“SUCH LETTERS, SUCH ENTERTAINING LETTERS”: THE EPISTLE IN JANE
AUSTEN’S NOVELS

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B.A., California State University, Sacramento 2009

THESIS

Submitted in partial satisfaction of
the requirements for the degree of

MASTER OF ARTS

in

ENGLISH
(Literature)

at

CALIFORNIA STATE UNIVERSITY, SACRAMENTO

FALL
2009
“SUCH LETTERS, SUCH ENTERTAINING LETTERS”: THE EPISTLE IN JANE AUSTEN’S NOVELS

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Abstract

of

“SUCH LETTERS, SUCH ENTERTAINING LETTERS”: THE EPISTLE IN JANE AUSTEN’S NOVELS

by

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Despite her early experiments with the epistolary form, none of Jane Austen’s published novels are in the epistolary form. However, all of Austen’s novels contain letters, many of which are crucial to the development of the story. This paper will explore the role and function of letters in Austen’s novels. Looking closely at each letter, we will see how Austen uses letters to reveal character and advance plot. We will also see how writing letters gives Austen’s characters a rhetorical voice, and how letters forge communication when it is otherwise impossible (not only physically, but socially and emotionally as well). Finally, we will explore how letters can lead characters to self-knowledge. By looking at how letters function in Austen’s novels, we will not only have a better understanding of her characters, but we will also have a better understanding of the role and significance of letters in Austen’s time.
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Chapter 1
INTRODUCTION

During the early to mid eighteenth century, the epistolary novel experienced an explosion in popularity in England, and by the end of the eighteenth century, over eight hundred epistolary novels had been published. The epistolary form was perhaps made most famous by Samuel Richardson’s epic tales told in letters. His novels *Pamela*, *Clarissa*, and *Sir Charles Grandison* epitomizes the epistolary form, and are quite arguably the greatest examples of their kind. In *The Epistolary Novel, Its Origin, Development, Decline, and Residuary Influence*, critic Godfrey Frank Singer says of *Clarissa*: “No novel in the English language presents a more penetrating study of the secret places of the soul and the deep anguish of that soul when it is violated than does his” (88). Jane Austen, of course, read Richardson, and was fond of his novels. Early in her career Austen herself experimented with writing in the epistolary form. Her Juvenilia boasts several attempts of stories written in letters. *Love and Freindship* and *Lady Susan* are perhaps her better-known attempts at the epistolary form. In these texts Austen actually turns epistolary novels on their head by attacking the very sentiments that are often portrayed in them. In *The Epistolary Novel in the Late Eighteenth Century: A Descriptive and Bibliographical Study*, Frank Gees Black notes that in her epistolary experiments Austen’s “chief target is always sentimentalism, and her burlesque of letter method has only epistolary sentimentalism as its object” (107). However, while Austen does use the epistolary form to parody the popular sentimental novels during her time, there is actually evidence that she also drafted *Sense and Sensibility* as an epistolary
novel, which at the time was called *Eleanor and Marianne*. There is even some speculation that *Pride and Prejudice* began in the epistolary form, although both of these theories have been widely disputed. If we accept that these two early works were first crafted in the epistolary form, then it seems clear that Austen did not view the epistolary novel as a genre that was limited only to promoting or attacking sentimentalism. Still, it is interesting that early on in her career, Austen played with writing in the epistolary form, yet, as none of her published novels are in the epistolary form, she was evidently dissatisfied with it.

There is much speculation as to why Austen abandoned the epistolary form. For one, by the time Austen began writing, the epistolary form was beginning to lose its popularity. While there are many possible reasons that epistolary novels were experiencing a decline in popularity, some critics cite the limitations of the form (i.e. having a limited point of view, lack of character development, lack of a unifying narrator, etc.) as the reason that Austen and others abandoned it. Yet, Richardson’s novels prove that the epistolary form offers more opportunities than it imposes limitations. Many critics actually speculate that Richardson perfected the form, leaving little room for others to add or improve to the genre. As Black puts it, “Richardson’s ingenuity in exploring the possibilities for variation within the type he invented left comparatively little for his followers beyond tame imitation” (1). Meanwhile, other critics cite the overt sentimentalism that is commonly represented in epistolary novels, and suggest that Austen distanced herself from these themes by abandoning the epistolary form. Austen
did after all parody sentimentalism in her early epistolary fiction. However, if we turn again to Richardson, we can see that not all epistolary novels reek of sentimentalism. Ultimately, it seems that Austen abandoned the epistolary form precisely because she did not excel at it the way Richardson did; she was not able to exploit the form the way he was able to. That is not to say that Austen was a less talented author. I think most of Austen's readers would agree that her primary talent lies with her unique narrative voice, and that this voice is what is missing from her epistolary experiments. Whatever the reason may be, early on in her career, Austen abandoned the epistolary form in favor of a style that takes advantage of her witty, ironic, and downright delightful narrative voice. However, it is interesting that while none of her published novels are in the epistolary form, all of her novels contain letters, and most of the letters found within the pages of Austen's novels are absolutely critical to the development of the story. Character is revealed, apologies are made, devious plots are unfolded, lives are potentially ruined, and love is passionately confessed within the letters in Austen's novels. Austen's readers learn to anxiously anticipate letters, as the letters almost always contain vital information, and we read them not unlike the characters in the novels read them – eagerly, repeatedly, and with as much astonishment, horror, or excitement. Lloyd W. Brown notes in *Bits of Ivory: Narrative Techniques in Jane Austen’s Fiction* that Austen is interested “in letters… as the direct transmission of personal values and feeling. In essence, epistolary styles are as integral to the theme and structure of each work as individual conversation” (137). He goes onto say:
The writing or the reading of letters is almost invariably crucial to the dramatic and psychological development of plot and character. Jane Austen exploits the inherent emotional values of the letter-writing process, and it probably accounts for the fact that so few of the letters in the novels are obscure or easily forgotten.

(156)

Mary A. Favret makes a similar statement in *Romantic Correspondence: Women, Politics & the Fiction of Letters*. She points out that “in every one of her finished novels [the letter] is there, playing a crucial, often decisive role, as if it were a character in its own right” (137).

It is clear that while Austen understood that the epistolary form was not the genre for her, she still valued the epistle as a literary device. She understood the letter to be potent and alive and necessary to the telling of a tale. As such, all six of her published novels contain multiple letters, each offering information that is crucial to the plot and development of the text. This paper will explore the role and function of letters in Austen's novels. Looking closely at each letter, we will see how Austen uses letters to reveal character and advance plot. We will also see how writing letters gives Austen’s characters a rhetorical voice, and how letters forge communication when it is otherwise impossible (not only physically, but socially and emotionally as well). Finally, we will explore how letters can lead characters to self-knowledge.
Chapter 2

“A USEFUL LESSON”: EARLY EXPERIMENTS WITH THE EPISTOLARY FORM

The Austens were a family of readers, particularly novel readers. While novel reading was often stigmatized for being indulgent and even immoral, the Austens, and Jane in particular, had no qualms with reading novels. In a letter to her sister, Cassandra, Austen writes of the local circulating library proprietor Mrs. Martin, who “as an inducement to subscribe” to the circulating library, tells Austen “that her collection is not to consist only of novels, but of every kind of literature.” Austen goes on to say that Mrs. Martin “might have spared this pretension to our family, who are great novel-readers and not ashamed of being so; but it was necessary, I suppose, to the self-consequence of half her subscribers” (Letters of Jane Austen 46). The Austen family had no such scruples when it came to reading novels, and they read novels of every sort, however good or bad they may have been. No doubt this included the many epistolary novels that were so popular at the time. Austen was particularly fond of the epistolary novels of Samuel Richardson and Fanny Burney. Knowing that the Austens were such avid readers, it is not surprising that Austen began writing at such a young age. Her Juvenilia dates back to 1787, when she was just eleven years old.

Much of Austen’s early work is in the epistolary form. And even as a youngster, her epistolary pieces were full of parody and irony. Black argues that throughout history, the epistolary novel “has lived upon sentiment. Letters are sentimental documents, designed to convey opinion and feeling rather than fact and action” (108). Elizabeth Lenckos echoes this idea: “The novel of letters had long been associated with the ‘cult of
sentiment’ dominant in the eighteenth century, and its history had been closely associated with the subject of women in love corresponding, then dying tragically of a broken heart” (4). Austen makes sentimentalism her chief target in her early epistolary pieces. “Amelia Webster,” a short epistolary piece (merely three pages long), comprises of seven letters, six of which are written by silly lovers, and the seventh reveals that the silly lovers have all married. In his letter to Amelia Webster, George Hervey confesses that he spotted her through a telescope while she was on her way to Bath, and “was so struck by [her] Charms” that ever since then, he has not “tasted human food” (49). This young Austen is clearly parodying the popular epistolary pieces of her time, in which lovers fall in love instantly, and are tortured by love sickness.

“Love and Freindship” and “Lady Susan” are Austen’s more mature epistolary works. Austen wrote “Love and Freindship” when she was just fourteen years old. While “Love and Freindship” is more developed than her earlier epistolary pieces, her target, gross sentimentalism, remains the same. The story is made up mostly of letters from Laura to her friend Isabel’s daughter, Marianne. At Isabel’s request, Laura’s letters tell Marianne of the “Misfortunes and Adventures” of her life (76). Austen’s humor is unmatched in these letters as Laura reveals the ridiculous shenanigans Laura and her friend Sophia engaged in. Virtually every sentence in this text is a jab at the sentimentalism that was portrayed in the novels that were so popular during this time. Austen’s humor is perhaps at its best when Laura recounts Sophia’s dying advice:

Take warning from my unhappy End & avoid the imprudent conduct which has occasioned it… beware of fainting-fits… Though at the time they may be
refreshing & Agreeable yet believe me they will in the end, if too often repeated & at improper seasons, prove destructive to your Constitution… Run mad as you often chuse; but do not faint. (Minor Works 102)

In her last waking moments, Laura takes the time to emphasize the dangers of “fainting-fits,” while maintaining the legitimacy of running as mad as one chooses. Laura and Sophia are clearly caricatures of the excessively sentimental and overly dramatic characters in some of the novels that were so popular during Austen’s time.

Around the age of nineteen, Jane Austen penned her short epistolary novel *Lady Susan*. Her penchant for the burlesque is more subdued in this piece, and sentimentalism is no longer her chief target of attack. The novel consists of letters that tell the story of Lady Susan’s attempt to scheme and manipulate her way into marrying her sister-in-law’s brother, while simultaneously having relations with a married man. Austen’s talent shines through in Lady Susan’s letters to her friend and confidant Mrs. Johnson, in which she discloses her immoral designs. Lady Susan is one of Austen’s most intriguing female characters. While her morals are certainly questionable, Lady Susan’s beauty, wit, and drive to be the maker of her own destiny, make her a fascinating character. As such, *Lady Susan* is a novel that is hard to put down. However, while Austen succeeds in developing Lady Susan into an interesting and complex character, the other characters remain somewhat undeveloped, making *Lady Susan* inferior to Austen’s published novels. Whether Austen understood this deficiency is unclear, but *Lady Susan* is the last epistolary novel she writes, suggesting she was somehow dissatisfied with it. Moreover,
Austen’s narrative voice intrudes at the end of *Lady Susan*, which suggests that Austen felt that something was missing from the epistolary form.

