public gossip about people getting married, she provides no imagines of the private married lives of her characters past the point of their unions. By not doing so, Austen creates a world in which letters and marriage serve a parallel function both within and outside of the text, as practices that hold both a public and private function. Namely, it appears the nature of marriage dictates that while marital bonds and ceremonies may be discussed publically, and marriage plots commonly visited, the details of conjugal life are private and thus hidden from the novel's readers.

According to Stone's mapping of the changing definition of kinship relationships in *The Family, Sex and Marriage in England: 1500-1800*, Austen's separation of the private and unspeakable from the public aspects of marriage in her literature mirrors the historically changing definition of familial relations. Stone argues that from the sixteenth to the nineteenth century, there was a significant shift in the basis of kinship from one derived from consanguineal bonds between blood relations across generations to one founded solely on the conjugal pair or married couple.¹ Starting in the middle of the seventeenth century, mating arrangements were increasingly based on the "personal affection, companionship and friendship," although parents

¹ Lawrence Stone divides these three hundred years into several periods: the 'Open Lineage Family,' from 1450 to 1630, the 'Restricted Nuclear Patriarchal Family,' from 1550 to 1700, and the 'Closed Domesticated Family,' from 1640 to 1800 (7). The first period, which Stone calls the 'Open Lineage Family,' is marked by "its permeability by outside influences and its members' sense of loyalty to ancestors and to living kin" (4) wherein marriage "was not an intimate association based on personal choice" (5) since the interests of the group took priority over those of the individual. Alternatively, the 'Restricted Nuclear Patriarchal' family, which Stone explains "began in about 1530, predominated from about 1580 to 1640, and ran on to at least 1700, saw the decline of loyalties to lineage, kin, patron and local community" (7). In this second period, the boundary of kinship was limited exclusively to the nuclear family, and "consequently became more closed off from external influence, either of the kin or of the community" (7). Nevertheless, the internal structure of marriage during this period was not much changed as mating arrangements were still rooted in economic and social necessity, rather than affective ties.

often still had the right of veto (Stone 271). Stone names this period of kin relations, which evolved in the seventeenth century but predominated mainly in the eighteenth century, the ‘Closed Domesticated Nuclear Family.’ This stage of kinship formulation, Stone argues, “was the decisive shift, for this new type of family was the product of the rise of Affective Individualism. It was a family organized around the principle of personal autonomy, and bound together by strong affective ties” (7). Stone continues, husbands and wives “personally selected each other rather than obeying parental wishes, and their prime motives were now long-term personal affection rather than economic or status advantage for the lineage as a whole” (8).

By the middle of the eighteenth century, there could be seen “a marked rise in more companionate relationships between husband and wife after marriage” (Stone 273). Ruth Perry also acknowledges this cultural shift in the kinship system to one based on affective ties in her book *Novel Relations: The Transformation of Kinship in English Literature and Culture: 1748-1818* but replaces Stone’s use of the term ‘companionate marriage,’ or as it is phrased in the passage above, ‘companionate relationships,’ with her own term for the new form of kinship: ‘privatized marriage.’ With her use of the term ‘privatized marriage,’ Perry points to the new definition of marriage in the eighteenth century as an institution not only based on companionate relations, but also as one with both a private and public life. While ‘privatized marriage’ is centered on the bond between a man and wife, it also maintains a public presence for the fact that the topic of getting married was constant fodder for gossip. In terms of the novel, the term ‘privatized marriage’ is equally well suited to reflect the fact that while some elements of marriage may be discussed, such as engagements, descriptions of the inner married life of those living within such a bond is too private to be included in print.

Perry also suggests that novels were in fact developed to allow writers and readers alike to tackle the historically changing definition of kinship relations. Perry argues that in the eighteenth century, novels “functioned to explore and work through the changing kinship arrangements which regulated domestic life and intergenerational relationships in a world rapidly being transformed by market forces, urban anonymity, and the spread of literacy” (6).² Perry continues, “When the ‘master narrative’ of this fiction is understood to be a reconsideration of the basis of membership in a family, it changes how we read the standard plots” (7). Perry specifically cites Austen and her invention of characters with interior lives and intimate human relations who “were suited to exploring concerns about family membership and individual obligation in this society in transition” as key for the exploration of the changing definition of kinship within the novel (7).³ However, while Perry finds Austen well equipped to explore public aspects of privatized marriage in her novels, she does not acknowledge the fact that this marital privatization does not mean a new and intimate terrain of marital intimacy. Rather, privatized marriage means the occlusion of marital intimacy from public discussion, both within and outside of the novel. In order to explore this new division between the public and private aspects of privatized marriage within the novel, Austen employs a new tool in addition to her use of free indirect discourse. Specifically, Austen employs the familiar letter within her work to explain that letters, like the newly constituted privatized or companionate marriage, remain private at their core even as they exist to a significant extent in the public sphere.

² For women in particular, Perry further argues that novels could also be used as a way to cope with their new subordinate roles within the conjugal model for kinship arrangements.

³ Perry also claims that the novel as form was created to allow readers to see into the interior lives of characters. Narrative tools particular to the novel include the use of third-person omniscient narrators, dialogue between characters and free indirect discourse (6).

Like the institution of marriage itself, the familiar letter is able to straddle the boundary between the public and private spheres. In *The Secret History of Domesticity*, Michael McKeon explains that in modernity, “the public and the private are separated out from each other” and the private is more specifically disembedded from the broader category of the public (xix-xx). By placing the private familiar letter inside of the novel, the epistle can both keep its private nature as a method of exchange between two individuals and become publicized before readers. McKeon elaborates, “Even in itself, correspondence—personal sentiments exchanged with another person—evokes the mediating doubleness of the private made public” (80).

Austen’s presentation of marriage in her novels works to a similar end by meditating on the “doubleness of the private made public” (McKeon 80). However, in his book *Marriage, Writing & Romanticism: Wordsworth and Austen after War*, Eric Walker observes that when it comes to marriage, Austen presents this “doubleness of the private made public” in her novels. Through use of the marriage plot in her writing, Austen points to the constancy of discourse on marriage in the public realm. However, when it comes to the private aspects of marriage, Austen leaves these details about actual married life unsaid. Walker cites Georg Hegel’s *Philosophy of Right* to explain, “there is something else going on in marriage that the romance narrative fails to explain” (30). Walker claims that in the early eighteenth century, “marriage is the only tale to tell—and as if that insult could be topped, it is a tale that is untellable” (5). In other words, because of its private nature, authors like Austen are unable to tell the tale of married life within the novel. His argument is wholeheartedly supported by the plot development of her novels, such as *Emma* and *Sense and Sensibility*. These narratives seem to lead single-mindedly toward the union of Emma Woodhouse and Mr. Knightly, and Elinor Dashwood and Edward Ferrars,

respectively. However, the two narrators stop right at the point of their unions, unable or unwilling to reveal what it looks like to live inside one of these affectionate marriages.

In fact, accounts of interior married life are systematically omitted from all of Austen's novels, just as they are in other texts from this period. Austen asserts that the private nature of married life makes it both knowable and partially unknowable in any public realm, including the material world of the novel. In order to illustrate the private and public nature of marriage, Austen uses the familiar letter, which models intimacy in a parallel manner. In particular, Austen uses letters to reveal both the importance of marriage as a private meeting of minds and the incompatibility of such a union with the novel as form. The familiar letter, William Merrill Decker explains in his book *Epistolary Practices: Letter Writing in America before Telecommunications*, is the epistolary form most commonly associated with domestic affairs such as marriage (22). Because the familiar letter itself is a form of communication with both a private and public function, its employment inside of the novel immediately parallels the character of marriage as an institution with both public and private facets. Elizabeth Heckendorn Cook goes further to assert that while in the eighteenth century the letter came to represent all that is private, its primary function remained in the social sphere (6). Because the content and form of letters were often fodder for public discussion, epistolary correspondence took on a major function in the public sphere. Thus while the material letter is exchanged privately between the writer and recipient, epistolary correspondence as a social custom served a much greater role in the seventeenth, eighteenth and nineteenth centuries in the public sphere.

In the following chapters, I will chart the role of letter writing in the centuries leading up to the years in which Jane Austen wrote in order to understand the historical and social circumstances under which Austen uses the epistolary form in her novels. I will also explore the

social standards laid out in early modern letter writing manuals to understand how the mechanics of epistolary composition and reception led to the dually private and public nature of letters in the seventeenth, eighteenth and nineteenth centuries. Moreover, I will look for evidence of these guidelines in the letters exchanged by Mr. and Mrs. Edward Montagu, a published epistolary communication similar to those Austen would have read, and in the letters Austen herself exchanged with her family members, including her sister Cassandra and niece Fanny Knight.

After laying out this type of already established epistolary groundwork, I will look at the ways in which letters appear in *Emma* and *Sense and Sensibility* in order to argue that epistolary correspondence serves as an analogy for the composition of marriage in England in the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries and within the early modern novel. While the marriage plot structures both of the two novels, readers are unable to see what marriage looks like from the inside out. Rather, like epistolary correspondence, marriage exists as a private entity with a constant awareness of its presence in front of a larger audience. By acknowledging within her work the social obsession with marriage while remaining silent on the private details of married life, Austen makes a more general claim about the basic nature of intimacy: it is both commonly discussed and universally acknowledged, but is also partially unknowable to the public.

I. Letter Writing in Early Modern England

While readers today are quick to accept the formal division of the private and public spheres, this separation was first accepted around the time that Austen wrote, in the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries. In her book *Epistolary Bodies: Gender and Genre in the Eighteenth-Century Republic of Letters*, Elizabeth Heckendorn Cook identifies the modern convention of splitting “human experience into separate orders of public and private, a division that was consolidated and naturalized in the course of the eighteenth century” (6). Cook asserts more specifically that in the early eighteenth century, epistolary correspondence became emblematic and representative of the modern division of the public and private. Cook elaborates, for example, “the letter became an emblem of the private; while keeping its actual function as an agent of the public exchange of knowledge, it took on the general connotations it still holds for us today, intimately identified with the body, especially a female body, and the somatic terrain of the emotions, as well as with the thematic material of love, marriage, and the family” (6). In *The Secret History of Domesticity: Public, Private, and the Division of Knowledge*, Michael McKeon similarly asserts that “Even in itself, correspondence—personal sentiments exchanged with another person—evokes the mediating doubleness of the private made public” (80).

