

**“A Very Pretty Hand”:
The Questionable Value of
Using Jane Austen’s Letters
as a Means of Knowing Austen**

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Mixed Reviews: Responses to Austen’s Personal Letters

MODERN readers crave intimacy with Jane Austen.¹ Her novels invite kinship because her narrators communicate personally with the reader. These artistic fabrications give the impression of being the author’s own candid voice. Having read the novels, readers seek additional communication with the writer, and for this they often turn to Austen’s personal letters. The letters do not nurture a personal relationship with Austen because the letters are private and not meant for the same readers as the novels. Although the letters help to elucidate the artistic voice of the author, there is a question as to the value of Austen’s published letters as vehicles for knowing the writer.

The letters have met with widely varying responses. Henry Austen, in his zealous praise of his favorite younger sister, quoted from them in his Biographical Notice and Postscript to the posthumously published *Persuasion* and *Northanger Abbey* and claimed that “she never dispatched a note or a letter unworthy of publication” (1968, 77). James Edward Austen-Leigh published *A Memoir of Jane Austen*, which included many of her letters in a section specifically dedi-

cated to them and used them to help explain events or relationships in her life. However, while he thinks that these are worthy of publishing for the sake of storytelling, he warns the reader “not to expect too much from them” as the “materials may be thought inferior to the execution” (2002, 50). Caroline Austen similarly asserts that, because her Aunt Cassandra burned the most interesting letters, “there is nothing in those [remaining] letters [...] that would be acceptable to the public” because the subject matter includes only domestic concerns ([1867] 2002, 173). However, Lord Edward Brabourne, Jane’s great-nephew, defends her letters as showing “what her own ‘ordinary, everyday life’ was” and says they are therefore “likely to interest a public which, both in Great Britain and America, has learned to appreciate Jane Austen” (1884, 1: xiii).

The publication of the collected letters by R. W. Chapman in 1932 opened Jane Austen’s letters to criticism from a wider range of critics, primarily male, who agreed with Caroline Austen and James Edward Austen-Leigh. E. M. Forster, a fan of her novels, wrote that “triviality, varied by touches of ill breeding and sententiousness, characterizes these letters as a whole” ([1936] 1965, 185). More recently, feminist criticism and theory have added new dimensions to the discussion of Jane Austen’s letters. Her family members who were responsible for their first publications and criticisms could not have known that the aspects that disappointed them about the letters would be the very elements to arouse critical attention nearly two hundred years later, cultivating more innovative and avant-garde discussion about them than ever. Marilyn Butler argues that audiences are interested in the letters because “they satisfy a basic human curiosity about other people’s lives” due to the everyday matters which are denounced by Austen’s younger relatives ([1955] 1985, x). Terry Castle has dramatized the fable of Cassandra Austen’s letter scourge to denounce her, calling it a “jealous winnowing down of her brilliant younger sister’s personality” and has used it to suggest that Jane Austen was not only prone to homoerotic, but also incestuous, tendencies (1995, 3). Whether denouncing or applauding Austen’s letters, the previous criticism is struggling with the same basic concerns. Throughout their published history, the letters have been scrutinized for their content and the eloquence of their writing, while critics have attempted to locate Austen’s artistic voice. Few have been concerned with the letters as physical documents.

Austen’s letters created an intimacy with their addressee that is very similar to the intimacy created between the narrator and the general reader in her novels. This paper first seeks to show how, not

only content, but also physical form is necessary to creating this intimacy with her intended audience. The letters are not as easily divorced from their physical form as the novels and each letter has a distinctive appearance according to whom it is addressed. The reader/writer relationship created in letters is such a specific one that even careful editing cannot help the modern reader enter into it. Different edited editions of the letters show that well-edited letters are easy to navigate but are divorced from any of the original intimacy with Austen, and that the most authentic reproductions of the letters leave the reader ignorant of the meaning of the content contained therein. Reading the letters, however, is very useful in revealing how Austen creates this intimacy with her audience in her novels. While the reader/writer relationship is too specific in her personal letters to be shared by the public, the linguistic strategies she uses in her novels closely resemble those in her letters. Examining these strategies helps elucidate how Austen re-creates this intimate addressor/addressee relationship between the narrator and the reader in her novels, creating the bond that many readers feel.