While the epistolary form experienced eminence through writers like Richardson and Burney, Black notes that the epistolary novel was mostly “third-rate or worse in most cases,” and that it “was the provender of ‘light readers’ in a period which had not the good fortune to be directed, by the good sense of Jane Austen or the rich invention of Scott, to other pasture” (1). Black explains that most epistolary novelists did not understand the complexity that comes with writing novels in letters. He stresses that the epistolary form demands very much the same versatility, command of varied styles, detachment, and imaginary identification of author with character as successful play writing.

To compose effective letters the writer must enter passionately into the situation of the letter writer; if the piece is composed of letters from different hands, he must be able to detach himself from his first point of view and adopt the others’ in various respects antithetical to it, capturing the appropriate new mental attitudes and verbal mannerisms. (50)

Richardson, of course, was a master at this. His talent lies with his ability to create and maintain several different personalities, each with depth and complexity, all while writing only in letters. Singer points out that the talent of writing in the epistolary form “came spontaneously to [Richardson]” (86). Black notes that “many hopeful young followers tried to do this while overlooking the artistic demands of the undertaking and remitted the charge that all their persons spoke the same language” (50). Unlike the “hopeful young
followers,” Richardson was able to develop distinct characters, each as complex and intriguing as the other. Although authors like Richardson and Burney were famous for their epistolary novels, the epistolary novel slowly began to lose popularity, and by 1830, it was virtually obsolete (Black 108). Black argues that with the abandonment of epistolary novels came an improved narrative technique, which “admitted a freer shifting in a point of view within the limits of narrative method and gave new importance to direct and extended dialogue” (110).

With her published novels, Austen abandons the epistolary form in favor of narratives from the third person perspective. And while she certainly exhibits talent in her epistolary pieces, her traditional novels are far superior. According to Lenckos, Austen’s novels are proof of “her favoring of an omniscient, third-person narrator who presided over the plot and depicted a variety of perspectives and positions, while being able to weave in and out of the private thoughts and public conversations of her characters” (2). Austen’s narrative technique allows for character development, enabling readers to understand the psychology of the characters. Lenckos notes, “it could be argued that her novels mark the end of the era of epistolary fiction and ring in the age of the new novel, distinguished by a more controlled, centered, and authorial perspective, coupled with the recreation on the page of a natural-seeming, realistic depiction of human communication” (2).

Austen’s abandonment of the epistolary form allows for her talent of narration to flourish. However, while she does abandon the epistolary form, she does not abandon the epistle entirely. Not only does Austen include several letters in all of her novels, but
letters are also referred to and talked about frequently. In his inquiry “The Supposed Letter Form of Sense and Sensibility,” D.W. Harding cites the number of times letters are mentioned in each of Austen’s letters, as well as how many verbatim lines from letters are included. In Northanger Abbey, there are 14 mentions of letters, and there are 121 verbatim lines. In Sense and Sensibility letters are mentioned 22 times, and there are 200 verbatim lines. In Pride and Prejudice, letters are mentioned 52 times, and there are 954 verbatim lines. Mansfield Park has mention of letters 49 times, and 482 verbatim lines. Emma has 53 letter mentions, and 325 verbatim lines. Finally, Persuasion has 21 letter mentions, and 154 verbatim lines. It is no coincidence that all of Austen’s novels are full of letters; she clearly makes the conscious decision to include letters in her novels.
Chapter 3

“THE TRUE ART OF LETTER WRITING”: THE VALUE OF THE EPISTLE

Letters were a vital vehicle for communication and self-expression in the eighteenth century, and a lot of care and thought went into the composition of a letter. In *Women, Letters, and the Novel*, Ruth Perry notes that “the letter in the 18th century had a special place in the intellectual and personal lives of literate people. Communication by written word was the only contact between people living at a distance from one another and letters were greatly prized in those times of bad roads and slow vehicles” (63). While letters were a part of daily life, they were still valued as mementos from abroad. Whether the message conveyed small town gossip, or news of a family member’s health, the letter represented regular communication in a time in which communication was not as easily accessible as it is today. In fact, in *Pride and Prejudice* the Bennets placed much faith in letters to communicate the latest news of Lydia’s whereabouts: “The arrival of letters was the first grand object of every morning’s impatience. Through letters, whatever of good or bad was to be told, would be communicated, and every succeeding day was expected to bring some news of importance” (296). Moreover, although some letters were meant to be personal (i.e. to be read by the recipient only) most letters in the 18th century were considered to be public documents that were likely read by all members of a family. Just as some families today gather around the television for entertainment, the family of the eighteenth century would gather around while a member of the family would read a letter aloud. According to U.C. Knoepflmacher in “The Importance of Being Frank: Character and Letter-Writing in *Emma,*” letters in *Emma*
provide a major sort of recreation to a provincial society where ‘a stray letter-boy on an obstinate mule’ is among ‘the liveliest objects’ one can presume to expect… To those ‘second rate and third rate’ minds of Highbury so contemptuously scorned by Emma for their unimaginativeness, the letter Mrs. Weston receives almost at the opening of the novel becomes an immediate source of excitement fit to be prolonged for a few days. (641)

The receipt of Frank Churchill’s letter provides lasting excitement for the people of Highbury as well as fodder for gossip.

Since the letter was so clearly prized during the eighteenth century, letter writing was considered an art, and as such, there was an abundance of letter-writing manuals designed to teach people how to write a proper letter. In fact, Samuel Richardson was famous for writing letter-writing manuals, and there is even speculation that *Pamela* began as a letter-writing manual that he transformed into an epistolary novel. To Richardson, the letter was more than merely a mode of communication. Brown points out that in a letter to Sophia West, Richardson suggests that correspondence is friendship itself:

This correspondence is, indeed, the cement of friendship: it is friendship avowed under hand and seal: friendship upon bond, as I may say: more pure, yet more ardent, and less broken in upon, than personal conversation can be even amongst the most pure, because of the deliberation it allows, from the very preparation to, and action of writing.
While I read it, I have you before me in person: I converse with you… I see you, I sit with you, I talk with you, I read to you, I stop to hear your sentiments, in the summer-house: your smiling obligingness, your polite and easy expression, even your undue diffidence are all in my eye and my ear as I read.

(qtd. by Brown 159)

To Richardson, correspondence has more value than conversation. Correspondence allows and encourages writers to carefully plan out their sentiment, and delve deep into themselves and pull out meaning that would perhaps never surface in conversation. Moreover, Richardson considers the epistle to be a living document. When reading a letter, he can imagine the letter-writer’s presence, and feel as though he were in conversation with him/her. The philosophy behind Richardson’s passion for correspondence explains just how he was able to write three novels, two of which reach over one thousand pages, in the epistolary form. Austen too, understands that letters are more than communication between two people. Brown notes that “the true art of letter writing is not simply a communicative technique. It is also a complex experience of feeling and insights, through which individual perception and human relationships are defined” (167). As I will argue below, Austen appreciates the value of the written word, and translates this appreciation to her novels by including letters.

In addition to promoting and maintaining relationships, letters in the eighteenth century gave women a much-needed voice, as well as a creative outlet. Austen’s own Henry Tilney insists that women are the true letter writers: “Every body allows that the talent of writing agreeable letters is particularly female” (NA 27). In
James How asserts that writing letters gave women an “empowering forum within which [they could] participate in the world of politics and take risks” (4). While women were expected to adhere to strict codes regarding face-to-face communication, the rules were not quite as defined when it came to communicating in letters. How argues that women were able to push the boundaries further in written communication than they were able to in verbal communication. As such, letters became a vehicle for feminine communication. Yet, Austen rarely includes any of her heroines’ letters in her novels. The vast majority of the letters Austen includes in full are written by men. We might attribute the lack of letters written by women to Austen’s narrative point of view, which allows readers free access to the thoughts and feelings of her heroines. There is usually no question as to what Austen’s heroines are thinking and feeling, yet the reader often does not have such open access to the thoughts of the male characters. Thus, in Austen’s novels, letters give the male characters a voice. In “Writing by the Book: Jane Austen’s Heroines and the Art and Form of the Letter,” Cheryl L Nixon and Louise Penner point out that “letters provide confessional spaces for her novels’ male characters: Austen gives Mr. Darcy, Frank Churchill, and Frederick Wentworth, for example, ample space to explain their feelings and behavior” (2).

“A very proper and handsome letter”

In addition to offering meaningful communication, Richardson also believes that the epistle carries moral value, and as such, he insists that the epistle conveys values (Brown 36). Although he has a certain charm and way with words, Robert Lovelace of
Richardson’s *Clarissa* is an obvious villain, as his letters reveal his corrupted sense of morality. Conversely, Clarissa is a clear heroine, as her letters convey a clear sense of moral values. One can certainly explore letter-writing in Austen’s novels in terms of morality and virtue. If we look at letters from Frank Churchill, Fitzwilliam Darcy, John Willoughby, and Captain Frederick Wentworth, we can see that the letter is indeed a reflection of the man.

Of all of the letter-writers in Austen’s novels, Frank Churchill is perhaps the most praised for his letter-writing skills. Everyone in Highbury (with perhaps the exception of Mr. Knightley) reveres Frank’s ability to write letters. In fact, the reader knows of Frank’s epistolary reputation early on in *Emma*. While Frank never paid Mr. and Mrs. Weston a visit after they were married, he did write them a “handsome letter” of congratulations that was quite the talk of the town. Indeed, Miss Bates mentions that “Mr. Woodhouse saw the letter, and he says he never saw such a handsome letter in his life” (18). Readers know from his long letter of apology at the end of *Emma* that Frank has a way with words, particularly written words, that enables his friends and family to forgive his egregious actions. While Frank can certainly write a “proper” letter, his actions are often far from proper. In “The Documents of Falsimilitude: Frank’s Epistles and Misinterpretation in *Emma*,” Mack Smith argues that Frank’s letters rely “upon conventions instead of sincerity” (68). Frank is able to elegantly use language and rhetoric to manipulate his readers into trusting that his actions are well meaning and innocent. Smith goes onto say that in his letter of apology
Frank tries to evade responsibility for his misconduct by a verbose, polished, circumlocutory apology. Verbosity is needed here because his conduct, if described simply and directly, would be judged by those he has offended as inexcusable; it must be viewed through the distortion of circumlocutions to be judged anything else. (67)

While Frank is indeed a talented letter-writer, his talent lies with his ability to manipulate via the written word. Frank’s letters may be beautifully written, but they do not convey virtue, as Richardson would insist. But it is only Mr. Knightley who can see through Frank’s eloquent letters. In response to Frank’s letter of excuse for not visiting the Westons, Knightley says, “He can sit down and write a fine flourishing letter, full of professions and falsehoods, and persuade himself that he has hit upon the very best method in the world of preserving peace at home and preventing his father’s having any right to complain. His letters disgust me” (148). Knightley sees Frank’s letters for what they are: desperate attempts to trick his readers into accepting his lies by using elegant language.