Materially, the letter represents the overlap between the new categories of the public and private. While the letter itself remains a vessel of private communication between the addresser and addressee, its form and function give the letter particular importance in the public sphere as a cultural practice. Decker confirms the public role of epistolary correspondence when he asserts, “letters ultimately contribute to a dialogue that transcends specific forms and individual participants. The isolated private letter is ever a token of a widely practiced generic discourse; it

always already speaks to nonaddressees, to the contingency of being intercepted and published” (26). The idea that the private letter “always already speaks to nonaddressees” moreover contradicts the commonly held beliefs that letters by nature constitute a wholly private form of communication, which would assume that because letters are often written between two private sources, the form of discourse is itself also entirely private. However, scholarship on letter writing from the seventeenth century to present says otherwise.

In her postscript to the essay “Re-siting the Subject” written by Gerald MacLean, Nancy Armstrong writes, “*Re-siting the Subject* invites its readers to think twice about what is perhaps our most basic assumption concerning the writing of letters—namely, that they allow a transaction between one individual and another whereby both can enjoy the privileges of privacy” (191). Both MacLean and Armstrong argue instead that letters are written with an imagined third party in mind, as if any letter could be intercepted and read by another. While private letters that are published take on an additional life in the public realm, MacLean and Armstrong argue that the semi-public nature of epistolary discourse extends even into those letters “that remained private, successfully exchanging their secrets only between the writer and designated reader” (MacLean 190). In such private letters, argues MacLean, “the possibility of interception remains a necessary fiction, constituting their imaginary horizon of privacy” (191). It is this fictional but potentially real third party reader in all letters, according to MacLean and Armstrong, that makes letters an ironically public form of discourse. Armstrong confirms,

I, for one, am more than willing to insist that letters are now and always have been—at least since the Neolithic Age—purloined letters. They are written as if they were going to be intercepted. Always present in the mind’s eye of the letter writer is a third party who leaves the mark of such awareness on the letter. I am

quite taken with the grandiosity of this claim: if one thing remains constant about literate human beings (a redundancy of sorts in the register in which we are both writing) from primal slime to the present day, it is this curious cultural practice and presumed deep human need to perform a kind of writing that only appears to be private but might in fact also be subject to scrutiny at any moment by an unknown third person (192).

While the material exchange of letters remains an ostensibly private form of communication, the presence of an imaginary third party reader eliminates a certain level of intimacy from epistolary correspondence. However, the divide between the public and private we perceive in the letter is not created entirely as a result of the presence of this third party reader.

In the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries, no letter would have been completely private simply because most were written according to social standards for epistolary correspondence set out in early modern letter writing manuals. While writers at this time mainly composed intimate letters to a singular audience, the universally followed guidelines for their composition makes each and every letter knowable to a broader public audience. In other words, because writers imitated model letters in these manuals, and the manuals were extensively used, most epistolary correspondents in the eighteenth and nineteenth century would have known the general content and form of any given letter. These manuals are therefore in many ways responsible for the concurrent presence of the public and private within each letter written at this time. The most notable instruction is that letters be an imitation in written form of an oral conversation between

two or more individuals,⁴ a practice which likely developed as a product of the fact that most personal letters would indeed be read aloud in intimate company.

At this time, letter manuals were more or less socially requisite in England: the ability to write letters to friends, family and business partners alike was a necessary skill. While there is no way to incontrovertibly prove that these letter manuals determined the patterns apparent in actual letters written at this time, studies of the price, printing and target audiences of the books suggest their omnipresence in the majority of households in early modern England and thus also the ubiquity of their use.⁵ Eve Tavor Bannet's *Empire of Letters: Letter Manuals and Transatlantic Correspondence, 1680-1820* includes a particularly important explication of both letter manuals and the general form of epistolary correspondence in the seventeenth, eighteenth, and nineteenth centuries. Most importantly, she establishes in this the connection between letter manuals and the actual composition of letters at this time. "Because users were expected to imitate the example of characters like themselves," Bannet writes, manuals also identify their proposed audiences "by their choices of fictional generic letter-writing characters in the collections of model letters they contained" (20). This idea that proper form for letter writing was learned primarily by imitation

⁴ In England in the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries, letters were most often written between two individuals. However, addressees were sometimes plural. Decker explains, for example, "Addresser and addressee need not be singular; particularly among family correspondents, letters are written in collaboration to addressees who often collaborate as readers" (22).

⁵ Letter manuals at this time, Bannet asserts, were affordable, and "generally cost 1 shilling in London during the late seventeenth and for most of the eighteenth century, rising to 2 shillings only in the 1790s" (12). Bannet claims the low price, among other factors, made London letter manuals not only easily accessible to the general public, but also widely used by correspondents. Bannet contends, "The number of editions and reprints of the most popular manuals in London alone confirm that a very large number of people were buying letter manuals throughout the long eighteenth century" (22). These letter manuals also targeted an extensive audience (20) and not any particular socioeconomic class. In the eighteenth century, "government agents, merchants and private correspondents" (13) sent letters in order to support the political administration of colonies, to foster commerce and coordination between merchants, and to facilitate the transmission of news and information throughout the country (10). As a result, the intended audiences for letter manuals are as varied as the writers and recipients of the letters themselves.

of model letters included in the letter writing manuals points to the central role of epistolary correspondence in the social sphere at this time (94). As a result, we can therefore see the greater public role of the private epistle. Moreover, because all letters imitate a common model set out in letter manuals, no letter could possibly be wholly private or unique. In general, the model letters included in letter manuals vary in each edition according to the needs of the letter's imagined writers and recipients. According to Bannet, the manuals "model the different language, sentiments and expressions requisite for different addressees in societies that remained profoundly hierarchical, both in the public and domestic spheres" (64-65). Therefore, while the "language, sentiments and expressions" of the letter are chosen according to the private or domestic sphere of the writer and reader, the fact that these standards are universally outlined in letter manuals and imitated by users makes the conventions of letter writing paradoxically open and public. The letter can thus be considered a material artifact of the social practice of epistolary communication, both written and read in terms of these publically known conventions.

The most important recommendation in letter manuals that points to the public function of familiar letters⁶ is not the audience which, although is most often singular, may be plural in the case of family correspondences (Decker 22). Rather, these manuals most notably recommend that users compose letters as "written conversation" (Bannet 51) as if recording with written word an oral conversation. One of the most frequently reprinted letter manuals of the eighteenth century *The Complete Letter-Writer or Polite English Secretary* teaches its users, "when you sit

⁶ Critics today name the epistles most commonly used for domestic correspondences the *familiar* or *domestic* letter, so named for its content, and for the conditions under which the letters are written and received in the seventeenth, eighteenth and nineteenth centuries. Bannet explains, "The term 'familiar letters' encompassed letters of business and letters of news, as well as letters of friendship, family, amusement and courtship" (43). For my purposes, the term *familiar* letter is also well suited in that it reflects the role of the letter as a means of private correspondence, but also its presence as a socially necessary means of communication in the domestic sphere.

down to write a Letter, remember that this sort of Writing should be like Conversation...and you will be no more at Loss to write than you will be to speak” (Anonymous 31). The article “General Directions for Writing letters,” reprinted in several letter manuals including *The Court Letter-Writer: or the Complete English Secretary for Town and Country*, similarly asserts that “the surest rule for writing well is to write as we speak, deliberately” (qtd. in Bannet 45).

Unlike written text, speech is a more outwardly public form of communication since oral conversation can be more easily overheard and intercepted by spectators than can writing. While the letter is materially private, exchanged between writer and reader, and the process of writing a private act performed in an intimate domestic setting, in imitating oral conversation, the substance of the letter becomes ironically public. Moreover, Bannet explains, “Letter manuals also indicate the importance of social practices in constructing the imaginary attached to epistolary writing as a form of communication that replicated conversation or speech” (314). As written letters imitate speech, epistolary communication also take on the public role speech and conversation have in the social sphere. Decker confirms, “Because the familiar letter lends itself to the confidential inscription of private, inward, individual experience, the conjunction of the private and public worlds is particularly felt” (79) in this type of correspondence.

In a chapter of her book titled “The Letter as Writing and Vocalized Speech,” Bannet delineates the particular ways in which letters can capture the essence of oral conversation. She asserts that familiar letters are modeled in letter manuals to be written “with the tones and cadences that people used in everyday speech” (89). The oral quality of the familiar letter, or what Thomas Sheridan and John Rice call the “silent speech” (qtd. in Bannet 90) of the letter, is further generated by “reenacting the various rhythms, pauses, emphases, tones, emotional or ironic strains, facial expressions and physical gestures that would accompany the words in

speech” (Bannet 90). Letter manuals specifically teach users to recreate the orality of speech in their letters through the use of punctuation marks like paragraph breaks, periods, colons, semicolons and commas (91) which reflect the pauses that are characteristic of spoken dialogue.

Among the many manual users aware of this recommendation that letters capture the essence of speech, Jane Austen herself uses these pauses, emphases, tones and punctuation points not only in the letters she writes for her novels, but also in her own private correspondences. Austen is a frequent user of the blank line (—) that reflects actual speech by showing readers “how to pace and regulate the phrasing and the breath” and further how to signal “the rising and falling inflexions or cadences of the voice” (Bannet 91). The importance of punctuation emphasized in letter manuals further implies that letter reading as a social skill becomes just as important as letter writing. Austen makes particular use of the blank line when she writes to her sister Cassandra Austen, for example, in a letter composed in early January 1799,

—One of my gayest actions was sitting down two Dances in preference to having Lord Bolton’s eldest son for my Partner, who danced too ill to be endured. —The Miss Charterises were there, & play’d the parts of the Miss Edens with great spirit. —Charles never came! —Naughty Charles. I suppose he could not get superseded in time. — (*Jane Austen’s Letters* 35).

With help of the blank lines, Austen writes to Cassandra about the ball as if she were talking to her sister about the event in person. Each blank line reflects a break in the written conversation, in other words, a point at which if speaking aloud, Austen would have paused, taken a breath, waited for her interlocutor to reply or moved on to discuss another aspect of the evening. The blank lines, especially those that frame her comments on Charles, also reflect what Bannet calls the “emotional or ironic strains” of oral dialogue (90). In the short, exclamatory and then

declamatory sentences such as “Charles never came! —Naughty Charles,” readers can also detect Austen’s infamously sarcastic and witty tone, one that she transfers to the narrators and the characters of her novels as they compose their own familiar letters.