Reading the Letters: Different Editions and the Experience of Reading

Critics like E. M. Forster who were reading the letters as literary creations were disappointed by them. Perhaps his disappointment stemmed from the physical presentation of the letters themselves. The way the letters have been published in edited volumes invites false expectations from readers. It is easy to subconsciously assume that because they are in a bound edition, they will follow some sort of narrative arc and be comprehensible to the public reader, as her novels are. Obviously, not having been intended for the public reader, they are not.² However, critics at the end of the twentieth century who were looking for something other than literary prowess evident in the novels were not disappointed. Kaplan stresses the importance of the letters in cultural history, claiming their value as artifacts of women's solidarity, Gooneratne claims that they dissolve any differences of place and time between Austen and her modern readers, and Flynn argues that the style of their writing helps us to understand Austen within her culture (1988, 211–26; 1970, 16–20; 1997, 101–02). These critics were all looking for some evidence of womanly understanding between Austen and her readers, modern and contemporary. Yet, locating the authentic Jane Austen in her letters is diffi-

cult as they are so far removed from their original context. Favret points out that general readers cannot see what the actual page looks like, and that this affects how the letters are perceived and discussed. The more the letters are edited for a general readership, the more readily understandable they become. Yet, ironically, the more comprehensible to modern readers the letters become, the less authentic Jane Austen seems. In some instances this rift between the original creation of the artifact and the modern reader's relationship to it becomes very pronounced.

The first edition of Jane Austen's letters was published in 1884 by Edward, Lord Brabourne, her great-nephew. The edition was published as two volumes and included ninety-six letters. In his introduction, Brabourne is attentive to the look of the letters themselves. He describes in great detail the boxes in which he found the carefully bundled letters and tells the reader that a manuscript copy of *Lady Susan* "in Jane Austen's own handwriting" was among the papers, that the packets were "endorsed 'For Lady Knatchbull' in the handwriting of [...] Cassandra Austen," and that one paper, written in his mother's handwriting, read "Letters from my dear Aunt Jane Austen, and two from Aunt Cassandra after her decease" (Brabourne 1884, 1: x–xi). He is aware of the importance of each individual's handwriting, and he must feel that it affects the item's value or he would not describe them so carefully. Yet, as attentive as he is to the state of the letters as a whole, he is not attentive to the way each individual letter looks.

Brabourne's edition takes several significant editorial liberties with the look of the letters, which greatly affect the way that they are read. While Deirdre Le Faye and Roger Sales have both pointed out the changes Brabourne makes to the content of the letters, Le Faye attributing the changes to publisher's concerns and Sales stating that Brabourne "edits out" traces of "Regency coarseness," the formal changes he makes have been given little attention (2001, 98; 1994, 8–10). Brabourne tailors the letters for printing, but his editorial practices remain hidden from the reader. The letters are paragraphed, punctuated, and ordered so that the reader may be better able to read them. His paragraphs generally coincide with dashes which Austen presumably used to indicate shifts in subject, but this is not uniform. Sometimes dashes remain unchanged, are changed to periods, or are completely ignored. For example, Austen's letter dated Wednesday 29 May 1811 reads:

They go to Steventon about y^e 22^d & I guefs (for it is quite a guefs) will stay there from a fortnight to three weeks. –I must not venture to prefs Mifs Sharpe’s coming at present; we may hardly be at liberty before August. –Poor John Bridges! we are very sorry for his situation, & for the distrefs of the Family. Lady B. is severely tried! –And our own dear Brother suffers a great deal I dare say on the occasion. (Austen 1811a, F217)

In Brabourne’s edition this passage reads:

They go to Steventon about the 22nd, and I guess—for it is quite a guess—will stay there from a fortnight to three weeks.

I must not venture to press Miss Sharpe’s coming at present; we may hardly be at liberty before August.