Mr. Darcy is also a strong letter-writer. However, his letter-writing skills are not nearly as highly praised as Frank’s are. In fact, the only time the reader hears of Mr. Darcy’s writing skills is at Netherfield Hall, when Darcy takes a moment to write to his sister. Miss Bingley, who is an adoring admirer of Mr. Darcy’s letters, simply cannot comprehend how Mr. Darcy can write such long charming letters, and with such handsome handwriting and evenness of lines (Pride and Prejudice 47). However, while Miss Bingley may think the utmost of Mr. Darcy’s writing, Mr. Bingley does not think
much of it all. In fact, Mr. Bingley insists that Mr. Darcy “does not write with ease. He studies too much for words of four syllables” (48). Mr. Bingley is apparently not impressed with Darcy’s stilted, and perhaps pompous, style. Mr. Darcy’s writing style is indeed a reflection of Darcy himself. He is thoughtful, honest, and yet haughty and sober. This style of writing, of course, is much different from Mr. Bingley’s, whose “ideas flow so rapidly that [he has] not time to express them” (48). As Darcy points out, Mr. Bingley’s supposed self-deprecating comment is actually a backhanded compliment. Bingley says that his thoughts fly so freely that he could not possibly stop to methodically write them down. Instead, he pours his soul onto the page, paying no attention to style or order. Although Austen does not include any of Bingley’s letters, if his description of his letters is accurate, his writing style is also a reflection of Bingley himself. Bingley is quite open about his feelings, and markedly less contemplative than Darcy.

While Mr. Darcy’s letters may not be the talk of the town as Frank’s are, the reader knows that Mr. Darcy is indeed an excellent letter-writer, as the reader is privy to his letter to Elizabeth. The letter itself is a literary masterpiece. It not only showcases his letter-writing and rhetorical skills, but also reveals Darcy’s humanity and compassion. However, unlike Frank, who uses his letters to manipulate and to offer superficial apologies, Darcy uses his letter to clarify. Mr. Darcy’s language is clear, concise, and more than anything, honest. He writes his letter knowing that much of its contents will pain Elizabeth to read, and he thus notes that it “pains [him] to offend [her]” (198); yet, he understands that the information must be communicated. His letter is an attempt to
reveal truth, while Frank’s is an attempt to contort it. Both Mr. Darcy and Frank are master rhetoricians; yet Mr. Darcy’s uses rhetoric to communicate virtue, while Frank uses it to communicate vice.

Captain Frederick Wentworth is another interesting character we can examine in terms of letter-writing skills in relation to morality. We can be certain that if morality were measured in direct relation to letter-writing skills, Wentworth would be nearing Sainthood. Yet, like Darcy, Wentworth does not have a reputation of being an elegant letter-writer. However, the letter in which Wentworth confesses his love to Anne is another literary gem for its moving and powerful language. The contents of the letter are probably Austen’s most emotionally charged prose, and they communicate more romance and passion than any other passage in Austen’s novels. Unlike Frank’s letters, the letter is quite short. Favret points out that “unlike Frank Churchill, who can ‘write a letter, indeed,’ Captain Wentworth is no master of the word game: he can ‘hardly write;’ he is ‘overpowered’” (166). Because his letter is written in such passionate haste, there is no artifice taking up any space. The contents of the letter are Wentworth’s feelings for Anne, and an inquiry into Anne’s feelings, and nothing more. His sentiment is simple, while Frank’s is elaborate. Frank’s letter is significantly longer, because he has to distract his readers with elegant language so they become blind to his immoral behavior.

John Willoughby is a letter-writer of a different sort. Initially, the reader knows Willoughby not by the content of his letters, but by the absence of his letters. Despite receiving Marianne’s desperate pleas for him to communicate with her, Willoughby does not write to her at all. When he finally does respond to Marianne’s pleas, the contents of
his letter are absolutely devastating. This letter, in which Willoughby denies any attachment to Marianne, is perhaps the most cold-hearted letter in all of Austen’s novels. However, if we are to believe Willoughby when he tells Elinor that Miss Grey was the one who wrote the letter, then we perhaps cannot judge him for the harsh words. However, that he signed his name to this cruel letter is proof alone that Willoughby is no man of virtue. He did not have the decency to tell Marianne the truth in his own words, which is perhaps much worse than if he had actually written the letter. So while we cannot judge Willoughby for the contents of the letter, we can certainly blame him for signing his name to it and for completely disrespecting Marianne by denying her the truth. The letter is indeed symbolic of Willoughby himself. He is a coward, as proven by the fact that he avoided Marianne as long as he could, and the letter is a cowardly attempt to appease both Marianne and Miss Grey.

Letters in Austen’s time were clearly more than a device for communication. People understood letters to be a reflection of the letter-writer. When a person writes a letter, his/her character, morals, and values are likely revealed in the language he/she uses. As such, letters were considered to be alive with the spirit of the letter-writer. Austen capitalizes off of the revealing nature of letters in her novels by including letters to reveal character, morals, and values to both the letter-reader and to the novel reader.
Chapter 4

“SUCH A DESCRIPTION OF YOUR QUEER LITTLE HEART!”: LETTERS THAT REVEAL CHARACTER

In his letter to Sophia West, Richardson expresses excitement over being able to read a letter and feel as though the letter-writer was right there in the room with him. To him, the letter has the power to bring his loved ones to him, no matter where in the world they may be. Indeed, the letter is a reflection of the letter-writer. Richardson feels the closeness of his loved ones when reading their letters because their personalities, idiosyncrasies, and spirit are apparent in the letter. Singer wonderfully describes this ability of letters to reveal the person as he describes Alexander Pope’s letters. He points out that Pope’s letters allow the letter-reader to feel a certain familiarity with Pope:

This familiarity enables us to see the personality of the author with an absolute clearness of portraiture. [The letters] are graceful and elaborate; they are conscious even to the point of being sometimes rhetorically so; they are witty and sprightly, full of a cleverness given to the creation of maxims and aphorisms; they contain a frequent asperity of speech and an occasional arrogance. All these qualities serve to reveal to us the man behind the letters. As a familiar document of a human being the epistles of Alexander Pope are invaluably alive. Moreover, Pope’s rearranging and prescribing of the letters proves that he consciously regarded them as literature, not simply as actual correspondence. (35)

Pope’s letters did not just communicate information. Rather, they communicated Pope himself – his character, his nuances, his soul. And it is the letter’s ability to reveal character in this way that makes it alive. As Richardson said, since the letters are imbued
with the life of the letter-writer, reading a letter is like being with the letter-writer.

Furthermore, Singer suggests that Pope viewed the writing of letters in the same way he viewed writing literature, and by doing so, he elevates the letter beyond simple correspondence. A letter, to Pope, is more than a note given to someone who is far away, but rather, a letter is a representation of the letter-writer.

In a letter to her niece Fanny Knight, Austen echoes Richardson’s almost romantic sentiment regarding letters:

Such Letters, such entertaining Letters as you have lately sent! – Such a description of your queer little heart! – Such a lovely display of what Imagination does… 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 you Feelings? – You are so odd! - & all of the time, so perfectly natural- so peculiar in yourself, & yet so like everybody else!” (Letters 478)

Clearly Austen is excited about her niece’s letters conveying her character and nuances so wonderfully. Fanny is better able to express all of the wonderful qualities in letters. She may not have the same freedom to express all of these qualities in conversation. Richardson skillfully harnesses the letter’s ability to reveal character in his epistolary novels. Brown points out that “Richardson [allows] his letter writers to use their correspondence not only for personal communication, but also for the establishing of specific identities” (141). There is no narrator in Richardson’s novels that describes the
characters. In order to create an epistolary novel with well-developed characters, the author must have the characters reveal themselves in their letters.

**“He must be an oddity”**

Austen understands the epistle’s unique ability to reveal character, and she takes full advantage of this by including numerous epistles in her novels. Mr. Collins is Austen’s triumph when it comes to revealing character in letters. Austen carefully withholds any information about Mr. Collins’s character up until the Bennets receive his first letter. The only information that both the Bennets and the reader have about Mr. Collins is that he is first in line to receive Mr. Bennet’s entail. While Austen’s witty and sharp-tongued narrative voice could have easily revealed Mr. Collins, Austen found it much more effective to let him unravel himself in his own words.

Mr. Collins’s primary purpose in writing to Mr. Bennet is to let him know that he would like to extend the proverbial “olive branch,” and become an involved member of the family. While the purpose of the letter may seem simple enough, the letter reveals more about Mr. Collins than perhaps the best narrator could. Certainly the letter could be seen as a genuine attempt of healing “the breach” that Mr. Collins’s father apparently created, and reconnecting with the Bennet family. But the letter also reeks of pomposity and arrogance. Brown argues that “in spite of painstaking efforts to create a desirable image of himself, [Mr. Collins] unconsciously betrays his real personality in the very process of self-flattery and beguiling ‘sophistication’” (139). As soon as Mr. Collins lets Mr. Bennet know the intent of his letter, he quickly begins flaunting his relationship with “the Right Honourable Lady Catherine de Bourgh… whose bounty and beneficence has
preferred [him] to the valuable rectory of [his] parish” (62-63). This first mention of Lady Catherine de Bourgh provides the reader a mere glimpse of what is to come from Mr. Collins and his infatuation with her and the ideas she embodies.

Mr. Collins’s letter not only reveals his character, but it also reveals the character of all of those who read the letter. Although the letter is addressed to Mr. Bennet, Mr. Bennet reads it aloud, to the entire Bennet family. While Mr. Bennet senses Mr. Collins’s “servility and self-importance” (64), he admits that “there is some sense in what he says about the girls… and if he is disposed to make them any amends, [he] shall not be the person to discourage him” (63). When Elizabeth asks if Mr. Collins could be “a sensible man” (64), Mr. Bennet sarcastically responds, “No, my dear; I think not. I have great hopes of finding him quite the reverse” (64). This is quintessential Mr. Bennet. He obviously understands that Mr. Collins may very well determine the future of the Bennet family, yet he makes light of the situation. He jokes that he hopes to find that Mr. Collins is a foolish man, yet he knows that Mr. Collins is next in the entail, and that a marriage to one of his daughters is more or less necessary. While Mr. Bennet’s easy-going attitude makes him a likeable character, it also makes him an irresponsible father. The attitude he has about Mr. Collins is the same attitude he has about allowing Lydia to go to Brighton with the Forsters, despite Elizabeth’s warning of the damage Lydia could do to the family with her “unguarded and imprudent manner” (231). Mr. Bennet’s laissez-faire attitude is indeed to blame for Lydia’s disastrous marriage. Austen foreshadows Mr. Bennet’s offenses in his response to Mr. Collins’s letter.
Jane’s reaction to the letter is also symbolic of her character. After Mr. Bennet reads the letter aloud, she responds, “though it is difficult… to guess in what way he can mean to make us the atonement he think our due, the wish is certainly to his credit” (63-64). Always one to see the best in everyone, Jane is quick to give credit to Mr. Collins. While she does not know what Mr. Collins’s intentions are, she automatically assumes that they are honorable. Jane exhibits this same optimism after Elizabeth tells her Wickham’s version of his history with Mr. Darcy. Jane responds by insisting that “it is, in short, impossible for us to conjecture the causes or circumstances which may have alienated [Mr. Darcy and Mr. Wickham], without actual blame on either side” (85). Jane withholds blame of both Mr. Darcy and Wickham, as “her mild and steady candour always pleaded for allowances, and urged the possibility of mistakes” (138).