Punctuation points are additionally significant in that they tell about how letters should be read in company. In the seventeenth, eighteenth and nineteenth centuries, because letters were commonly read aloud to a familiar audience, letter manuals also teach users how to translate written punctuation points into the emphases, phrasing, pauses and inflexions used in speech. In order to create standards for the oral recitation of letters, letter manuals give instructions not only on “the length of pauses and character of inflexions” (Bannet 92) for punctuation points for the sake of the individual who would read the letter aloud, but also so that the hearers would be given ample time to “collect their thoughts, absorb what they had heard, and prepare for what was to come” (91). In this way, as letters are in fact recited aloud according to their punctuation and form, the third party public reader MacLean and Armstrong identify becomes quite real.

Although some letters indeed remained private between addresser and addressee, the majority of familiar epistles were ritually read aloud (MacLean 190). While this audience usually consisted of particularly intimate acquaintances of the recipient, the fact that the letters were read aloud to multiple listeners alone models one of the many ways letters function publically. Bannet explains, “Letters participated in ritual and collective aspects of social life that made correspondence a performative event. In company, to borrow a term from painting, a letter often served as a ‘conversation piece,’ and the ability to read a letter aloud competently was an important and ingratiating social skill” (47). Both the content of the letter and the act of reciting the letter show the ways the letter maintains its private function, while taking on an additionally public role. In other words, the letter straddles the boundaries between the private and public.

Early modern letter writing manuals are therefore representative of the ways private letters also take on a more public function: letters are written according to publically known standards for their composition. The manuals themselves further highlight the ways epistolary correspondence has taken its seat in the public sphere, as a socially requisite practice. However, in addition to these letter manuals, actual epistles from the seventeenth through nineteenth centuries also show evidence of the dual presence of the public and private in epistolary correspondence. The most obvious echo of manuals apparent in these familiar letters is that they mimic oral conversation and that their authors are aware that they will one day be read aloud in company. The published familiar letters of Elizabeth Montagu from the eighteenth century, a collection similar to those Jane Austen herself would have likely read, for example, exhibits evidence of these recommendations. Born a wealthy and well-connected Miss Robinson on October 2, 1720, Elizabeth married Edward Montagu, a grandson of the first Earl of Sandwich twenty-nine years her senior on August 5, 1742. While the couple was very much devoted to one another, the two led very separate lives as a result of Edward's political and social responsibilities. As a result, Elizabeth and Edward took part in a very extensive familiar epistolary correspondence, the content of which covers a range of topics, which was later published after their deaths in the early nineteenth century and spread throughout England.⁷

One of the letters of this collection, written on August 15, 1742 from Elizabeth's father Mr. Robinson to his new son-in-law Edward Montagu, illustrates clearly the fact that letters, although written as private communication between two individuals, were in fact a public affair.

⁷ The correspondence between Elizabeth and Edward Montagu was published posthumously. Because Elizabeth and Edward were unaware that their letters would one day be published, we can assume they were written for the eyes of the addresser and addressee, and not for a general readership. Thus, while the publication of letters makes them public to some degree as a result, it is nevertheless important to view correspondences published posthumously but written in confidence between addresser and addressee as fundamentally private.

While the letter is short, a good half or so of Mr. Robinson's letter is committed to his exposure of the fact that a previous letter of Elizabeth's had been widely read by the family. He writes,

As I think that no letters that come from your wife ought to be a secret to you, I cannot help telling you I saw one from her last week to her Mother, and another to her brother Tom, so full of the happiness of her present condition, and the prospect of her future, that I begin to be suspicious that they are designed as a reproof to me for the deplorable state under which she passed twenty-three years (Montagu 118).

This passage is particularly interesting for two reasons, specifically because it acknowledges both Mr. Robinson's assumption that no letter is entirely private, and the fact that Elizabeth writes knowing that the letter would likely be read by the rest of her family. It is clear that Mr. Robinson makes it habit to read private letters addressed to his family members, including a letter written to his wife and one to his son Tom, for example. The first statement of this passage, however, is further worth noting for the connection it makes between letter writing and marriage. Mr. Robinson writes, "I think that no letters that come from your wife ought to be a secret to you," which reflects his belief that not only are private familiar letters open to more general readership by intimate friends and families, but also that rules for letter writing and reading are different for married couples than single correspondents. Robinson furthermore suggests that no letter written by a married individual, whether composed to his or her spouse or not, should be considered private—at least not private from the spouse. Letters between spouses are thus an exceptional case. Mr. Robinson seems to imply that while information must always be shared between spouses, this knowledge is also somehow private or hidden from the rest of the world.

Mr. Robinson further implies in this passage that Elizabeth has written her letters knowing that eyes other than those of the primary recipient might read them. Robinson writes, for example, that the letters written by Elizabeth to his wife and son are “so full of the happiness of her present condition, and the prospect of her future, that I begin to be suspicious that they are designed as a reproof to me for the deplorable state under which she passed twenty-three years” (Montagu 118). Elizabeth writes about how happy marriage has made her, Mr. Robinson says, as a reproof to him “for the deplorable state under which she passed twenty-three years.” Mr. Robinson’s playful tone further implies the possibility that Elizabeth might read his response thanks to the social custom of reading letters aloud or sharing them with intimate relations.

In general, the letters of the Montagus and Austen show the doubly public and private nature of epistolary correspondence in function and form. However, when the content of these letters begins to touch on gossip about marriage and the prospect of getting married, this division between the public and private nature of letters becomes even more complex. In general, correspondents like Elizabeth Montagu and Jane Austen imply that letters on the topic of marriage or the process of getting married are not especially different: the letters remain primarily private, but acknowledge the existence of public gossip on the process of getting married. In the next chapter, I will show that in her own correspondences, Austen opines that letters between married individuals differ from these more general letters on the topic of marriage in that they are notably more private and hidden from the public. A particularly interesting letter written in what seems to be the handwriting of a Mrs. Anne Donnellan, a confidante of Elizabeth Montagu, but which remains unsigned, says in a postscript,

Now pardon me this impertinent letter, there are not those in the world to whom I would write so freely, for I do not know those who I think have sense and

goodness of heart, to bear advice: the only merit of mine is its sincerity and affection, and having seen more years has given me many opportunities of seeing the world of love, with all its mischiefs. Adieu, burn this, and love me as I do you most sincerely (Montagu 114).

The content of this letter is private, as an answer to Elizabeth's early request for advice on courtship before her marriage to Edward Montagu. However, Mrs. Anne Donnellan ironically implies that most letters written on the topic of courtship or marriage are not entirely private discourses. Rather, this letter in particular is unusually private, and impertinently or unusually so for the fact that the author writes so freely and openly her feelings in the epistle: Mrs. Donnellan writes, "there are not those in the world to whom I would write so freely." Mrs. Donnellan immediately contradicts this thought, however, with her request that Elizabeth burn the letter. While burning the letter confirms that the contents of the letter are private, it also implies that no letter was secure from peeping eyes, that burning a letter after reading was the only way to keep a letter truly private. This request moreover points to the materiality of the letter itself as the vessel of the private exchange of information, but one that is disposable and impermanent.

Jane Austen's letters reveal a similar tendency. In a postscript to Austen's letter to her sister Cassandra, composed on Monday and Tuesday, October 11 and 12, 1813, there is a note in her niece Fanny Knight's handwriting. Fanny writes, "My Dearest At: Cass: —I have just asked At: Jane to let me write a little in her letter but she does not like it so I wont. —good bye" (*Jane Austen's Letters* 236). It is clear that third party reader (and secondary writer) Fanny has transformed Austen's original letter into a semi-public document. Whether Fanny has read the entire letter or not, we cannot be sure. Regardless, the fact that she had access enough to the epistle to write her own postscript at the end of her aunt's original suggests that she could have

read the document if she had wished to do so. What is more important in this postscript, however, is the suggestion that Jane Austen still assumes the letter to be a fundamentally private document, as she “does not like” the fact that Fanny’s third party eyes had access to her epistle.

While we are quick to think of epistolary correspondence merely as a means for the exchange of information, the letter in the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries does much more. Specifically, the letter and epistolary correspondence in general serve as a communicative model for the exchange of information in the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries. Although letters were written ostensibly for the private exchange of information most often between two individuals, no letter was composed without some kind of attention to the public sphere. Each familiar letter was composed conscious of its public audience, both the literal audience as letters were recited in company and the metaphorical audience as letters were written to mimic oral conversation. However, this communicative model for the coupled function of the public and private is not limited to epistolary correspondence, but shows itself in other forms in the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries, some of them within the novels of Jane Austen.

II. Marriage: A Tale that is Untellable?

In the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries, like epistolary correspondence, the institution of marriage straddled the public and private spheres. Since this historical moment, marriage has been rooted in the conjugal pair rather than consanguineal ties. Moreover, starting at this time, while the process of getting married was constantly talked about publically, the private nature of being married was consistently occluded from the public eye. It is clear both from her own private letters and her novels that Jane Austen was soundly aware of the two faces marriage held in the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries: the public emphasis placed on getting married and the private nature of the married life of the conjugal pair. In this chapter, I will explore Jane Austen's private correspondence with her close family in the late eighteenth and early nineteenth centuries, in which her awareness of and commentary on the complex nature of marriage and married life at the time she wrote is displayed. I will also explore the ways the novel and its tools, such as free indirect discourse, are suitable to illustrate the split nature of marriage.

While Austen herself never married, Austen did not hesitate to acknowledge the ubiquity of gossip on the topic of in England in the late eighteenth and early nineteenth centuries. As a collection, Austen's letters, which span over twenty years, from January of 1796 to her death in July of 1817, are comprised of "fragments—fragments of observation, of characterization, of criticism—they are in the same class as the material of the novels; and in some respects they have a wider range" (Chapman xi). However, in these "fragments of observation," we can clearly sense her opinions of gossip on engagements and attachments and her witty criticism of commonly held public attitudes toward marriage. In the first twelve years or so of her letters, Austen touches solely on the public face of marriage, the gossip surrounding getting married.

However, it is not until much later when she writes to her niece Fanny Knight that Austen suggests what she thinks about being married, namely that the private nature of life within a companionate or conjugal relationship would make a relationship less intimate between women.