Poor Mr. John Bridges! we are very sorry for his situation and for the distress of the family. Lady B. is in one way severely tried. And our own dear brother suffers a great deal, I dare say, on the occasion. (Austen 1811b, 102)

Note that in Austen’s original there are no paragraph breaks at all, whereas in Brabourne’s reproduction of her letters there are three distinct paragraphs. The spelling is also changed, as he changes “y^e” for the more modern “the” and “22^d” becomes “22nd.” Punctuation and capitalization are dramatically different as well. The long “s” that Austen characteristically employs, as in “guefs” and “Mifs,” is dropped, the capital “Family” is no longer capitalized, and Brabourne does not allow Lady B. to warrant an exclamation point.

Most interestingly, whereas two of the dashes become paragraph breaks, one is completely ignored, and a parenthetical aside actually becomes enclosed in dashes. In the last line another aside is created when Brabourne adds commas to Austen’s original sentence. The choices with the two asides tell us much about the editing practice in relation to the voice of the writer and the reception of the reader. A narrative structure is imposed upon Austen’s original writing. The ideas are organized and the colloquialisms are updated. The author’s voice is obscured as the rhythm of the reading, and the very expressions she uses, are manipulated. Brabourne also orders her postscripts and additional comments, which are often written in the margins, into a linear structure. He does all of this without giving the reader any clue as to the appearance of the originals. While Brabourne’s editorial liberties make the letters much more easily comprehensible to the modern reader, they also give the impression that the letters were finished products rather than effusions of thought.

They enforce an order and a rhythm onto them which was not intended and not executed. It is not surprising, then, that they were read as literary creations and, consequently, were found wanting.

The next comprehensive attempt at publishing the letters was R. W. Chapman's *Jane Austen's Letters to Her Sister Cassandra and Others*, published in two volumes in 1932. Chapman's preface states that the letters in his edition have been published from the original manuscripts wherever possible, and copied from the most reliable source where the original could not be made available. Chapman must have been aware of Brabourne's changes because, although he states that there is "no reason to believe that Brabourne's text is seriously corrupt," he goes on to say that he has done "a good deal in addition and correction, as well as in the restoration of Jane Austen's spelling and punctuation" (1932a, vi–vii). However, while he is aware of the importance of preserving Austen's original form, he takes his own liberties with editorial changes which affect the reading. For example, in letters in which there are additional comments added upside down in the margins, postmarks under the address panel, or crossing, Chapman simply places the comments in a logical order and he always finishes the letter with the complimentary closing. He does not tell the reader where these comments originally appeared on the page. In addition, it appears that many of the originals could not be found and were simply copied from earlier prints. The letter cited above, written on 29 May 1811, appears exactly as it did in the Brabourne edition.

Sixty years later, Deirdre Le Faye picks up where Chapman left off, offering the most definitive printed edition of the letters to date. Her view of Brabourne's edition is not as confident as Chapman's as she states that "not only did he or his printer transcribe carelessly and on some occasions omit or alter sentences, but that the division of JA's text into paragraphs was nearly always arbitrary and incorrect" (1995a, xv). Le Faye is obviously aware of the importance of the look of the letters and attempts to solve the problems of a printed edition by giving the reader clues as to how to read the letters in a manner that situates the reader more closely to the original document and, therefore, the author. She preserves spelling and punctuation. Superscripts are faithfully portrayed, and postscripts are denoted. The reader is told which comments appear in the margins, are written upside down between lines, or are crossed. Her edition is taken from the manuscript copies of the letters, except in the fourteen cases where the originals could not be located, creating a more complete manuscript study than Chapman had been able to perform. In the

cases where the original letter could not be found, she uses Brabourne's copies, but removes the paragraphing. Le Faye's assumption in her editing is that, by preserving everything authentic about Austen's letters, she can guide the reader to a better understanding of the letters as a whole. However, as Brabourne's comments hint, there is still something missing, no matter how attentive to detail an editor of the letters attempts to be. Readers who read these editions are missing Austen's own handwriting and the look of the original page.