Even Mary contributes to the discussion about Mr. Collins by commenting on the letter’s style: “In point of composition,” she says, “his letter does not seem defective. The idea of the olive branch perhaps is not wholly new, yet I think it is well expressed” (64). Mary, of course, is much more concerned with style, and whether or not Mr. Collins’s letter is informed by classical theory, than the actually contents of the letter. Mary merely adds pomp to the conversation, proving that her opinions are as empty as her cousin’s. Catherine and Lydia, on the other hand, add nothing to the conversation whatsoever. The narrator simply notes that “to Catherine and Lydia, the letter nor its writer were in any degree to interesting” (64). Because it was not likely that Mr. Collins “should come in a scarlet coat” they expressed no interest in the letter. This behavior symbolizes Catherine
and Lydia’s behavior for the majority of the novel. The girls care only for superficial social engagements and frivolous connections.

Mrs. Bennet also reveals herself as she responds to Mr. Collins’s letter. Indeed, the letter “had done away much of her ill-will, and she was preparing to see him with a degree of composure, which astonished her husband and daughters” (64). This is quite a passive response from Mrs. Bennet, who mere minutes before insists that Mr. Bennet “not talk of that odious man” (61), and comments that “it was very impertinent of him to write to you at all, and very hypocritical. I hate such false friends” (62). Mr. Collins’s letter has soothed Mrs. Bennet’s “poor nerves” by suggesting that he will likely marry one of her daughters. Mrs. Bennet shows no concern for Mr. Collins’s character; she is only concerned with whether or not her daughters will be married, and since Mr. Collins’s sounds interested in marrying one of her daughters, she is more than satisfied with him.

Elizabeth, however, is suspicious of Mr. Collins’s character. She senses Mr. Collins’s pomposity, and is “struck with his extraordinary deference for Lady Catherine” (64). Moreover, she ponders, “what can he mean by apologizing for being next in the entail. – We cannot suppose he would help it, if he could” (64). Here Elizabeth asserts herself as the only Bennet with the ability to critically analyze the written word. While the other Bennets are easily seduced by Mr. Collins’s politeness, Elizabeth is able to see past the veneer to Mr. Collins’s true character. She is not fooled into believing that Mr. Collins is truly sorry that he is next in the entail. She knows that he is probably quite delighted to be next in line to the entail, and thus his apologizing only reveals his
phoniness. The reader can deduce from this passage that Elizabeth is the only Bennet with any real sense. Mr. Collins’s letter and the Bennet family’s reaction to it serve as a microcosm of the entire novel. Austen is able to reveal the character of seven characters in roughly two pages. Such a feat would have been impossible had the narrator revealed Mr. Collins’s character. By having Mr. Bennet read Mr. Collins’s letter aloud, Austen provides an opportunity for each family member to respond in his/her own way, and therefore reveal his/her character to the reader.

Mr. Collins’s second letter to Mr. Bennet arrives in volume three of *Pride and Prejudice*, and is even more revealing of his character than his first letter. Only this time, Mr. Collins not only reveals his stupidity and pomposity, he also reveals his ill-nature. The ostensible purpose of this letter is to console Mr. Bennet after Lydia has run off with Mr. Wickham. However, the letter does not offer any genuine condolence or familial support. In fact, the letter more than likely makes Mr. Bennet feel worse than he did. Mr. Collins goes on and on about how terrible the Bennet’s situation is now, and how it can never be mended. He even goes so far as to say that “the death of [Lydia] would have been a blessing in comparison of this” (297). What kind words from a family member offering condolences! Furthermore, he advises Mr. Bennet to “throw off [his] unworthy child from [his] affection for ever, and leave her to reap the fruits of her own heinous offence” (297). Such sage advice is coming from a man who does not want his own name to be tainted by Lydia’s indiscretions. Moreover, given that Mr. Collins is clergyman, his sense of Christian forgiveness is severely lacking in this letter. It is clear that Mr. Collins’s purpose of writing to Mr. Bennet is not to console him and his family, but rather
to ensure that Mr. Bennet does everything in his power to preserve the family’s reputation. Mr. Collins has now completely unraveled himself in this letter; he is shallow, self-centered, and even cruel.

“Yes, quite a proposal of marriage; and a very good letter”

Although Austen does not give us access to Mr. Martin’s letter of proposal to Harriet Smith in *Emma*, the reader is still able to discern Mr. Martin’s character through Harriet and Emma’s analysis of the letter. However, what is more interesting about this letter is how Emma’s reaction to it reveals Emma’s own character. In fact, according to James Edward Austen-Leigh in *A Memoir of Jane Austen*, Jane Austen described Emma as “a heroine whom no one but myself will much like” (148). Emma’s reaction to Mr. Martin’s letter is exactly what makes it difficult for anyone to disagree with Miss Austen’s assertion. Thinking that Mr. Martin is a simple farmer, Emma is quite surprised at how well the letter is composed: “the language, though plain, was strong and unaffected, and the sentiments it conveyed very much to the credit of the writer. It was short, but expressed good sense, warm attachment, liberality, propriety, even delicacy of feeling” (51). Such a letter was certainly something to be admired. However, Emma attributes the eloquence of the letter to one of Mr. Martin’s sisters. She insists that she “can hardly imagine the young man whom [she] saw talking with [Harriet] the other day could express himself so well, if left quite to his own powers” (51). While we cannot be sure whether Emma actually believes that Mr. Martin’s letter has a ghostwriter, or if she is simply trying to deflate Harriet’s image of him, it seems likely that the latter theory reflects her motives more accurately.
Emma’s actions are even more deplorable when Harriet asks her how she shall respond to the letter. Initially Emma insists that she could not possibly tell Harriet how to respond, that “the letter had much better be all [Harriet’s] own” (51). Upon Harriet asking what the contents of the letter should be, Emma reveals that she assumes the letter will kindly turn down Mr. Martin’s proposal, and in doing so, Emma ever so carefully is able to tell the naïve Harriet what to do, without actually telling her what to do. With a little effortless manipulation, Emma is able to convince Harriet that she does not want to marry a man “merely because she is asked, or because he is attached to her, and can write a tolerable letter” (54). Despite her initial affection for the letter, Harriet now thinks that the letter “is but a short letter,” (54) and that “nobody cares for a letter” (55).

Now that Emma has convinced Harriet to reject Mr. Martin’s proposal, all Harriet has to do is write the letter. And while Emma insists that she could not assist Harriet compose the letter, her assistance “was in fact given in the formation of every sentence,” and the letter was quickly “sealed, and sent” (55). Given her concern that Mr. Martin’s letter might have had a ghostwriter, one would think Emma would not attempt to help author a letter of such gravity. However, without any genuine hesitation, Emma effectively seals Harriet’s fate as she writes and seals the letter. Emma shows no remorse in manipulating Harriet. In fact, she believes that she is doing Harriet a favor by attempting to match her with a man with more status than a simple farmer like Mr. Martin. Emma has higher hopes for Harriet’s martial prospects; she believes Mr. Elton is a superior suitor for Harriet. However, Emma is doing Harriet a monumental disservice. Emma’s response to Mr. Martin’s letter, and her actions that follow, reveal both her
“power of having rather too much her own way,” and her “disposition to think a little too well of herself” (5). Indeed, this glimpse of Emma’s character as revealed by her response to Mr. Martin’s letter is indicative of her character throughout the majority of the novel.

By including letters in her novels, Austen is able to effectively reveal the character of both her letter-writers and letter-readers. The letter-writer’s character is revealed in his/her letters through the language he/she chooses. Conversely, a letter-reader’s character is revealed when they respond to and internalize the content of a letter. Austen recognizes that the same cannot be achieved through narration or dialogue. Characters cannot respond to narration, nor can they reflect on another character’s meaning during conversation. Once a letter is read, characters are given as much time as they need to reflect and respond, all the while revealing their character. Moreover, because letters so accurately represent the letter-writer, and because letters carry so much meaning, letter-readers have a lot to reflect upon, which allows the reader a glimpse into the letter-readers’ mind.
Chapter 5

“SOMETHING HAS OCCURRED OF A MOST UNEXPECTED AND SERIOUS NATURE”: LETTERS THAT ADVANCE PLOT

While there are several letters within each of Austen’s novels, Austen is careful about how she uses them. Austen often strategically chooses to include letters in her novels that advance plot. Important news is often communicated in letters, and letters often mark the beginning of a new series of events. Austen often carefully withholds information, choosing to have her characters reveal important information in letters, and in doing so, she adds to suspense to her novels. As such, readers begin to anticipate letters with excitement, knowing that some sort of important news will likely be imparted. While most letters advance plot in one way or another, there are a few letters that do so more than others.

“I thought it my duty as a friend…”

Mr. Martin’s letter of proposal to Harriet propels the plot of the first book of *Emma*. While the letter may seem to be a modest letter of proposal, Austen’s inclusion of the letter accomplishes a lot more than a mere proposal of marriage. In fact, the receipt of the letter marks the beginning of Emma’s contemptible behavior of meddling in other people’s lives. Emma ignores the sweet sentiment of Mr. Martin’s letter, and instead, uses the letter as an opportunity to advance her own agenda. Emma strips the letter of its meaning and purpose, and makes her own meaning and purpose out of it. Instead of honoring the letter for its romantic and kind sentiments, Emma twists the letter into an insult. She believes that Mr. Martin is socially beneath Harriet, and thus, the letter is an affront to Harriet’s social status. She capitalizes on Harriet’s innocence and naïveté, and
manipulates her into believing that she is indeed socially above Mr. Martin, and that she
deserves a better partner in marriage. After Emma successfully manipulates Harriet into
deciding Mr. Martin’s proposal, she quickly moves on to posturing Harriet into fancying
Mr. Elton. When Harriet voices concern about hurting poor Mr. Martin and his family,
Emma quickly responds: “Let us think of those among our absent friends who are more
cheerfully employed… At this moment, perhaps, Mr. Elton is shewing your picture to his
mother and sisters, telling how much more beautiful is the original” (56). Emma quickly
attempts to move Harriet’s attention away from Mr. Martin, and toward Mr. Elton, who
Emma believes is a much more suitable partner. Mr. Martin’s letter marks the beginning
of Emma’s attempts to match Harriet with Mr. Elton, much to their detriment. While
Harriet eventually does marry Mr. Martin, Emma’s meddling severely compromises her
friendship with Harriet, and it all started with Harriet’s receiving Mr. Martin’s simple
letter of proposal.

“She had some feelings which she was ashamed to investigate”

A letter that produces more joyous consequences is Mary Musgrove’s letter to
Anne Eliot in *Persuasion*. In this letter, Mary gives news of Louisa Musgrove’s
impending marriage to Captain Benwick, and subsequently advances the plot of the
second half of the novel. Mary originally sets out to write a letter to update Anne on the
goings-on at the Musgrove household. She rambles on for a few pages, updating Anne on
the latest gossip. If Mary were to send only the first part of her letter, Austen never would
have included the entire letter in the novel. It is mere chatter, and no news of importance
is related. If anything, the first part of the letter reveals Mary’s character, which is
superficial and self-centered. However, Mary does not seal and send the letter after she signs it, and is therefore able to include the news of Louisa’s engagement to Captain Benwick, thus making the letter worthy of being included in full. To Anne, this letter reveals much more than the simple fact that Louisa and Captain Benwick are to be wed. This letter essentially reveals that Louisa and Captain Wentworth are in fact not an item, nor will they ever be. Moreover, it confirms that Captain Benwick does not have feelings for Anne, as Charles had originally supposed.