In an early letter written from Wednesday to Thursday, November 12 to 13, 1800 to Martha Lloyd, who in 1828 became the second wife of Austen's brother Frank, Jane Austen first addresses gossip on the marriage of Sir Williams of Portsmouth, a topic that reappears in many of her later letters. Austen writes in a postscript, "It is reported at Portsmouth that Sir T. Williams is going to be married—It has been reported indeed twenty times before, but Charles is inclined to give some credit to it now, as they hardly ever see him on board, & he looks very much like a Lover" (*Jane Austen's Letters* 59). Austen not only acknowledges gossip on the supposed marriage of Sir T. Williams for the first time, but also points to the ubiquity of gossip on the topic of marriage in general. Austen writes "It is reported" and also "It has been reported indeed twenty times before" suggesting that marriage is the topic of many casual conversations, whether between tea table or epistolary companions. The second phrase goes even further to imply that public gossip on marriages is not always correct. Even if twenty is a number fabricated by Austen, the effect of the statement remains the same: to impress upon the reader that marriage is a topic that also cannot be accurately or effectively discussed publically.

Austen continues to discuss the face marriage holds in the public sphere when she writes, "Charles is inclined to give some credit to it now, as they hardly ever see him on board, & he looks very much like a Lover" (*Jane Austen's Letters* 59). The reason Austen first gives for why Sir Williams has not been seen on board is based on pure logic: as a Captain in the Royal Navy, if Sir Williams is not on board his ship, it is thus possible, and according to Charles likely, that Williams is spending his time on land courting his future wife. However, the second part of this

sentence “& he looks very much like a Lover” is presented almost as an afterthought, as a comma separates it from Charles’ initial claim. This latter phrase plays much more to what Austen knows to be commonly held opinions of how Love looks as it is expressed in Romantic literature, for example, or gossip columns in popular newspapers like *The Spectator*. By bringing into question the power of appearances, Austen secondarily implies that perhaps courtships and marriages are not as they appear. In other words, because married life within the conjugal union is hidden from public view, gossip on the topic of marriage does not necessarily reflect its inner reality. Perhaps more importantly, Austen concedes in this passage how ineffective and superficial speculation on the subject of other peoples’ romances seems to be.

Austen revisits the proposed marriage of Sir Thomas Williams when she writes to her sister Cassandra, from Thursday to Friday, November 20 to 21, 1800, “The young lady whom it is suspected that Sir Thomas is to marry, is Miss Emma Wabshaw; —she lives somewhere between Southampton & Winchester, is handsome, accomplished, amiable, & everything but rich.⁸—He is certainly finishing his house in a great hurry. —Perhaps the report of his being to marry a Miss Fanshawe might originate in his attentions to this very lady; the names are not unlike” (*Jane Austen’s Letters* 61). The last sentence of this passage reflects clearly what

⁸ In this letter to her sister, Austen recognizes the fact that many marriages in England in the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries were socioeconomically motivated. At this time, marriage involved a transfer of a “significant amount of real or personal property from the family of the bride to that of the groom, with a reverse commitment in the future of a significant proportion of annual income” (Stone 88). In this way, marriage between the property-owning classes in the sixteenth and seventeenth centuries was often considered along the basis of money, status or power rather than for affect, love or sexual attraction (86). However, in the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries, the development of the concept of ‘strict settlement,’ whereby inheritance could not be denied to a rightful heir despite their marital choices since the settlements were drawn up before marriage, meant that marriages were no longer solely rooted in economic factors (243). Austen acknowledges this shift in this letter, for example, when she notes that money is an appealing quality in a wife, but not a necessary one, since Sir Williams still plans to marry Miss Emma Wabshaw despite her lack of monetary wealth.

Austen's letter to Martha Lloyd also suggests: public reports of purported marriages are not always accurate. In this case, the future bride's name was miscommunicated. Further, her use of the word "suspect," which in some form reappears in many of her letters, further echoes the fact that the great majority of her reports on marriage are products of gossip. In this way, letters on the topic of getting married are presented as a public, though not reliable, affair.

In a second letter to Cassandra on the topic of Sir Williams' marriage, written on Sunday November 30 to Monday December 1, 1800, Austen speaks again of Miss Wabshaw:

She is now seven or eight & twenty, & tho' still handsome less handsome than she has been. —This promises better, than the bloom of seventeen; & in addition to this, they say that she has always been remarkable for the propriety of her behaviour, distinguishing her far above the general class of Town Misses, & rendering her of course very unpopular among them. —I hope I have now gained the real truth & that my letters may in future go on without conveying any farther contradictions of what was last asserted about Sir Thomas Williams & Miss Wapshire (*Jane Austen's Letters* 65).

Austen finds after hearing much gossip that Sir Williams' bride to be is in fact a Miss Wapshire, daughter to a "widow, with several sons & daughters, a good fortune, & a house in Salisbury" (64). It is important to take note of which characteristics Austen chooses to present to her sister on the character of Miss Wapshire. Austen names only those qualities that would be important for a future wife to have, namely that she comes from a respected and landed family with fortune, and is distinguished with beauty despite her age. That girls in their late twenties can indeed find good husbands is also interesting when considered in light of Austen's own literary characters, including Anne Elliot from her late novel *Persuasion*. Another line of particular

interest from this passage is her last one, which reads, “I hope I have now gained the real truth, & that my letters may in future go on without conveying any farther contradictions of what was last asserted about Sir Thomas Williams & Miss Wapshire” (65). The fact that Austen hopes to have captured “the real truth” in this last letter implies that when it comes to public discourse on the topic of marriage, there can in fact be more than one version of the truth. Ironically, spreading a rumor publically makes it in some ways true regardless of the veracity or substance of the claim.

By the time she was in her thirties, Austen moves past public gossip on the process of getting married and opines on what she thinks being married might be like in the early nineteenth century. Austen writes in a letter to her sister Cassandra written from Tuesday to Wednesday, December 27 to 28, 1808, “Lady Sondes’ match surprises, but does not offend me; —had her first marriage been of affection, or had there been a grown-up single daughter, I should not have forgiven her—but I consider everybody as having the right to marry *once* in their Lives for Love, if they can—& provided she will now leave off having bad head-aches & being pathetic, I can allow her, I can *wish* her to be happy. —” (*Jane Austen’s Letters* 159). Her sharp wit in this passage mocks the social system that encourages women to marry often for economic security over love. Her phrase “but I consider everybody as having the right to marry *once* in their Lives for Love, if they can” is particularly noteworthy for the multiple ways it can be interpreted. The final words “if they can,” introduced as an afterthought to the initial claim, imply that many women *cannot* or do not in fact marry for love. Lady Sondes appears to be one of the lucky few.

In this passage, Austen begins to dissect the cultural expectations for the conjugal pair. Austen separates in these lines public opinions for what the process of getting married should be like and her own opinions for how it might feel to be married. In the first half of this passage, Austen recognizes the social custom that women have “the right to marry *once* in their Lives for

Love.” She identifies this custom as a public expectation rather than her own opinion when she says, “I should not have forgiven her” for marrying more than once out of affection, which would have been a social anomaly. In some cases, the phrase “should not” could be synonymous in its usage to the phrase “I would not.” However, in this passage, usage of the phrase “should not” instead points to the public face marriage wears, the social expectations for who and how someone should get married, rather than what private married life should be like.

In the second half of the passage, however, Austen indeed begins to reveal her own personal opinions and feelings about Lady Sondes’ married life. Her last words “I can allow her, I can *wish* her to be happy” are especially witty, and seem to work to a similar end as her phrase “I should not have forgiven her.” Her words “I can allow her” point again to general public opinions about what one should think about getting married: in other words, according to social rules and regulations, what a woman is allowed or instructed to think about any given marriage. The second half of the phrase, separated by a comma, divides public opinion from Austen’s own feelings, that she “can *wish* her to be happy.” To wish reveals a personal desire, in this case for Lady Sondes’ private married life, that she be happy in her affectionate union.

Jane Austen’s most interesting comments on the interior private nature of married life do not appear until her letters to her niece Fanny Knight, the oldest child of Austen’s brother Edward. In these letters, Austen moves away from a discussion of the public face of marriage and moves instead toward its more private face. In other words, rather than discussing social expectations for engagements and the process of getting married, Austen opines on what private married life would be like within a conjugal union. Austen writes her niece on several occasions, between November 1814 and July 1817. Although the letters are not many, Fanny was an important epistolary companion for Austen, one that Austen makes clear she is not ready or

willing to lose after Fanny's impending marriage. While Austen may not agree with the importance placed on marriage in England in the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries, her letters to Fanny make clear that Austen recognizes matrimony was nevertheless as socially important as her niece thinks it to be. Early in their communication, Austen advises Fanny on how to choose the right husband. She writes to Fanny, for example, in a letter dated Wednesday, November 30, 1814, "Now my dearest Fanny, I will begin a subject which comes in very naturally" (*Jane Austen's Letters* 285). In light of the fact that all of Austen's novels center around the function of marriage in England in the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries, it is no surprise that Austen would feel natural breaching the subject of marriage with her intimate friend and niece, Fanny.

Some of Austen's more pointed advice in this letter to Fanny includes, "You like him well enough to marry, but not well enough to wait. —The unpleasantness of appearing fickle is certainly great—but if you think you want Punishment for past Illusions, there it is—and nothing can be compared to the misery of being bound *without* Love, bound to one, & preferring another. *That* is a Punishment which you do *not* deserve. —" (*Jane Austen's Letters* 286). Throughout the letter, Austen particularly emphasizes her wish that Fanny marry for Love: marriage without true affection is "a Punishment which you do *not* deserve." This advice, however, opposes publically held ideals on the institution of marriage that all eligible young women marry. Eric Walker explains in *Marriage, Writing & Romanticism* this paradox between how Austen feels about marriage and public expectations for marriage when he asserts, "To wed demands death; not to wed demands death" (6). In early modern England, in other words, marriage was a social requisite. Therefore, "not to wed demands death," both in the sense that the woman might not be able to economically support herself, or simply that such an abstinence would be social suicide. To say that marriage for reasons other than love, including economic reasons, is a form of

punishment thus suggests that Austen is not opposed to marriage, but simply the socially motivated reasons that women marry when, how and who they do.⁹

The tension between the face marriage puts on in the social sphere and the actual private nature of married life becomes further apparent in Austen's reference to how Fanny will appear if she accepts or denies the marriage proposal. This tension reappears in later letters to Fanny, specifically when Austen addresses how her communication with Fanny will inevitably change once Fanny marries. In one such letter, Austen reveals her fear that because marriage in the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries is centered on the private life of the conjugal pair, once Fanny marries and Austen will therefore be denied the intimate access to Fanny's feelings that she was previously allowed as an epistolary companion. Austen writes in one such letter to Fanny, written from Thursday to Friday, February 20 to 21, 1817,

You are inimitable, irresistible. You are the delight of my Life. Such Letters, such entertaining Letters as you have lately sent! —Such a lovely display of what Imagination does. —You are worth your weight in Gold, or even in the new Silver Coinage. —I cannot express to you what I have felt in reading your history of yourself, how full of Pity & Concern & Admiration & Amusement I have been. You are the Paragon of all that is Silly & Sensible, common-place & eccentric, Sad & Lively, Provoking & Interesting. —Who can keep pace with the fluctuations of your Fancy, the Capprizios of your Taste, the Contradictions of your Feelings? — You are so odd! —& all the time, so perfectly natural—so peculiar in yourself, & yet so like everybody else! —It is very, very gratifying to me to know you so intimately. You can hardly think of what a pleasure it is to me, to have such

⁹ While marriages of affection were increasingly accepted and desirable for women in the nineteenth century, marriage remained an economic necessity for many young women.

thorough pictures of your Heart. —Oh! what a loss it will be, when you are married. You are too agreeable in your single state, too agreeable as a Neice. I shall hate you when your delicious play of Mind is all settled down into conjugal & maternal affections (*Jane Austen's Letters* 328-329).