Jane Austen's handwriting cannot be conveyed to the reader in a typeset publication of her letters. As Favret suggests, our contact with the author of the letters is lessened by the formal considerations which must be taken with a typeset edition. Austen's close handwriting when she has much to say, her large handwriting when she is writing in a professional capacity, and the pages which are completely full of writing, or sparsely covered, are completely lost on readers who read the letters only in Le Faye's tightly bound edition. One can read that letter number 71 is written on "two leaves quarto, laid; watermark device (Heawood Nos. 2752-62) over monogram, no date; black wafer," and that an additional paragraph is written "upside down between the lines of p. 1," and still not know exactly how the writing fills the page (Le Faye 1995b, 402, 57). Austen herself often refers to her own handwriting, and uses it as clues to reading her state of being. In the most extreme example, after an illness she states, "I will not boast of my handwriting; neither that, nor my face have yet recovered their proper beauty" (1817, 342). While a note on the text tells the reader that the handwriting is uneven in this letter (betraying her weakness) the readers who read the letters out of a typeset edition cannot fully appreciate the implications of this, nor would they be able to immediately recognize the unevenness of the writing if given this one isolated sample (Le Faye 1995b, 476). A familiarity with many writing samples is necessary to understanding the weakness of the handwriting in this letter, as compared with the others. Comments such as these remind readers that they are not intimate with Jane Austen, and cannot become so through such studies.

In less extreme cases, Le Faye's edition does create a linear structure in letters that are not necessarily linear. Although she does alert the reader to the fact that she has organized the postscripts, the reader does not have the opportunity to struggle with the design of the page. For example, in one letter to Cassandra Austen, Jane includes a section written below the address panel, a paragraph written upside down between the lines of the first page, and a crossed section on the second page (1813a, F265-F268). Although they could be

read in any order, Le Faye has put them in that order, and has added the crossed section after the signature as a postscript. However, this is not the only way the original reader, or any reader of the actual document, could read the letter. There would be time spent in deciding which section should follow which, and deciphering the cross-work written in the center of the page. In addition to which, the reader's attention is not drawn to how rare it is for Austen to cross one of her letters, or that it does not resemble other samples of crossed letters. She is much more inclined to write upside down between lines, or at the top of the first page. When Austen's letters are crossed they adopt the aspect of a treasure hunt. The crossing is not generally evenly spaced, and the insert is usually crossed because she has something particular to say. Le Faye cannot convey the fact that her crossing to her brother Frank, indicating that there is to be a second edition of *Sense and Sensibility*, is in the very center of the second page (1813b, F269–F272). Nor can specifying for the reader the location of the comment impart the full sense that, because this is crossed, and due to its location on the page, this must be an exciting piece of information that Austen wanted to communicate in a special way. The way she writes this message is also interesting, as it appears hidden within the actual text of the letter because she was struggling to hide her identity as the authoress of the work.

Jo Modert must have felt that the actual look of the letters was important. In 1990, five years prior to the publication of Le Faye's edition, Modert published *Jane Austen's Letters in Facsimile: Reproductions of Every Known Extant Letter, Fragment, and Autograph Copy, with an Annotated List of All Known Letters*. Through the facsimile copies of the letters, readers can see her handwriting, analyze its evenness, and understand her uneven writing in illness. The letters also invite the reader to attempt to decipher all of the extra writing that did not fit on the bulk of the page and was squeezed onto any extra space. The reader can interpret their order, and the meaning behind the space in which they are written. Although Modert does not mention the importance of reading the letters in their original handwriting, she must have thought it to be important in order to publish an edition of the letters in facsimile. And indeed, the reading experience between three different versions is very different. The same letter, XXIII in Brabourne's edition, 24 in Le Faye's edition, and F51–F54 in Modert's edition, has a very different appearance in the three publications. In Brabourne's edition it is evenly divided into paragraphs, there is no attention given to page breaks, and there seems to be a postscript after the signature. In the Le Faye

edition, the most faithful typeset edition available, page changes are clearly delineated, spelling and punctuation is exactly as it appears in the original, and the reader is told that one section is written upside down at the top of the first page and that the postscript appears below the address panel. Although Le Faye's version is extremely faithful to the original, the facsimile has a different impact. It takes the reader a moment to adjust to Austen's handwriting, and at the end of the body of the letter, the reader must decide in which order to read the additional comments. The reader is forced to turn the book upside down and on its side in order to properly read the letters in all the angles they require. Paradoxically, this very act of turning the book and discovering the possibilities of the letter has a somewhat alienating effect on the reader.