While Mary knows that the news she relates will surprise Anne, she has no idea how much so, for Anne had “never in her life been more astonished” (165). In fact, Anne was so astonished that she found it difficult to “remain in the room, preserve an air of calmness, and answer the common questions of the moment” (165). However, Anne’s bewilderment does not stem solely from the knowledge that such an odd couple is soon to be wed. Rather, Anne is truly astonished about learning that Wentworth is still an eligible bachelor: “Anne’s heart beat in spite of herself, and brought the colour into her cheeks when she thought of Captain Wentworth unshackled and free” (167). Here Anne is just beginning to become aware of her feelings. In fact, she begins to have “some feelings which she was ashamed to investigate. They were too much like joy, senseless joy!” (167-168). Anne’s feelings of “senseless joy” allow her to recognize that she indeed has feelings for Wentworth. With this recognition, Anne’s new challenge is to let her feelings be known to Wentworth while still following proper decorum. Indeed, this recognition of her feelings represents a turning point in Anne’s relationship to Wentworth. In fact, the
rest of *Persuasion* focuses on Anne’s quest to find a way to finally reconcile with Wentworth.

“What a good joke it will be!”

Lydia Bennet’s letter in which she reveals to the Forsters that she has run off with Mr. Wickham advances the plot of the final third of *Pride and Prejudice*. This letter imparts some of the most devastating news in all of Austen’s novels. Not only do Lydia's actions tarnish her own reputation, but they also jeopardize the reputation of all four of her sisters, putting them at risk of never marrying, and therefore having no fortune or future. The careless words she later scribbles to her friend Harriet only magnify how utterly careless Lydia truly is. Indeed, this careless letter represents Lydia herself. She does not have the decency to tell her family what she will be doing; instead, she scribbles her intentions in a short letter. Although Lydia obviously spends little time writing the letter, the letter produces serious consequences. Once Lydia's letter is read, the direction of the novel takes a significant turn. Much of the final third of the novel centers on finding Lydia, and rectifying the situation she gets herself into.

While the actions Lydia admits to in her letter are contemptible, and ultimately end in her social demise, they are also what eventually bring Elizabeth and Darcy together. Once Colonel Forster receives Lydia’s letter, he notifies the rest of the family (in a letter, of course), and in an effort to prevent Lydia from doing any more damage to the family’s reputation, Mr. Bennet and Colonel Forster endeavor to find Lydia as quickly as possible. The receipt of Lydia’s letter also sends Elizabeth home prematurely from her stay with the Gardiners, so that she can console her family, particularly Jane. In
fact, Elizabeth learns of Lydia’s letter in two frantic letters from Jane. After reading the letters from Jane, and discovering what awful events have unfolded, Elizabeth is scarcely able to process what has happened when she is confronted by none other than Mr. Darcy. Darcy immediately senses Elizabeth’s anxiety, and tries to comfort her at once. While in tears, Elizabeth explains to Darcy what Lydia has done. Darcy responds with both “compassion” and “restraint,” expressing that he wishes that there was something he could say or do that “might offer consolation to such distress” (278). Upon Darcy leaving, Elizabeth realizes:

How improbable it was that they should ever see each other again on such terms of cordiality as had marked their several meetings in Derbyshire; and as she threw a retrospective glance over the whole of their acquaintance, so full of contradictions and varieties, sighed at the perverseness of those feelings which would now have proved its continuance, and would formerly have rejoiced in its termination. (279)

Darcy shows genuine concern for Elizabeth and her family, and he sincerely wishes there was something he could do to ease Elizabeth’s pain. While he bears the news with a calm disposition, it is also clear that he is outraged with what Wickham has done. Lydia’s letter has allowed Elizabeth to see Darcy in a different light. Elizabeth witnesses Darcy’s compassion and for the first time is sorry to see him leave. She accepts that his leaving is merely an “early example of what Lydia’s infamy must produce” (279). Now that Lydia has ruined the Bennet name, Elizabeth understands that a man like Darcy would never associate himself with her or her family ever again. It seems as though Lydia’s letter has
demolished all hope of reconciliation between Elizabeth and Darcy. Little does Elizabeth know that she has severely underestimated Mr. Darcy.

Lydia’s letter not only sends the Bennet family on a mad search for Lydia, but it also secretly sends Darcy out to find Lydia and Wickham, if for nothing else, Elizabeth’s sake, and also to atone for keeping his history with Wickham a secret, and for failing to warn anyone about Wickham’s true character. Darcy successfully finds the couple, and financially appeases Wickham enough to marry Lydia, thus ending the crisis Lydia and Wickham put the Bennets through. All of this is of course done without the Bennets’ knowledge. In fact, Elizabeth learns of Darcy’s charity in a letter from Mrs. Gardiner. Mrs. Gardiner writes in response to a quite forceful letter written by Elizabeth, in which she insists on knowing why Mr. Darcy was present at Lydia and Wickham’s wedding. In her letter, Mrs. Gardiner divulges Darcy’s arrangement in detail. She tells of Darcy’s involvement in Wickham and Lydia’s marriage – his appeasing Wickham with a generous monetary gift as well as the ostensible reason Darcy felt compelled to rectify Lydia’s situation, and Darcy’s insistence that his deeds go unknown. Mrs. Gardiner’s letter “threw Elizabeth into a flutter of spirits, in which it was difficult to determine whether pleasure or pain bore the greatest share” (326). Amidst this mix of emotions, Elizabeth’s “heart did whisper, that he had done it for her” (326). Although she quickly discounts this idea, Darcy later admits that he indeed “thought only” of Elizabeth when he helped Lydia. Had Lydia never gotten mixed up with Wickham, Darcy would have never been able to prove that he still loves Elizabeth. The Lydia-Wickham scandal clearly helped to bring Elizabeth and Darcy together, and much of the plot surrounding the
scandal is forwarded and revealed in letters. Consequently, readers begin to eagerly await letters, as they understand that some piece of plot will likely be revealed.

By revealing important news and advancing plot through letters, Austen not only adds suspense to her novels, but she also provides an opportunity for her characters to adequately respond to the news. Characters cannot respond if news is revealed through narration. It is typically the response to news that drives the plot forward, and by allowing us access to the characters’ thoughts after reading about news in a letter, Austen helps her readers to understand the motivations that drive her characters to act.
Chapter 6

“WILL YOU DO ME THE HONOUR OF READING THAT LETTER?”: LETTERS THAT FORGE COMMUNICATION

In many cases in Austen’s novels, spoken language fails, and letters allow characters to find their voice. Not only are letters sent when geography limits communication, but also when social and emotional barriers limit communication. The context in which Austen’s novels are set certainly does not encourage open and honest communication. Failure of communication is a widespread evil in Austen’s novels, and not even her most virtuous characters are exempt from its effects. However, failure of communication does not always depend on the time period in which Austen’s novels are set. Open communication proves to be quite difficult when characters’ pride is at stake. Moreover, some characters find certain sentiments to be difficult to express verbally, and instead, find their voice through the written word. Conversely, some characters use letters as a medium for communication when their purpose is to manipulate and deceive. Whatever the characters’ intentions may be, letters allow for communication to take place when it may not have otherwise been possible.

“My character required it to be written and read”

Throughout the first half of Pride and Prejudice, Elizabeth and Darcy are separated by language. Laura G. Mooneyham in Romance, Language and Education in Jane Austen’s Novels points out that “the first half of the novel displays the growing linguistic divisions between Elizabeth and Darcy as each perceives reality according to his or her own habit of speech. Elizabeth through wit and its attendant blindness, Darcy through the language of reserve and privilege” (46). Darcy cannot seem to say anything
without sounding pompous, and Elizabeth is always quick to judge whatever he says. Elizabeth’s prejudice keeps her from understanding any of Darcy’s meaning, and Darcy’s pride makes it difficult for her to want to understand his meaning. This is made clear in an exchange between the two while at Netherfield Hall. In a lively discussion about human folly, Darcy admits that his follies lie with his temper, which is “too little yielding,” and “would perhaps be called resentful” (58). He goes onto confess, “My good opinion once lost is lost for ever” (58). Elizabeth responds by confirming, “That is a failing indeed!” But she does not stop there; she then declares that Darcy’s “defect is a propensity to hate everybody” (58). Darcy quickly follows up by saying (with a smile) that Elizabeth’s defect “is willfully to misunderstand them” (58). While Darcy’s perception of Elizabeth is more accurate than Elizabeth’s perception of him, his pompous attitude does not exactly encourage open communication. While Elizabeth’s aim may not be to “willfully” misunderstand people, her steadfast, and even stubborn opinions often result in her doing so. While Darcy was trying to open up communication in this discussion, it ends only in insults and further misunderstanding and miscommunication.

This sort of miscommunication follows them throughout much of the novel. Darcy’s first marriage proposal is the ultimate failure of communication. While he does truly love Elizabeth, his proposal falls painfully short of communicating that sentiment. By beginning his proposal with the admission that “in vain” he has “struggled… But it will not do. [My] feelings will not be repressed” (189), Darcy is not exactly using language that will melt Elizabeth’s heart and compel her to accept his proposal. However, to Darcy, by beginning his proposal in such a way, he is not only beginning honestly, but
he is also beginning rhetorically. Darcy believes that he is in fact flattering Elizabeth by admitting that he loves her despite his better judgment. Elizabeth is rightly offended by his proposal, and for “bestow[ing] it so unwillingly” (190). Darcy then asks Elizabeth why “with so little *endeavour* at civility” he is “thus rejected” (190). Here, Darcy invites open communication, and he certainly gets it. Elizabeth finally has the occasion to tell Darcy just why she has “never desired [his] good opinion” (190). Darcy is both astonished and disheartened at Elizabeth’s remarks, and while he does respond to some of her charges, he does not defend himself entirely, and not at all effectively. The conversation is so heated at this point that he knows that Elizabeth would not have been receptive to anything he had to say, and even if she had, he would have been incapable of properly defending himself, as his emotions were running high. However, Darcy does not want to cut communication off entirely, so he resolves to defend himself in a letter, as he can better communicate himself through writing, especially when he is far away from Elizabeth’s sharp tongue.

Darcy writes his letter of defense as an attempt to bridge the miscommunication between himself and Elizabeth. He is prompted to defend himself of the charges Elizabeth throws at him immediately after he proposes marriage. However, Darcy’s letter is not simply a letter of defense; rather, it is a document that expresses honest and open communication. He begins his letter to Elizabeth by establishing the reason he has written the letter. He claims that “the effort which the formation, and the perusal of this letter must occasion, should have been spared, had not [his] character required it to be written” (196). Darcy writes this letter to clear the charges that Elizabeth has waged against his
character. Now that he has heard what Elizabeth has to say about him, he feels that it is necessary to open up communication, and respond to her charges. In the letter, Darcy addresses all of the indecencies Elizabeth accuses him of committing. He is finally in a position in which he feels compelled to tell Elizabeth about his sordid history with Mr. Wickham. Essentially, the letter allows Darcy to tell Elizabeth everything that he could not in person. Through the written word, Darcy is able to express himself openly and honestly. There is no way that Elizabeth could misunderstand his meaning in this letter.