The bond Austen shares with her niece, as her aunt, her confidant, and her epistolary companion, is quite clear from these opening lines from her November letter to Fanny. The many qualities Austen outlines that make Fanny such an “inimitable, irresistible” companion in her single state, however, are contrasted with what Austen suspects Fanny will become once married. Fanny is feeling and sensible, commands good taste and social graces. These characteristics that make her so uniquely herself, however, also makes her especially marriageable and therefore, as Austen suggests, “so like everybody else!” Austen presents a strain between the intimate epistolary relationship she shares with Fanny, and the loss of intimacy she anticipates when Fanny marries. Austen writes, “It is very, very gratifying to me to know you so intimately. You can hardly think of what a pleasure it is to me, to have such thorough pictures of your Heart” (329). However, Austen worries that when Fanny is contained within her conjugal union, she will also be prevented from intimately communicating with her aunt. Austen exclaims, for example, “Oh! what a loss it will be, when you are married. You are too agreeable in your single state, too agreeable as a Neice. I shall hate you when your delicious play of Mind is all settled down into conjugal & maternal affections” (329). Austen’s witty quip that she “shall hate” Fanny once she is married does not hide her underlying fear that marriage would mean the loss of Fanny as an epistolary companion with which she can exchange her most intimate thoughts as she does now. Austen insinuates here that the Mind changes and “deteriorates” once married by becoming closed to intimate interactions and “delicious plays of Mind” with those outside of her union.

Specific use of the word conjugal here furthermore brings attention to the fact that the definition marriage in the early nineteenth century was centered on the conjugal pair, a private bond not conducive to communication, whether public or private, outside of the matrimonial bond.

The division Austen identifies in her letters between public gossip about impending marriage and the private nature of married life is one she transfers to her literary work as well. While Austen's characters are constantly thinking about the prospect of marriage, about who is getting married, and who they themselves might marry, readers never once see the novels' protagonists past the moment they are married. With the exception of brief letters like the one Lydia sends her sister Elizabeth (Austen, *Pride and Prejudice* 296) after her elopement with Mr. Wickham in *Pride and Prejudice*, neither do readers gain access to letters that reveal in any way the internal nature of married life. Austen translates this belief to her narrators, who are similarly unable or wittily unwilling to speak about the protagonists once they have entered married life.

This is worth considering in light of the fact that Austen has equipped her narrators with a new narrative tool that allows readers into the minds of her protagonists: free indirect discourse. Michael McKeon defines free indirect discourse as “a method of disclosing characters in the process of gaining self-knowledge that, by refining the virtual institution of the narrator, enhances the structural relation of detachment and interiority whose effect is less subtly available through the actualized fiction of a literal epistolary document—or indeed through the customary practice of third-person narration itself” (703). McKeon continues, “Free indirect discourse is notable for the relationship it establishes between what might be called the overarching, ‘public’ detachment of narrative voice and the ‘private,’ relative interiority of the character’s point of view to which it provides access” (704). Just like the letters her protagonists write, Austen allows readers a deeper view of her characters’ minds through the use of free indirect discourse.

Moreover, in this way, the novel as form mirrors the composition of the familiar letter in that it both allow readers a peek into the private, interior lives of their protagonists while staying aware of the broader social discourses and customs surrounding marriage and engagements.

While the voices of her narrators are somewhat disconnected from the interiority of her characters, I would suggest that Austen herself is quite attached to these narrators and that Austen tells her readers what she thinks about the public nature of marriage and the behavior of her characters through the voice of her narrators. At the moments in which her narrators announce the engagement of her protagonists, they cut themselves off from the intimate relationship they have maintained with the women for the length of the novel. In these moments, the narrators pan back out of the minds of these characters because they are no longer allowed access into the inner thoughts of the women. Her narrators, in other words, perform the retreat into inaccessibility that Austen imagines marriage conferring upon women, just as she suggests in her letter to Fanny.

Take as an example the end of *Emma*, where the marriage of our protagonist Emma is given a mere paragraph at the close of the novel. The narrator gives hardly a sentence to the ceremony itself, explaining that “The wedding was very much like other weddings, where the parties have no taste for finery or parade; and Mrs. Elton, from the particulars detailed by her husband, thought it all extremely shabby and very inferior to her own” (Austen, *Emma* 381). The narrator devotes more words to Mrs. Elton and her opinions of the union than the description of the ceremony itself. Moreover, it seems that the narrator does not think it necessary or even worthwhile to describe the wedding. Almost as if in passing, the narrator concludes, “But, in spite of these deficiencies, the wishes, the hopes, the confidence, the predictions of the small band of true friends who witnessed the ceremony, were fully answered in the perfect happiness

of the union” (381). The narrator concludes by saying that the marriage of Emma Woodhouse and Mr. Knightley ended like any other, with the “perfect happiness” that was expected in any affectionate union. Why is it that the narrator, who has spent nearly four hundred pages detailing (through indirect discourse and omniscience) the inner thoughts of her protagonist, is now unable or unwilling to tell readers about Emma’s life after her marriage? It seems that perhaps a likely answer can be found in Jane Austen’s letter to Fanny Knight: that after her marriage, the points of access into Emma’s mind will have faded. The narrator’s end to *Emma* is witty and not sentimental because, like Austen, our narrator believes that this affectionate union will be like any other: intimate, private and disconnected from outsiders.

We see a similar tendency in *Mansfield Park* when the narrator abruptly and sarcastically concludes, “With so much true merit and true love, and no want of fortune or friends, the happiness of the married cousins must appear as secure as earthly happiness can be” (Austen, *Mansfield Park* 372) and also in *Sense and Sensibility*, where Elinor and Edward Ferrars are said to become “one of the happiest couples in the world” (Austen, *Sense and Sensibility* 285). These observations mock the commonly held feelings about marriage: the idea that marriage is the source of happiness and life itself. The fact that readers hit a wall at this point, and are no longer invited into the minds of the female protagonists only serves as further evidence of Austen’s belief, in accordance with the new historical definition of kinship, that marriage is an intimate institution, private from the eyes of onlookers.

III. Knowing Other People in Emma

Austen introduced in her novels epistolary correspondences between her characters that are similar to the familiar letters she wrote to her close friends and family. In her late novel *Emma*, for example, letters appear throughout the text, but serve a much greater role than as a mere method of correspondence in early modern England. Rather, in *Emma*, as in many of her other novels, Austen uses letters more broadly for the communicative model they provide for readers. While the letters Austen writes for her characters, and familiar letters in general, serve their primary purpose to relay information, inside the novel they take on a much greater role. Specifically, in *Emma*, letters that are written privately, by characters like Jane Fairfax and Frank Churchill, are consistently shared in company, thereby training readers to think of intimacy in general as something that that can always be disclosed to a public audience.

One of the more repeated appearances of letters in *Emma* that clearly depicts their dually private and public role is the epistolary correspondence between Jane Fairfax and her grandmother and aunt, Mrs. and Miss Bates. Miss Bates habitually reads aloud to her mother the letters that Jane regularly writes her, and even shares their detailed contents with the residents of Highbury who come to call on her. Miss Bates tells Emma, for example, about a recent letter she had received from Jane, “I was reading it to Mrs. Cole, and since she went away, I was reading it again to my mother, for it is such a pleasure to her—a letter from Jane—that she can never hear it often enough” (Austen, *Emma* 123). Just as letter manuals recommended at the time, to read letters aloud or recite their contents in company, it is clear that Miss Bates makes it custom to reveal the details of Jane’s epistles to whichever companions come to visit her. In fact, Emma is hesitant to visit Miss Bates and agrees only to do so with Harriet when, “as well as she could

calculate, they were just now quite safe from any letter from Jane Fairfax” (121). Ironically, Emma is in fact forced to sit and hear the most current details of Jane’s life, and is even thanked by Miss Bates for being “so kind as to wish to hear what she says” (123).

Moreover, Miss Bates’ understanding of the role of letters in Highbury helps to highlight in *Emma* the model Austen sets up for epistolary correspondence, as a private form of communication that also has a public forum. Miss Bates looks at letters as the only means of the public communication of information. Although privately written initially, Miss Bates recognizes the role of letters in the public sphere, as they are routinely read aloud and their contents repeated in company. Miss Bates is dumbfounded, for example, to find that Mr. Knightley has heard news of Mr. Elton’s engagement before she herself did, owing to the fact that she had just gotten word from Mrs. Cole, who wrote her of the attachment as soon as her own husband had told her the news. Miss Bates exclaims, ““But where could *you* hear it?’ cried Miss Bates. ‘Where could you possibly hear it, Mr. Knightley? For it is not five minutes since I received Mrs. Cole’s note—no, it cannot be more than five—or at least ten. . . . But, Mr. Knightley, how could you possibly have heard it? For the very moment Mr. Cole told Mrs. Cole of it, she sat down and wrote to me”” (Austen, *Emma* 136). Miss Bates cannot fathom that Mr. Knightley has gained public knowledge from any other source but epistolary communication. Mr. Knightley only confirms this assumption when he reveals, “I was with Mr. Cole on business an hour and half ago. He had read Elton’s letter as I was shewn in, and handed it to me directly” (136). While Mr. Elton had written to Mr. Cole privately, the substance of his letter, the announcement of his engagement, quickly becomes public knowledge as it is read by Mr. Knightley and its contents repeated by Mrs. Cole to Miss Bates. Therefore, the intimacy of the familiar letter is once again opened to its broader function for a public audience.