While Elizabeth and Darcy do not engage in a verbal dialogue, the letter promotes a different type of dialogue. Unlike verbal communication, the written word is tangible. Elizabeth can read and re-read Darcy’s letter, keeping her from making snap judgments or talking over him. According to Lenckos, Darcy’s letter allows for a sort of “Socratic dialogue” (2). As she reads the letter, Elizabeth is able to question each of the claims Darcy makes, and through the process of reasoning, she can answer his claims, either by accepting them or not. While Darcy’s letter does not result in the immediate union of Elizabeth and Darcy, it certainly marks the first step toward the two having a better understanding of one another, and having more open and honest communication.

According to Mooneyham, Elizabeth’s angry rejection of Darcy’s proposal coupled with Darcy’s letter of defense constitutes a “central point of aired grievances and angry honesty” from which “Elizabeth and Darcy reconstitute a language, building their romance in the process (46-47).

Indeed, the letter opens the door for further communication. Without the letter Elizabeth would have never chosen to speak to Darcy again; communication would have
ended entirely. The letter represents the first step taken on the road to open communication. By the end of the novel, communication between Elizabeth and Darcy has blossomed. In fact, after Darcy renews his proposal, the couple is able to communicate openly and honestly, even about Darcy’s letter. In *Jane Austen and the Didactic Novel*, Jan Fergus points out:

> Once Elizabeth and Darcy are engaged, they are free to discuss, compare and reinterpret everything that has happened between them – particularly the origin and progress of their love. These last exchanges constitute the final stage of dialogue evident in the novel and create an entirely new effect. Ambiguity is dispelled, and release and intimacy effected. (118)

Elizabeth and Darcy now feel comfortable enough to discuss even the most painful and embarrassing of subjects. Darcy admits how Elizabeth’s words have “tortured” him, and Elizabeth insists that she has “long been most heartily ashamed” of what she has said (368). Likewise, while Darcy maintains that his letter to Elizabeth was “necessary,” he hopes that she has destroyed it, and Elizabeth agrees that “the letter shall certainly be burnt” (368). The couple is now at peace with the communication that they engaged in during and after the proposal, and feel as though they can move onto a different type of communication, that is, open dialogue. Fergus calls this achievement of dialogue a triumph of dialogue. The triumph lies in actually rendering through conversation a relationship which wholly convinces and satisfies the imagination, the mind and the heart, that a ‘happy ending’ (the most hackneyed of literary conventions, yet
the least common in serious art) has been not merely asserted or conjured up, but actually achieved. (118)

Language has the power of alienating Elizabeth and Darcy, but it also has the power of bringing them together.

“I can hardly write”

Captain Wentworth’s love letter to Anne Elliot is another example of how the written word takes place of verbal communication even when there are no physical limitations preventing face-to-face communication. In fact, Captain Wentworth scribbles his declaration of love just steps away from Anne, choosing to communicate his feelings for Anne in a letter, even though there are no physical barriers separating them. There are, however, emotional barriers that prevent them from communicating, and for Wentworth, only the written word is able to break down these barriers. Throughout *Persuasion* Wentworth and Anne cannot communicate. A combination of social etiquette and Anne and Wentworth’s complicated past render it nearly impossible for them to communicate in an open and honest way.

Wentworth’s wounds still have not healed from when Anne ended their engagement eight years before, and both he and Anne are uncomfortable in each other’s company. Their shared past that resulted in the tragic end of their relationship has made communication painful and difficult. Mooneyham succinctly points out that “honest communication of any variety is a rare commodity in *Persuasion*” (162). Anne especially has problems with communication. In fact, Mooneyham goes on to say that “Nothing is more difficult in Anne’s world than to express what one means simply and directly; the
very structure of her society works against honesty and sincerity” (165). In *Jane Austen and the Fiction of Her Time*, Mary Waldron points out that Anne has “no one else with whom to discuss her life-choices. During the eight years which elapse before she meets Wentworth again, her isolation becomes total, since she can no longer communicate even with Lady Russell” (137-138). Indeed, Anne has become completely isolated, as evidenced by her not telling anyone, not even Lady Russell, about her reaction to hearing of Louisa and Captain Benwick’s engagement. Although she keeps her feelings for Wentworth to herself, she knows that if she ever wants to reconcile with Wentworth, she must find a way to communicate her meaning.

While neither Wentworth nor Anne feel comfortable communicating their feelings for each other, Mooneyham insists that “happiness cannot be regained unless they seek it,” and “the only means of regaining happiness is through language” (146). If Wentworth and Anne want to reconcile, they must find a way to open up communication. Mooneyham argues that “Anne now knows that Wentworth loves her. But the barrier between them remains a difficulty of language, for Anne is aware that there is a gap between love and a declaration of love” (172). Anne knows that she must find a way to communicate her love to Wentworth, but she must find an appropriate way to do so. Mooneyham goes onto say, “in Anne’s society, a direct declaration of love is impossible. But Anne is not rendered mute by social restrictions; society merely dictates that messages be transmitted by the code of social converse” (173). Mooneyham points out that Anne is able to “tell Wentworth of her constancy and devotion while on a surface level discussing the relative fidelity of women and men with Captain Harville” (174).
Indeed, Anne is able to come up with a way in which she can let Wentworth know of her feelings without breaking social decorum. In a discussion with Captain Harville, in which they debate whether it is men or women who suffer more after the loss of a loved one, Anne makes her argument very clear that it is women who suffer longer, in hopes that Wentworth might overhear. Anne suspects that Wentworth indeed does overhear her when she notices that he drops his pen after she makes her argument. After she supposes she has Wentworth’s attention, she goes onto say that “we never can expect to prove anything upon such a point. It is a difference of opinion which does not admit proof. We each begin probably with a little bias towards our own sex, and upon that bias build every circumstance in favour of it which has occurred within our circle” (234). She later says that “all the privilege I claim for my own sex (it is not a very enviable one, you need not covet it) is that of loving longest, when existence or when hope is gone” (235). While Anne is still speaking in code, her meaning could not be any clearer. By arguing that men and women begin with a bias towards their own sex, and then draw from experience in their own circles, she is essentially saying that she knows from experience, perhaps even personal experience, that women love longer than men do. Her final comment on the subject, in which she says that women love longest even when all hope is gone, could easily be interpreted as an admission of her unyielding love for Wentworth.

Anne’s plan works, and is thus finally successful communicating with Wentworth, however veiled and indirect that communication might have been. This communication prompts Wentworth to reciprocate. However, rather than communicating with Anne in coded verbal language, he chooses to communicate his precise meaning to
her in writing. Upon hearing Anne talk about women loving longer than men, he switches from writing his original letter, to writing a beautiful admission of his love for Anne. He finds the need to respond to Anne’s code, and as John Picoulis in “Reading and Writing in ‘Persuasion’” notes, he quickly “commits his thoughts to paper with a most passionate urgency” (35). Picoulis goes on to say:

Aroused as he writes, he declares that his soul has been pierced; he is almost overpowered. As he hands her his letter, his eyes ‘glow’. A chance meeting in a public house has been converted into a deed which, while it is not an action, nevertheless feels like one. Perhaps Wentworth senses that the present occasion offers him as good a chance as any for the kind of declaration he has in mind and he seizes the chance. Writing is both his recourse and his necessity. (35)

Writing allows Wentworth to communicate with openness and honesty, something that he could not do verbally. It is as though he is overtaken by his pen, and he pours his soul onto the page without restraint. This letter is obviously not a carefully planned out piece of writing; it is written in much haste. Picoulis notes that his letter “truly represents a spontaneous overflow of feeling” (35). In fact, in “Jane Austen and the Romantic Lyric: Persuasion and Coleridge’s Conversation Poems,” Keith G. Thomas likens Wentworth’s letter to a Romantic poem:

The argument, tone, and occasion of the letter all evoke this fluid a range of possible poetic paradigms; but most importantly the letter assumes a Romantic lyrical shape: moving the subject from deadening exclusion to revivifying
inclusion, it is a colloquy with self and other that reaches a fuller knowledge of both. (917-918)

Writing, rather than talking, allows Wentworth to both understand and express his feelings. Wentworth “seizes” the moment in writing, as Picoulis says, and thus refuses to allow their inability to communicate to continue to alienate him and Anne (35).

Wentworth’s letter is actually able to open up verbal communication. Favret notes, “with the letter, the lovers complete each other’s meaning, heal each other’s confusion and extract themselves from their immediate context” (172). Mooneyham points out that throughout the novel “the barrier between Anne and Wentworth is linguistic. Words keep them apart; only words can bring them together” (146). Anne’s words prompt Wentworth to respond with written words, and as a result, the couple is able to finally open up verbal communication. When Wentworth and Anne encounter each other on the street, they engage in an intimate conversation, in which they freely “[exchange] again those feelings and those promises which had once before seemed to secure every thing, but which had been followed by so many, many years of division and estrangements” (240). They discuss everything from Wentworth’s jealousy of Mr. Elliot to his “preceding attempts to attach himself to Louisa Musgrove” (242). Now Anne and Wentworth have opened up honest communication, they are confident that there will “always be the hope of more [communication]” (246).

“A wonderful establishment”

Social etiquette can also make communication difficult, and many of Austen’s characters use written correspondence to navigate these social barriers. Lucy and Edward
in Sense and Sensibility and Frank and Jane in Emma, engage in secret correspondence in order to maintain their socially inappropriate relationships. In cases like these, letters are treasured as symbols of love and connection. Jane Fairfax, more than anyone else in Austen’s novels, values the letter and all that it symbolizes. She is perhaps the most enthusiastic about the exchange of letters. Favret points out that “Jane shows an extreme attachment to these emblems of connection” (160). This is clear when Jane is questioned as to why she continually insists on picking up letters from the post office:

The post-office is a wonderful establishment!... The regularity and dispatch of it!

If one thinks of all that it has to do, and all that it does so well, it is really astonishing!... So seldom that any negligence or blunder appears! So seldom that a letter, among the thousands that are constantly passing about the kingdom, is even carried wrong – and not one in a million, I suppose, actually lost! And when one considers the variety of hands, and of bad hands too, that are to be deciphered, it increases the wonder! (296)

Jane’s speech in which she sings the post office’s praises is clearly more of a defensive strategy to explain why she insists on picking up her letters from the post office herself, than a genuine admiration of the post office itself. However, Jane’s speech may actually be a genuine expression of her excitement of letters, particularly letters from Frank, veiled in language that praises the post office. While it is true that Jane does value the post office, she values it for a more particular reason than that it is organized and reliable. Rather, she values the postal system because of its ability to narrow the distance between her and Frank. The postal system allows for her and Frank to communicate when
communication is otherwise impossible, and thus to maintain their relationship over time. Moreover, the post office allows Frank and Jane to carry out their relationship in secret. Letters can be written and read in private, and Frank and Jane take full advantage of the secrecy letters afford. So while Jane’s speech praising the machinations of the post office may have been a desperate attempt to clear her suspicious behavior, there is some truth in her utterance. In fact, in “The British Postal Service, Privacy, and Jane Austen’s *Emma,*” David Wheeler points out:

> The [postal] service had no equal among the rapidly industrializing European nations and plays a crucial role in *Emma,* not only in advancing the romantic plot involving Frank and Jane but also in marking a cultural transition in the nature of courtship from a public, social ritual to a private matter, as the definition and importance of privacy broadened throughout the century. (34-35)

Indeed, without the postal service, Frank and Jane would have never been able to carry out their secret relationship. Jane’s enthusiasm is certainly not without warrant.