Mr. Knightley's description of the engagement letter to Emma only further illustrates the way Austen uses the letter to model intimacy as something that will always be directed partly to a public audience. Mr. Knightley tells Miss Bates and Emma of Mr. Elton's letter, "It was short, merely to announce—but cheerful, exulting, of course,'—Here was a sly glance at Emma. 'He had been so fortunate as to—I forget the precise words—one has no business to remember them. The information was, as you state, that he was going to be married to a Miss Hawkins. By his style, I should imagine it just settled'" (Austen, *Emma* 136). Here, Mr. Knightley asserts that "one has no business to remember" the specific words of another's letter, although it is socially encouraged to repeat its contents to others. That is to say, while the words might remain private, the substance of letters, which letter manuals remind users will likely be repeated in company, thus molds epistolary correspondence into a dually private and public form of communication. There is a certain level of irony in the idea that the "precise words" of a letter should remain private, since the phrasing of letters would be modeled off of common examples listed in letter manuals. Thus, no words of any letter written by these guidelines would be wholly unfamiliar.

One of the central examples in *Emma* of the major function letters play for the social transmission of news in Highbury is the epistolary correspondence Frank Churchill shares with the new wife of his birth father, formerly the nanny and companion of Emma, Mrs. Weston. While readers are not actually introduced to Frank Churchill until halfway through the novel, he nevertheless takes on an important social persona throughout the work thanks to the distribution and repetition of the letters he has written to Mrs. Weston. For nearly the whole of *Emma*, Frank is at the heart of nearly all of the public gossip that passes through Highbury. News of his potential visit to Highbury upon the marriage of his blood father, for example, "was very generally proposed, as a most proper attention" (Austen, *Emma* 15). The phrase "very generally

proposed” is a phrase much repeated in the novel, and implies the whereabouts and decisions of Frank Churchill was a topic on the minds of everyone in Highbury.

Readers first become familiar with the character of Frank Churchill through the widespread discussion of the letter he has written to the new Mrs. Weston, congratulating her on her marriage to his birth father. For example, the narrator tells readers, “For a few days every morning visit in Highbury included some mention of the handsome letter Mrs. Weston had received. ‘I suppose you have heard of the handsome letter Mr. Frank Churchill had written to Mrs. Weston? I understand it was a very handsome letter, indeed. Mr. Woodhouse told me of it. Mr. Woodhouse saw the letter, and he says he never saw such a handsome letter in his life’” (Austen, *Emma* 15). Repetition of the phrase “handsome letter” in this passage ostensibly mirrors the repetitive nature of public gossip itself, and the repeated telling amongst the residents of Highbury of the fact that Frank had composed such a well-written letter to his new mother. Moreover, while Mr. Woodhouse is one of few to have personally read the letter, its substance has nonetheless passed through “every morning visit in Highbury.” Thus, the letter sent privately from Frank Churchill to Mrs. Weston also takes on a communicative role in the public sphere.

While characters like Mr. Woodhouse, Mr. George Knightley and Mr. John Knightley all have the opportunity to read actual letter written by Frank Churchill, most of the information residents of Highbury learn about Frank is garnered from secondary letters written about and relaying the messages of his original epistles. For example, after a letter arrives from Frank Churchill’s uncle and adopted father urging his immediate departure from Highbury, because of his aunt’s poor health, our narrator relates, “The substance of this letter was forwarded to Emma, in a note from Mrs. Weston, instantly” (Austen, *Emma* 202). In this case, both by reading the

original letter sent to her from Frank and by sharing its contents with others does Mrs. Weston bring the private epistle into its broader communicative role in the public sphere.

The most narratively significant letter Frank Churchill writes to Mrs. Weston, the contents of which are later repeated to Emma, among others, is the one announcing his previously secret engagement to Jane Fairfax. In the letter, which nearly concludes the novel, Frank details his hidden relationship with Jane and explicates his motives for almost every action he made while at Highbury. However, the letter is more interesting for the job it does in posing epistolary correspondence as a broader model for intimacy, which always exists to some extent in front of a larger audience. While Frank writes to Mrs. Weston, he makes clear that he is aware that when the time is right, its contents will be shared with others. Frank writes, for example, “Acquit me here, and procure for me, when it is allowable, the acquittal and good wishes of that said Emma Woodhouse, whom I regard with so much brotherly affection, as to long to have her as deeply and as happily in love as myself” (Austen, *Emma* 344-345). In other words, “when it is allowable,” Frank Churchill asks Mrs. Weston to share this letter, his motives for all his actions, and his plans for his future life with Jane Fairfax with Emma. We then read Frank’s entire letter when Emma does, after Mrs. Weston forwards the confession to her companion (342). This letter Frank writes to Mrs. Weston is therefore neither private from Emma nor from us readers, and therefore strongly models the way epistolary communication is both intimate, in that it is written between addresser and addressee, but also public, in that its contents are never kept secret.

We see therefore that in *Emma*, letters serve as a communicative model for intimacy, thereby training readers to think of privacy as something that always stays aware of its public audience. However, inside of *Emma*, it is not only letters that function in this way. Rather, nearly all descriptions of intimacy in the novel also imagine a wider audience, which in many cases

directly implies the readers of the novel. In her book *Thinking about Other People in Nineteenth-Century British Writing*, Adela Pinch begins to address the role of readers in knowing the inner minds of literary characters in early modern British writing, including that of Jane Austen. Pinch cites Austen's *Mansfield Park* and *Emma* specifically as novels that illustrate her broader claim that "thinking about not only other actual people, but also literary characters, can occasionally make them real" (Pinch 5). In *Mansfield Park*, for example, when the narrator asks "And Fanny, what was *she* doing and thinking all this while?" the effect is "to impress upon readers, early on in the story, that she has Fanny Price's complete confidence" (Pinch 151). In the Box-Hill episode of *Emma*, Frank Churchill proclaims, "I am ordered by Miss Woodhouse (Who, wherever she is, presides) to say, that she desires to know what you are all thinking of" (Austen, *Emma* 290) because Emma herself does not know what the other characters around her are thinking. Pinch claims that in these works, Austen successfully "sutures the consciousness of a particular character into the fabric of a wandering omniscient narration" such that it is thinking about other characters in the novel that allows the other characters and external readers to know one another (Pinch 151).

Pinch's claim about the importance of thinking about other people is key to understanding the role of the reader in how intimacy functions within Austen's novels. While characters in *Emma*, for example, often connect with each other on an intimate level, readers' knowledge of what the characters are thinking through the author's use of free indirect discourse, among other narratological techniques, stays aware of the public audience. In her introduction to the 2003 Oxford World's Classic Edition of *Emma*, Pinch suggests, "The plot of *Emma* is all about who knows what, and when: whether, for example, Mr. Knightley knows more about Mr. Elton's interests and ambitions than does Emma, or whether and when anyone comes to

understand the mystery of Jane Fairfax—or, of course, when it is that Emma comes to know her own feelings” (Austen, *Emma* xix). *Emma* is not only a novel about “who know what, and when,” as Pinch claims, but also about the process of knowing each other, and how the process of knowing each other models the makeup of intimacy in early modern England.

The very way Austen begins *Emma* and approaches reports on the marriage of her former governess and companion Miss Taylor to Mr. Weston illustrates this model of knowing. In these early pages, through use of free indirect discourse and narration, readers become intimately aware of the inner thoughts of Emma. Nevertheless, we find that Emma’s thinking on the marriage does not intrude too far into imagining the new life of Miss Taylor, because Emma knows that thinking about marriage is governed by the same conventions as writing a letter. She cannot think openly on what the intimate married life of Miss Taylor, now Mrs. Weston, and Mr. Weston will be like because she knows she must always keep a sense of a wider public audience, and in this case, also the readers. The brief announcement that “Miss Taylor married” (Austen, *Emma* 5) is about as deep into the details of the marriage as we readers are allowed. Emma acknowledges, “The event had every promise of happiness for her friend,” but goes no further into these promises than to mention that Mr. Weston was “a man of unexceptionable character, easy fortune, suitable age and pleasant manners” (6). Instead, through free indirect discourse, our narrator reveals about Emma, “How was she to bear the change? —It was true that her friend was going only half a mile from them; but Emma was aware that great must be the difference between a Mrs. Weston only half a mile from them, and a Miss Taylor in the house” (6). In this passage, Emma recognizes that married life will change her governess, just as Jane Austen feared that her niece Fanny Knight would change after marriage (*Jane Austen’s Letters* 329). While she notes there will be differences in her relationship with the new Mrs. Weston, Emma nevertheless

finds herself unable to intimately describe what the changes will be, but instead keeps an eye to the public, and keeps silent on those issues that cannot be discussed publically. Fictional reports on marriage are thus governed by the same conventions as letters, which although are private at their core, must always bear a public audience in mind.

Later in the novel, when we hear what Emma and Mr. Knightley say to each other in their most romantic exchange, we readers are again implicated in this model for how intimacy functions within the novel, as something constantly aware of the public. In these moments, Austen shows us readers that we have been the audience all along, and further that the love scene has been operating like a letter to the reader. In other words, Austen implies that this romantic exchange, although essentially private, becomes open to the public when characters like Emma in fact speak to external readers. In this late avowal, the narrator relates, “The subject followed; it was in plain, unaffected, gentleman-like English, such as Mr. Knightley used even to the woman he was in love with, how to be able to ask her to marry him, without attacking the happiness of her father. Emma’s answer was ready at the first word” (Austen, *Emma* 352). Even in this most private moment, there are rules regarding exchanges of intimacy, whether in letters or in this case, in the novel in general. Our narrator cannot reveal the most secret details of Emma and Mr. Knightley’s hearts because conventions dictate that one can never speak about intimacy without some sense of a wider audience. In the novel, knowing or thinking about other people thus requires attention to readers in order to maintain this model for intimacy.