“If your sentiments are no longer what they were, you will return my notes”

Language is an integral part of Marianne and Willoughby’s somewhat secret relationship in *Sense and Sensibility.* The communication between Marianne and Willoughby initially sustains their relationship. The private nature of their relationship maintains and encourages personal and intimate communication. Since only Marianne and Willoughby know the extent of their relationship, they gain a sense of exclusiveness, adding intimacy to their relationship. While Marianne’s family questions the appropriateness of Marianne and Willoughby’s relationship, and they suspect that
Marianne and Willoughby are either secretly engaged or soon to be, no one quite knows the extent of their relationship. In fact, it is when Elinor notices that Marianne is writing a letter to Willoughby when they are in London that she concludes “that however mysteriously they might wish to conduct the affair, they must be engaged” (161). Indeed, it is when this intimate correspondence is cut off when their relationship begins to unravel. After writing Willoughby, Marianne anticipates a response, and is frustrated when she does not receive one. Her desperation shows through as she asks the footman, “Has no letter been left here for me since we went out?” (165). The footman confirms that no letter was left for Marianne, and she responds, “Are you quite sure of it?... Are you certain that no servant, no porter has left any letter or note?” (165). Marianne is in need of communication, as communication is what reinforces her relationship with Willoughby. When Willoughby does not reciprocate communication, Marianne is rightly concerned.

While the letters that Marianne sends to Willoughby are initially withheld from the reader, they are later revealed when Willoughby returns them per Marianne’s request. Marianne writes these letters to Willoughby in a desperate attempt to bridge the communication that Willoughby had cut off. As Nixon and Penner argue, these letters are Marianne’s only voice; her letters to Willoughby are “her only way to communicate” (16). In her letters, Marianne demands to know why he has been behaving so dreadfully. Yet rather than revealing a strong, independent woman, the letters expose Marianne’s powerlessness and immaturity. According to Favret, “Marianne’s unguarded letters heighten the effects of her indiscretion by concentrating, and transfixing, them in a single,
revealing context” (160). Brown argues that “Throughout [Sense and Sensibility], Austen manipulates the device of the letter... [and uses] it to emphasize Marianne’s vulnerability” (146). In her first letter, she expresses excitement and hope that Willoughby will visit if not that very night, then certainly the next day. The second letter expresses her frustration and “astonishment” that she has not received an answer to her original letter. Her final letter expresses the repulsion she felt after he snubbed her at the ball. Yet she is still willing to hear his justification for his behavior. She asks Willoughby to “explain the grounds on which you acted, and I shall be satisfied, in being able to satisfy you” (188). She concludes this letter by claiming “if I am to learn that you are not what we have thitherto believed you, that your regard for us all was insincere... let it be told as soon as possible” (188). The tone of desperation in these letters reveals Marianne’s insecurity. By the second and third letter, it is clear that she is not confident in Willoughby’s loyalty. However, despite Willoughby’s contemptible behavior, Marianne is still willing to forgive him if he can explain himself to her. By waiting to reveal Marianne’s letters to Willoughby until after she includes Willoughby’s cruel letter in which he denies all attachment to Marianne, Austen is able to paint Marianne as a vulnerable and ineffective child.

These letters illustrate Marianne’s desperate attempt to rebuild the communication that has been lost. She pleads with Willoughby to, if nothing else, communicate with her – to respond to her letters, even if what he has to communicate is painful. To Marianne, the loss of communication is far more painful than anything else. In fact, Marianne is so insistent on salvaging communication with Willoughby that she risks her own reputation
and propriety, as it is quite inappropriate for Marianne to be sending Willoughby such letters. Upon reading Marianne’s letters, Elinor was not blind “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” (188). Marianne’s letters are written proof of her improper behavior and immaturity.

Willoughby’s response to Marianne’s plea for communication is to not only end communication altogether, but also to rewrite the communication they had in the past. In his letter, which is perhaps the cruelest letter in all of Austen’s novels, Willoughby denies having ever had feelings for Marianne while in Devonshire, and he divulges that his “affections have been long engaged elsewhere,” and that the engagement will be fulfilled shortly (183). These are Willoughby’s last words for Marianne. Essentially, he communicates by saying that there will no longer be communication. Their relationship will end, and thus communication will end. He also denies that any communication between them meant what Marianne thought it did. He reconstructs their past communication, and thus meaning, and makes it carry an entirely different meaning. This attempt to rewrite his and Marianne’s relationship devastates Marianne, almost beyond repair. The cruelty of the letter is not lost on Elinor either:

With what indignation such a letter as this must be read by Miss Dashwood, may be imagined. Though aware, before she began it, that it must bring a confession of his inconstancy, and confirm their separation for ever, 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 villany. (183-184)

Essentially, it is not Willoughby’s actions that make him so deplorable, but it is the language he uses in his letter that makes him so. His last words to Marianne are harsh and full of lies.

It is not until volume three of Sense and Sensibility that Elinor discovers that Willoughby’s cruel letter has a ghostwriter. The language in his letter was not his own, which means that his letter essentially does not offer any communication at all, or at least no honest communication. The last words Willoughby has to offer to Marianne are not his, but Miss Grey’s. By being Miss Grey’s mouthpiece, Willoughby cheats Marianne out of the communication she so deserves. His letter does not represent a desire to forge communication with Marianne. Rather, it represents a desire to appease his fiancée at Marianne’s expense, which makes him nothing more than a coward.

“Miss Crawford’s style of writing, lively and affectionate, was itself an evil”

Favret argues that along with showing how letters can positively impact people’s lives, Austen’s novels “also display [her] suspicions of the letter” (137). Lenckos notes some problems inherent in epistolary communication: “the puzzling nature of authorship, the problem of reception, the uncertainly of meaning in written exchanges” (6-7). Nixon and Penner argue that the letter has “two contradictory sets of connotations… On the one
hand, it was considered the most direct, sincere, and transparent form of written communication, but on the other, the letter was simultaneously recognized as the most playful and potentially deceptive of forms as a stage for rhetorical trickery” (16). Henry and Mary’s co-authored letters to Fanny embody many of the problems that come with written communication. In an attempt to maneuver social barriers, Henry Crawford tries to communicate his sentiments to Fanny not by writing her a letter, as that would be socially unacceptable, but by having his sister Mary write a letter to Fanny communicating his sentiments. Lenckos argues that Henry shows that the “taboo imposed on the correspondence between young, unattached people could be circumvented. A lover could, after all, ask a sibling or a family member of the same sex to correspond in his stead with the object of his attentions” (5-6). Fortunately for Henry, Mary is more than willing to help Henry implement his plans.

One of Mary’s first letters to Fanny seems to be a letter congratulating Fanny for her brother William’s promotion. However, Mary’s meaning begins to be unclear when she tells Fanny that she gives Fanny her “most joyful consent and approval,” and assures her that she “may smile upon him with your sweetest smiles… and send him back to me even happier than he goes” (303). While Mary never gives the antecedent to “him” and “he,” Fanny correctly assumes that Mary is referring to Henry. While the letter was penned by Mary, the messenger, Henry, was equally responsible for the content of the letter. Rather than communicating his meaning to Fanny himself, he and Mary conspire to manipulate Fanny indirectly through a series of letters like this one. This letter is designed to both reveal Henry’s feelings and intentions as well as to compel Fanny to
reciprocate. Henry is attempting to make his meaning known without having to directly face Fanny and tell her how he feels, or face negative repercussions for writing his meaning in a socially inappropriate letter. Henry knows exactly what is in the letter, and he waits all night for Fanny to respond. He wants Fanny to play his game, and rather than respond directly to him, he wants Fanny to respond to his meaning by writing a letter to Mary. Poor Fanny has been placed into an awful position, and is forced to play along. However, true to her convictions, Fanny writes a response to Mary, begging her to “never mention the subject again,” adding that she has “seen too much of Mr. Crawford not to understand his manners” (307). Unlike Mary, Fanny makes her communication quite clear, leaving no sentence open for debate, and while Fanny worries that “her note must appear excessively ill-written, that the language would disgrace a child, for her distress had allowed no arrangement,” she knows that her letter would at least “assure them both of her being neither imposed on, nor gratified by Mr. Crawford’s attentions” (308). Fanny does not attempt to manipulate Mary and Henry, nor does she try to veil her meaning. She pays no attention to carefully crafting her language in an agreeable style; rather, she uses simple language that ensures that her meaning cannot be misinterpreted or misconstrued. Unlike Mary and Henry, Fanny values honesty over style. Mary, however, excels at writing agreeable letters in which the meaning is not always immediately clear. Lenckos argues that Mary “writes letters in Henry’s stead that plead his cause far more eloquently than he possibly could” (6). Mary’s talent for writing elegant letters can potentially help Henry’s plight of convincing Fanny to accept Henry’s advances.
However, Fanny is not seduced by Mary’s stylish prose. She understands that Mary and Henry are trying to manipulate her, and she refuses to fall victim to their schemes.

Not only does Mary write letters to Fanny to communicate Henry’s meaning, but she also writes letters to Fanny to communicate her meaning to Edmund. Mary’s “lively and affectionate” style of writing made Edmund insist that Fanny read the chief of the letter to him, and then she had to listen to his admiration of her language, and the warmth of her attachments. – There had, in fact, been so much of message, of allusion, of recollection, so much of Mansfield in every letter, that Fanny could not but suppose it meant for [Edmund] to hear. (376)

Since writing directly to Edmund would violate social codes, Mary chooses to communicate her meaning to Edmund via Fanny. Knowing that her meaning will make it to Edmund, Mary makes Fanny take on the role of a messenger. This indirect method of communication in which Henry communicates his meaning through Mary, and Mary communicates her meaning for Edmund through Fanny, puts Fanny, who is in love with Edmund herself, in a terrible situation. Fanny has found herself “compelled into a correspondence which was bringing her the addresses of the man she did not love, and obliging her to administer to the adverse passion of the man she did,” which “was cruelly mortifying” (376). Mary’s letters force Fanny to face the unwanted advances of both of the Crawfords. Henry’s advances were hard enough for Fanny to cope with, but Mary’s sentiment that was meant for Edmund makes the letters downright unbearable for Fanny to read. In fact, Fanny feels relieved when she realizes that Mary’s correspondence would likely halt once Fanny left for Portsmouth: “When no longer under the same roof with

Edmund, [Fanny] trusted that Miss Crawford would have no motive for writing, strong enough to overcome the trouble, and that at Portsmouth their correspondence would dwindle into nothing (376). Rather than treasuring Mary’s letters as mementoes of close communication, as Jane Fairfax does, Fanny dreads Mary’s manipulative letters, and relishes the day that the communication will come to an end.

Contrary to Fanny’s wish, she does indeed receive letters from Mary while she is in Portsmouth. In fact, Fanny receives several letters while she is staying with her family. The letters she receives during this time are the most significant in the novel. It is during her stay with her family that she receives a letter from Mary that represents another attempt to communicate Henry’s feelings to Fanny. There can be no mistake that Henry was indeed the ghostwriter of this letter. In the letter, Mary describes the walk that Henry and Fanny went on: “when the balmy air, the sparkling sea, and [Fanny’s] sweet looks and conversation were altogether in the most delicious harmony, and afforded sensations which are to raise ecstasy even in retrospect” (415). This reads more like a love letter than a letter from a friend, making it clear that these sentiments are coming from Henry and not Mary. Mary’s letter affords Henry yet another opportunity to make his meaning known to Fanny, without breaking any social norms. However, to Fanny, Henry’s meaning is not nearly as interesting as Mary’s. It is Mary’s coded message for Edmund that provokes Fanny’s interest. Mary elucidates her growing interest in Edmund, who “gets into [her] head more than does [her] good,” and leaves Fanny anxious for more information regarding Mary and Edmund’s budding relationship: “This was a letter to be run through eagerly, to be read deliberately, to supply matter for much reflection, and to
leave every thing in greater suspense than ever. The only certainty to be drawn from it was, that nothing decisive had yet taken place” (417). While the letter is successful in that it communicates both Henry’s and Mary’s sentiments, Fanny would much rather their sentiments go unheard.

By including letters that forge communication when communication is otherwise impossible, Austen reveals the power of the written word. There are so many factors that make communicating verbally difficult or even impossible, and Austen’s characters have discovered that the written word can make communication possible. Where verbal language often fails, written language can often succeed. In cases like Darcy and Elizabeth’s, and Anne and Wentworth’s, written communication can heal wounds and open up honest verbal communication. And like with Frank and Jane, written correspondence can maintain relationships by allowing continuous communication. Moreover, as with Henry and Mary, written language can allow for communication when it is otherwise impossible according to social conventions.
Chapter 7

“TILL THIS MOMENT I NEVER KNEW MYSELF!”: LETTERS THAT LEAD TO SELF-KNOWLEDGE

Many of the letters that Austen’s characters send include information that is so poignant, so powerful, that it actually leads the letter-reader to come to some sort of revelation about the self while reading it. Whether it is the reflection that takes place while reading a letter, or simply being able to see the truth spelled out in black and white, letters have a way of elucidating truth when spoken words cannot. The epiphanies that take place during the writing and reading of letters are not only crucial for the characters’ growth, but they are also crucial to the plot and resolution of the novel. It is no accident that Austen includes letters as a means of attaining self-knowledge. Austen clearly understands the power of the written language as well as the permanence of letters. Whereas meaning related in conversation may be easily forgotten, meaning in correspondence can be revisited over and over again. Letters allow her characters to read and re-read the content, compelling them to think and re-think about what is being said, and come to a new understanding of the self.

“But vanity… has been my folly”

Elizabeth Bennet experiences a powerful self-revelation after reading Darcy’s letter of defense. While Darcy’s letter is a significant document in it of itself, as it allows both the reader and Elizabeth to understand the truth surrounding Darcy and Wickham’s history, its effect on Elizabeth is equally crucial to the novel. The chapter that follows Darcy’s letter reveals Elizabeth’s complex response. Indeed, it takes Elizabeth an entire chapter to read and understand the letter, all the while coming into a new understanding
of herself. She begins the letter by reading it hastily, as “she had formed no expectation at all of its contents” (204), and could not satisfy her curiosity fast enough. “She read, with an eagerness which hardly left her power of comprehension, and from impatience of knowing what the next sentence might bring, was incapable of attending to the sense of the one before her eyes” (204). The letter excites a “contrariety of emotion,” and “her feelings as she read were scarcely to be defined” (204). The contents of Darcy’s letter are so shocking that Elizabeth cannot even identify her own feelings, which, for her, is something that does not happen often. At this point Elizabeth’s emotions are running high, and she does not approach Darcy’s letter objectively. She believes that the part of the letter in which Darcy explains his actions surrounding Jane and Mr. Bingley is “all pride and insolence” (204). However, once she reads the part of the letter regarding Mr. Wickham, “her feelings were yet more acutely painful and more difficult of definition… Astonishment, apprehension, and even horror, oppressed her. She wished to discredit it entirely, repeatedly exclaiming, ‘This must be false!’” (204). Her preconceived notions of Mr. Darcy still obscure her view of him, and at this point, she is not willing to bend her opinion of him based on his letter. Consequently, after her first review of the letter she “put it hastily away, protesting that she would not regard it, that she would never look at it again” (205). True to form, Elizabeth lets her prejudice get in the way of truth.

Yet, the physicality of the letter prevents Elizabeth from moving on and ignoring Darcy’s meaning, as a half a minute later “the letter was unfolded again, and collecting herself as well as she could, she again began the mortifying perusal of all that related to Wickham, and commanded herself so far as to examine the meaning of every sentence”
She reviews the letter repeatedly, gradually increasing her attention to Darcy’s argument, and she tests Darcy’s assertions against her own knowledge:

She put down the letter, weighed every circumstance with what she meant to be impartiality – deliberated on the probability of each statement – but with little success…. Again she read on. But every line proved more clearly that the affair… was capable of a turn which must make him entirely blameless throughout the whole. (205)

Despite her best effort, Elizabeth cannot think of anything that might redeem Mr. Wickham. She therefore resolves that the letter is indeed true. At this crucial moment Elizabeth discovers that everything she believed to be true was a lie, and that this knowledge has made her question her prior identity: “How despicably I have acted!... I, who have prided myself on my discernment! – I, who have valued myself on my abilities!... How humiliating is this discovery! – Yet, how just a humiliation… But vanity… has been my folly… Till this moment I never knew myself!” (208). While the purpose of Darcy’s letter is to illuminate the truth, the letter also changes Elizabeth. The letter forces her to reflect on her behavior and attitude, and this reflection ends in her concluding that despite priding herself on her ability to read the character of others, she did not know her own.

Had Darcy never given this letter to Elizabeth, she would have never known why he tried to disrupt Jane and Mr. Bingley’s relationship, nor would she have known about Wickham’s abominable behavior. However, more importantly, Elizabeth would have never known herself. She would have never realized that her assumptions are often based
on prejudice, and that her pride gets in the way of true understanding. Lenckos points out that “Darcy’s letter to Elizabeth is in part so impressive because it is the one message he writes to her, and it forever changes her outlook and her life” (7). The same effect would have never occurred had Darcy tried to explain his meaning verbally. After Darcy offends Elizabeth with his less than flattering proposal, Elizabeth would have never given him the chance to make his defense. Darcy knows this, which is why he chooses to write his meaning in a letter. However, while Elizabeth and Darcy do not engage in a verbal dialogue, Elizabeth approaches the letter as though she were participating in a dialogue with Darcy. This method is effective, as Elizabeth is able to engage with Darcy’s meaning without Darcy actually being there. She is able to question his meaning, argue against it, test it, accept it and ultimately be changed by it.

“But this note made me know myself better”

John Willoughby claims that he experiences a revelation after reading Marianne’s heart wrenching letters. At the same time that he admits to Elinor that the letter he gave to Marianne was ghost-written, he proclaims that he was deeply moved by Marianne’s “infamous” letters. He describes that upon receipt of Marianne’s first letter, his “feelings were very, very painful. – Every line, every word was… a dagger to [his] heart” (325). He mentions that he knows Marianne would have rebuked him had she known that he was in town while she sent her first letter. Indeed, he exclaims that Marianne’s “taste, her opinions” are “better known to [him] than [his] own” (325). Willoughby’s response to Marianne’s letter reveals his intimate connection with her. Willoughby knows Marianne so well that he can identify her feelings more easily than his own. Elinor is uncomfortable
with Willoughby’s honest, yet inappropriate language, and although his response to the letter softens her heart, she reminds him that he is married now, and insists that he “relate only what in [his] conscience [he thinks] necessary for [her] to hear” (325).

However, Willoughby goes on, declaring that Marianne’s letter confirmed that “she was as constant in her own feelings, and as full of faith in the constancy” of Willoughby (325-326). This knowledge of Marianne’s constant heart “awakened all [his] remorse” (326). He admits to convincing himself that Marianne had moved on once he left for London, yet her letter confirms that she was just as constant as ever. This letter confirms to Willoughby that he was trying to validate his cruel actions by fancying that Marianne had become indifferent to him, and that he had grown into “a fine hardened villain” (326). Indeed, Willoughby confesses that “this note made [him] know [himself] better” (326). Marianne’s letter made him more aware of his own feelings for her, and he comes to realize that “she was infinitely dearer to [him] than any other woman in the world” (326). Furthermore, reading her letter, he realizes that he was “using her infamously” (326). Before she wrote to him, he was able to convince himself that he no longer had feelings for Marianne, and that his actions were not felt by her. But her letters reminded him of the truth, and this truth was devastating for Willoughby to deal with. He “thought of [Marianne]… every moment of the day,” and though his “head and heart were full” of Marianne, he was “forced to play the happy lover” to Miss Grey (327). While Marianne’s letter did not change anything, as Willoughby was inevitably going to marry Sophia, her letters were able to penetrate Willoughby’s façade, and they forced him to deal with the feelings that he had been fighting for so long. Like Elizabeth after
reading Darcy’s letter, Willoughby knew himself better after reading Marianne’s letters. However, this knowledge is essentially of no use to Willoughby. He follows through with his marriage to Miss Grey even though he still loves Marianne, and even Miss Grey knows that he “had no regard for her when [they] married” (329). Unfortunately, unlike Elizabeth, who was able to benefit from her self-revelation, Willoughby’s came too late.

In Austen’s novels, the tangible nature of letters often allows for personal reflection. While pride, obstinacy, and hurt feelings can often prevent self-reflection, there is something about truth written in a letter that often allows for reflection to take place. Elizabeth and Willoughby are left alone with written truth, and thus are able to reflect on this truth, and in doing so come to a better understanding of themselves.
Chapter 8

CONCLUSION

In James Boswell’s account of Samuel Johnson’s last living days, Boswell notes that as Johnson opened a note that a servant brought to him, he said, “An odd thought strikes me: we shall receive no letters in the grave” (1390). Johnson’s utterance goes to show just how significant letters were in the eighteenth century. A letter, to Johnson, was clearly not a simple transmission of facts, or else he probably would not have been struck by his thought about letters while on his deathbed. Letters embody the very essence of the writer, and by reading a letter, we are often able to catch a glimpse, however brief it might be, of the writer’s soul.

Examining Austen’s inclusion of letters in her novels has not only helped me to better understand her novels, but it has also helped me to better understand and appreciate the power of the written word. Letters bring characters together. Letters reveal truth. Letters allow characters to better understand themselves and others. In Austen’s novels the written word is able to change people in ways that the spoken word cannot. The written word is also often able to effectively communicate meaning when the spoken word fails. Austen includes letters not because they merely function as a convenient literary device; rather, she includes them to showcase the value of the written word. And just as Austen's characters' written words - their letters - are able to reveal truth and change people, Austen's written words - her novels - are able to transcend the physical page to touch readers' lives in intimate and meaningful ways.
WORKS CITED