In “Where does the pleasure come from? The marriage plot and its discontents in Jane Austen’s *Emma*,” Deanna Kreisel agrees, “Austen quite consciously—and repeatedly—draws attention to the everyday decisions of what to say and what not to say and by underscoring the interests which go into those decisions, calls into question the very plots which these decisions

enable.” In her friendship and later courtship with Mr. Knightley, and throughout *Emma*, the title character says, “Just what she ought, of course. A lady always does” because of her own keen awareness of what can and cannot be said in company or in the novel. Kreisel elaborates that while *Emma* follows the trajectory of the traditional marriage plot, Austen is not concerned with what actually happens to the potential marryers of her novels. Kreisel explains, “Especially with a novel like *Emma*, we can pose the uncomfortable and enlightening question of what exactly happens between our two romantic leads during this book. Actually, not much” (Kreisel). Instead, Kreisel argues, Austen draws attention to and questions which elements of the marriage plot are “narratable and not-narratable, or perhaps more accurately ‘worthy of narration’ and ‘not worthy of narration.’” In *Emma*, Austen makes clear that she is conscious of the fact that marriage exists differently in the public and private spheres. While her narrators and protagonists can intimately discuss the process of getting married, there are some elements, such as those concerning the details of private married life, which cannot be discussed in the text.

We therefore see in *Emma* that letters and marriage conspire in the novel to shroud a certain kind of experience from ever really being exposed to the audience at large, both to the characters inside and the readers outside of the text. Rather, while both point to the most private kind of experience, whether the epistolary exchange of information or the romantic attachment that is married life, they do so while protecting it from public revelation. In order to see the overlap of letters and marriage, we turn again to the conclusory letter from Frank Churchill to his new mother Mrs. Weston in which he reveals his hidden engagement to Jane Fairfax. While Frank writes privately to Mrs. Weston, he does so with an eye to the public, with the hope and intention that the letter later be read and repeated to her friends and family, or as Frank writes, to “those among your friends who have had any ground of offence” (Austen, *Emma* 343).

In this case, Frank uses the private letter as a way to publically uncover his secret engagement, but also reveals a further manipulation with the composition of intimacy in early modern England. Frank in fact admits to manipulating a public intimacy with Emma to guard his own private engagement. Frank explains, “My behaviour to Miss Woodhouse indicated, I believe, more than it ought. —In order to assist a concealment so essential to me, I was led on to make more than an allowable use of the sort of intimacy into which we were immediately thrown” (Austen, *Emma* 344). That is to say, in the social sphere, he strongly hinted at an attachment to Emma to protect the one he truly had to Jane hidden from the public eye. Frank continues, “I cannot deny that Miss Woodhouse was my ostensible object—but I am sure you will believe the declaration, that had I not been convinced of her indifference, I would not have been induced by any selfish views to go on” (344). Like our author, character Frank Churchill is aware of the model for intimacy practiced in early modern England. He is aware, in other words, of how intimacy is perceived socially, as something that is never truly hidden from a public audience. Frank is in fact so aware of these conventions that he is able to manipulate an apparent intimacy with Emma in order to paradoxically guard his own engagement from the public eye.

In this instance, Frank Churchill manipulates the conventions of intimacy that Austen spends the whole of *Emma* establishing in order to illustrate for the reader once more that letters and marriage alike are institutions that are double aware and present in the public and private spheres. In this way, Austen uses letters as a model for communication in her novels in order to convey through her narrator and characters, and to her readers her knowledge about the private nature of married of life. Austen thus uses fiction, and letters in her fiction, as a tool with which to highlight the ironically dual nature of intimacy in marriage, the letter and the novel.

IV. *The Performance of Privacy in Sense and Sensibility*

Not only does Austen have her characters in *Emma* and *Sense and Sensibility* write letters to each other, but she presents their epistolary compositions a “calm and deliberate performance” (Cook 16) of the social standards for epistolary communication detailed in early modern letter manuals. Moreover, she uses these epistolary performances in the novel as a way to further illustrate for the reader the way intimacy functions in early modern England as something that is continually concerned with the public. In *Emma*, for example, we see the title character compose a letter of rejection on behalf of Harriet to Mr. Martin in response to his marriage proposal. Ironically, while this sort of letter should be written with the utmost sincerity and privacy, the letter Emma writes or performs for Harriet has neither quality. Rather, her epistle merely mechanically follows the recommendations laid out in letter manuals for how such a letter should be composed. The narrator of *Emma* relays, “Emma assured her there would be no difficulty in the answer, and advised its being written directly, which was agreed to, in the hope of her assistance; and though Emma continued to protest against any assistance being wanted, it was in fact given in the formation of every sentence” (Austen, *Emma* 44). By writing to Mr. Martin as a proxy for Harriet, Emma shows readers that even the most private of letters are written with an awareness of the publically known expectations for epistolary correspondence in letter manuals.

The same pattern of performing the standards for letter writing appears in *Sense and Sensibility* when we find Willoughby’s wife Miss Sophia Grey has in fact composed his final letter to Marianne. Willoughby explains to Elinor, ““And in short—what do you think of my wife’s style of letter-writing? —delicate—tender—truly feminine—was it not?”” (Austen, *Sense and Sensibility* 249). When Elinor exclaims, ““Your wife! —The letter was in your own hand-

writing,” Willoughby continues, ““Yes, but I had only the credit of servilely copying such sentences as I was ashamed to put my name to. The original was all her own—her own happy thoughts and gentle diction”” (249). Even a woman such as Miss Sophia Grey is therefore capable, thanks to the model letters listed in letter writing manuals, to imitate a letter with a male author. Moreover, Elinor is unable to identify Willoughby’s letter as a performance. Handwriting alone persuades her that the letter has been composed by Willoughby himself, a true testament to the fact that all ‘proper’ letters in early modern England tend towards the imitable and formulaic.

In *Sense and Sensibility*, other authors also write letters according to the publically known and recognized standards for their composition. Just as in *Emma*, the letter in *Sense and Sensibility*, and specifically protagonists Elinor and Marianne’s interaction with the letter, more broadly models the way no intimate relationship in early modern England was ever entirely private, but always remained aware of its presence in front of a public audience. This adds to the extended sense that *Sense and Sensibility* is a book about what its characters can and cannot say, or rather what topics are too intimate to be breached in the public sphere or the novel setting. In this work, Austen stresses not only the bond between sisters Elinor and Marianne Dashwood, but also their individual relationships to commonly held opinions about romantic attachments and intimacy: Marianne, as she breaks with the social law that allows open epistolary correspondence only between engaged lovers, and Elinor, whose own secret romantic attachment to Edward Ferrars does not prevent her from judging her sister’s improperly public relationship. Moreover, Austen uses Marianne’s attachment to and correspondence with Willoughby, and Elinor’s evaluation of both, to claim that marriage, like letter writing, is precluded from complete privacy.

In the Introduction to *The Secret History of Domesticity*, McKeon delineates the separation of the public and private spheres, a demarcation that Elinor later identifies within

Sense and Sensibility regarding her sister Marianne's relationship with Willoughby. McKeon writes, "the modern disembedding of the public-private dyad entails their separation out not only from the common ground of tradition and social practice but also from each other: the division of public *from* private" (xx). McKeon claims in other words that the private is both begat through and separate from the public. Correspondingly, within *Sense and Sensibility*, Elinor is acutely aware that Marianne's intimate attachment to Willoughby is subject to public scrutiny, as it exists to a great extent within the public sphere. On the other hand, Marianne remains blind to the composition of intimacy as something that always subsists in front of a larger audience. Rather, Marianne imagines that both the familiar letters she writes to and her romantic attachment to Willoughby are entirely private entities. Mrs. Dashwood similarly contends to Elinor, "'We have already agreed that secrecy may be necessary, and we must acknowledge that it could not be maintained if their correspondence were to pass through Sir John's hands'" (Austen, *Sense and Sensibility* 64). In other words, while the Dashwoods live in Barton Cottage, the proprietor Sir John Middleton would have seen any and all mail sent to or from any one of the Dashwood ladies. Thus, while Marianne and to some extent her mother Mrs. Dashwood naively believe her correspondence with Willoughby to be private, the letter writing could never remain wholly so. In keeping with McKeon's argument, Marianne's private exchange of individual letters is reflective of the broader and more public nature of epistolary correspondence in general: the private exchange of letters takes place within the greater social practice of epistolary correspondence, whose central function is the communication of information (including news of epistolary and thus romantic associations) to the public at large.

While Mrs. Jennings, Mrs. Palmer and the Middletons are also responsible for spreading rumors of Marianne's imagined engagement, it is also the material letters Marianne sends to

Willoughby that solidify news of their attachment in the wider circles of their acquaintance. Colonel Brandon says to Elinor when speaking about the supposed engagement, “I beg your pardon, I am afraid my inquiry has been impertinent; but I had not supposed any secrecy intended, as they openly correspond, and their marriage is universally talked of” (Austen, *Sense and Sensibility* 129). This passage clarifies the parallel between epistolary correspondence and romantic attachment, the connection between an open correspondence and an engagement “universally talked of” and socially accepted as fact. Ironically, epistolary correspondence between two lovers is not a private association, as Marianne and her mother Mrs. Dashwood had imagined. Rather, Colonel Brandon would not have believed rumors of the engagements “if I had not, when the servant let me in to-day, accidentally seen a letter in his hand, directed to Mr. Willoughby in your sister’s writing” (129). This is to conclude that while the content of the letters might remain private if not read aloud in company, correspondence between two lovers ironically constitutes a topic of interest to a wide circle of onlookers. In a similar instance, Elinor agrees the correspondence between Lucy Steele and Edward Ferrars is proof of their engagement. The narrator relates, “Elinor saw that it *was* his hand, and she could doubt no longer. The picture, she had allowed herself to believe, might have been accidentally obtained; but a correspondence between them by letter, could subsist only under a positive engagement, could be authorised by nothing else” (102). Thus, public knowledge of a private epistolary correspondence in fact makes a romantic attachment universally acknowledged.

Throughout *Sense and Sensibility*, Austen draws our attention to the role of intimacy in the relationship between Elinor and Marianne, and specifically what is said and left unsaid between the two sisters. While Marianne and Willoughby openly show their attachment in public, and their engagement is universally rumored to be true, Marianne is unable to speak

openly on the subject, even to her most intimate of friends, her mother and sister Elinor. This inability is reflective of the greater model for intimacy Austen provides in *Sense and Sensibility* as something that gets disclosed while still maintaining its private function. The narrator reflects about Marianne and Willoughby, for example, “Elinor could not be surprised at their attachment. She only wished that it were less openly shewn, and once or twice did venture to suggest the propriety of some self-command to Marianne. But Marianne abhorred all concealment where no real disgrace could attend unreserve” (Austen, *Sense and Sensibility* 41). The behavior of Marianne and Willoughby in public for Elinor confirms their engagement. The narrator continues about Elinor as she overhears Willoughby speaking to Marianne, that “in the whole of the sentence, in his manner of pronouncing it, and in his addressing her sister by her christian name alone, she instantly saw an intimacy so decided, a meaning so direct, as marked a perfect agreement between them. From that moment, she doubted not of their being engaged to each other” (45). However, while Marianne is able to openly act attached to Willoughby, and maintain some degree of intimacy with him in the public realm, she is nevertheless unable to discuss the details of the relationship with her sister Elinor until Willoughby becomes engaged to Miss Sophia Grey. While intimacy is ironically created in the public realm as a result of gossip and the visual observation of private epistolary correspondences, it is clear that there are some details of romantic attachments and intimate relations that must be left unsaid.

Elinor questions the silence of her sister Marianne and Willoughby about their seemingly obvious engagement. The narrator speculates about Elinor using free indirect discourse, “Why they should not openly acknowledge to her mother and herself, what their constant behaviour to each other declared to have taken place, Elinor could not imagine” (Austen, *Sense and Sensibility* 54). In reality, Marianne and Willoughby do not openly acknowledge their engagement because

they are not in fact engaged, but simply romantically attached. However, it is not these narrative details that are noteworthy, but rather how Marianne and Elinor position themselves in regards to discussions of intimacy within the novel. Why are Marianne and Elinor unable to openly discuss with each other their romantic attachments to Willoughby and Edward Ferrars, respectively?

While all narrative detail is made clear at the end of the book, we are especially aware throughout the novel of how the Dashwood sisters constantly leave each other and Austen's readers in the dark about their own romantic attachments. Austen models their intimate romantic relationships in such a way to illustrate for the reader the fact that there are some aspects of such attachments that are precluded from elucidation in the novel to other characters and to us readers. That is to say, even these romantic relationships are both knowable and unknowable at the same time. The same holds true for letters portrayed in *Sense and Sensibility*: when we are finally allowed to peek into the intimate relationship between Marianne and Willoughby,¹⁰ and to read several of the last letters sent between the two, we find that even these letters are not wholly intimate. Even the most private of letters is not wholly private, but is always aware of the public.

Late in the novel, we are in fact given the chance to peek inside a private correspondence, and read several of the letters Marianne sends Willoughby, and his cold response, a reproduction of the letter Miss Sophia Grey dictates for him to copy in his own hand. The narrator relates, "a letter was delivered to Marianne, which she eagerly caught from the servant, and, turning a death-like paleness, instantly ran out of the room" (Austen, *Sense and Sensibility* 134). Marianne then displays in her person all the emotion and intimacy her letters and the letter from Willoughby cannot. The narrator explains that Marianne, "though unable to speak, seemed to

¹⁰ Elinor and readers constitute a third party audience to the letters, as Cook explains in *Epistolary Bodies* (8). The fact that Elinor and readers of *Sense and Sensibility* have access to letters of Marianne and Willoughby make their epistolary correspondence to some degree public.

feel all the tenderness of this behaviour, and after some time thus spent in joint affliction, she put all the letters in Elinor's hands; and then covering her face with her handkerchief, almost screamed with agony" (136). Austen first presents us with the formulaic epistle Marianne has just received from Willoughby, to contrast Marianne's "excess of suffering" (136) with the letter's lack of intimate feeling. Willoughby writes to Marianne such lines as those that follow:

I am much concerned to find there was any thing in my behaviour last night that did not meet your approbation; and though I am quite at loss to discover in what point I could be so unfortunate as to offend you, I entreat your forgiveness of what I can assure you to have been perfectly unintentional... My esteem for your whole family is very sincere; but if I have been so unfortunate as to give rise to a belief of more than I felt, or meant to express, I shall reproach myself for not having been more guarded in my professions of that esteem (136).

This letter, scripted by Miss Sophia Grey but copied and sent at the hand of Willoughby, is filled with the hard courtesy and good manners recommended in letter writing manuals from the seventeenth, eighteenth and nineteenth centuries. Elinor is surprised to find that even when looking inside the most private of letters, sent between seeming lovers Marianne and Willoughby, there is a lack of feeling. Even intimacy is not wholly private. Elinor contemplates,

...she was not aware that such language could be suffered to announce it; nor could she have supposed Willoughby capable of departing so far from the appearance of every honourable and delicate feeling—so far from the common decorum of a gentleman, as to send a letter so impudently cruel: a letter which, instead of bringing with his desire of a release any professions of regret, acknowledged no breach of faith, denied all peculiar affection whatever—a letter

of which every line was an insult, and which proclaimed its writer to be deep in hardened villainy (136-137).

Much to her surprise, Elinor finds the letter lacks “all peculiar affection whatever,” and dryly performs the polite familiar letters modeled in letter manuals. This deficiency of intimacy makes the private letter for Elinor an insult, and makes Willoughby in her eyes a writer “deep in hardened villainy” and “impudently cruel.” This private letter is hardly intimate at all.

Quite unlike the letter Willoughby composes, Marianne writes with intimacy and confidence. Because she imagines herself to be officially engaged to Willoughby, she allows herself to write with the intimacy reserved for lovers. The narrator relays how Elinor and Marianne feel about the correspondence through free indirect discourse:

That such letters, so full of affection and confidence, could have been so answered, Elinor, for Willoughby’s sake, would have been unwilling to believe. But her condemnation of him did not blind her to the impropriety of their having been written at all, and she was silently grieving over the imprudence, which had hazarded such unsolicited proofs of tenderness, not warranted by anything preceding, and most severely condemned by the event, when Marianne, perceiving that she had finished the letters, observed to her that they contained nothing but what any one would have written in the same situation (Austen, *Sense and Sensibility* 140).

The first half of the passage reflects how Elinor feels about the correspondence. Strong words and phrases like ‘condemnation,’ ‘blind her,’ ‘grieving over the imprudence,’ ‘hazarded,’ and ‘severely condemned’ mark Elinor’s sharp and biting disapproval of her sister’s improper participation in a private correspondence with Willoughby. As they two were not engaged,

according to social custom, Marianne and Willoughby should have never participated in such a communication; their participation in such serves as social proof of their attachment, an attachment that we find never actually existed (139). The latter part of the passage reflects through indirect discourse the more pathetic and melancholy feelings of Marianne, that the letters “contained nothing but what any one would have written in the same situation.”

While Marianne’s epistle is proof that the familiar letter can in fact hold some degree of intimacy, the irony is that her letters should never have been written in the first place. Its intimate confessions are rather “unsolicited proofs of tenderness,” and thus bring into question the space romantic attachments occupy in the public consciousness. When can a letter be truly intimate? When and what can be said in public? When does the romantic attachment exist in private, and when does it become subject to public scrutiny? We see from the presentation of intimacy and epistolary correspondence in *Sense and Sensibility* that there is no clear and definite answer to any of these questions. Rather, intimacy is metered. While romantic attachments and epistolary correspondence like the one Marianne shares with Willoughby are at their core intimate relationships, both exist to some degree in the public sphere. Marianne cannot speak openly on her attachment, nor can Elinor speak of her hidden feelings for Edward Ferrars. Nevertheless, the letters Marianne sends are observed publically by Colonel Brandon, among others, and become corroboration for rumors of their open engagement, one that in reality does not exist. In *Sense and Sensibility*, we become audience to the spectrum of intimacy, as it exists in the novel and in England in the seventeenth, eighteenth and nineteenth century generally.

V. Conclusion

As we saw, in *Marriage, Writing & Romanticism: Wordsworth and Austen after War*, Eric Walker makes the claim that for authors in the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries, “marriage is the only tale to tell—and as if that insult could be topped, it is a tale that is untellable” (5). A more precise analysis of *Emma* and *Sense and Sensibility* shows that to the contrary, marriage is not a tale entirely untellable. Rather, Jane Austen identifies marriage as an institution with both public and private facets. While Austen feels herself able to narrate gossip about engagements and the process of getting married in her novels, she remains silent on the private nature of married life, which remains shielded from a public audience. Diane Kreisel similarly asserts, “Austen is more deeply concerned with relationships between young women of marriageable age than she is with the potential marryers themselves. While this revelation is not particularly startling, it leads to the question of what Austen considers narratable and not-narratable.” In order to divide in her novels those public facets of marriage that can be discussed from those private ones that cannot, Austen employs the familiar letter, which similarly models the split between the public and the private. Because the familiar letter plays to publically held standards for epistolary correspondence, the epistle takes on an additional public role other than its main function for the private exchange of information. We see therefore that while Austen writes each and every one of her novels around the traditional marriage plot, her voice while doing so is much more ironic. Austen alerts her readers to the “everyday decisions of what to say and what not to say and, by underscoring the interests which go into those decisions, calls into question the very plots which these decisions enable” (Kreisel).

We therefore see that the union of marriage and the familiar letter within the novel is at once both extremely natural and not quite as natural as it at first may seem. While the prevalence of the epistolary novel as form faded with the appearance of the novel in the late eighteenth and early nineteenth centuries, it is clear that the epistolary mode had not entirely disappeared. In fact, letters in the novel serve a similar purpose to the one they held in older epistolary novels. Like free indirect discourse, the familiar letter within the novel allows readers to take a closer look into the interior minds of the characters. Nevertheless, while the familiar letter seems quite at home within the novel, the same does not seem to be the case with marriage. In fact, marriage does not appear to be an especially natural topic for the novel. While we accept the ubiquity of the marriage plot as the driving force of many early novels, the composition of the novel as form seems somewhat at odds with marriage. The novel and the associated invention by Jane Austen of free indirect discourse were developed in order to elucidate even the most private and intimate details of characters' inner lives. However, we have seen that while marriage exists to a great extent in the public sphere in gossip and conversation, the details of private married life remain occluded from revelation in front of a larger audience. In other words, because of its most private nature, married life eludes full representation within the novel as form. This relationship between marriage and the novel is not necessarily one that has disappeared. Even today, hundreds of years after Jane Austen wrote *Emma* and *Sense and Sensibility*, we see in contemporary novels remnants of the marriage plot, and the associated complex composition of intimacy. I ask now, over the years, how has the interaction of marriage, the letter and the novel changed? Moreover, how in this day and age do marriage and the familiar letter continue to interact within the novel, and what do they reveal about how the categories of public and private exist today?

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