While, of the three possibilities Modert's facsimile edition is the best for understanding the look of the letters, there is still something missing in the way that the letters can be read in any bound copy. Whether in one volume or two, the letters are generally cumbersome and unwieldy. The Modert facsimile edition is especially heavy and awkward due to its sheer size. The book itself had to be large enough to fit copies of the large quarto sheets upon which the letters were originally written. While turning the book in order to examine the letters from every angle, the reader is taken out of the letter reading experience by the volume that must be manipulated. The letters, even in Modert's edition where it is possible to see Jane Austen's handwriting and, in some cases, the folded creases, lose their size and shape when bound, and most certainly when typeset. The original letters were read and reread, folded and unfolded, then carefully refolded again. The original recipient could put the letter in his/her pocket, then remove it for further perusal, to remember which answers were necessary in the response letter, or to remember something interesting that was said. Readers' attention is necessarily drawn to the fact that these letters are not their property, and that they are therefore removed from Austen and her world.

It is not only the obscured form in these bound editions which removes the modern reader from the feelings of solidarity with Jane Austen. The content—in many cases inside jokes, family names, and abbreviations—also serve to remind readers that they do not share in the intimacy which exists between Jane Austen and her addressees. When Austen mentions "Mrs. F.A. and her children" it is not difficult for the academic reader to deduce that she means Mrs. Frank Austen (1813c, 233). However, it becomes more confusing when she mentions that "Miss B is to make only a temporary absence" or that

she has “an appointment with M^{de} B” (1808, 141; see also 1813d, 220). La Faye’s endnotes make it clear that the names refer to Bailey in the first instance and Bigeon in the second. Le Faye defends her edition as giving “maximum ease of reading the actual text” and employs endnotes to “give explanations of now obscure references to contemporary matters” rather than footnotes (1995a, xvi). Presumably, this is an attempt to create a reading atmosphere as close to that originally intended as possible, as the page is not broken by explanations which were obviously unnecessary to the original writer and addressee. However, Modert’s edition, which claims the most authenticity, gives no clue as to whom these abbreviations refer. This lack of understanding immediately draws readers out of the experience of reading the letter, reminding them that they are not part of the social world in which Jane Austen is an initiated member. Whether readers must admit that they do not know who Miss B is, or must refer to the endnotes to discover her identity, they are immediately removed from the letter reading experience which would otherwise have created a bond between reader and writer. Butler suggests that the letters “satisfy a basic human curiosity about other people’s lives” (1985, x). Consequently, family pet names, such as “itty Dordy,” make the reader a literary voyeur, looking in upon an intimacy that was not meant for an outside audience to share (1798a, 15). The endless notes in La Faye’s edition remind the reader that these are no longer private letters, but are meant for scholars, and the absence of such notes in Modert’s edition reminds the reader that in most cases notes are necessary for contextualizing the letters in order to understand them.

After examining the different editions of the letters, and realizing that through them there is still distance between the original writer and the modern reader, the problem of reading personal correspondence as an academic tool becomes more clear. The acts of lovingly referring to a letter and rereading it betrays an intimacy with the letter as an object, and through that object with the person who originally wrote the letter. For the original readers of the letters, that implied a bond between them and Jane Austen. As Janet Altman points out, the epistolary language is defined by “not one but two persons and the specific relationship existing between them” (1982, 118). These specific relationships defined Austen’s letters, and consequently “the letters to the nieces show more flow of fancy,” and in the letters to “her brother Frank, away at sea, Jane writes in a more regular and considered style, giving a bulletin of information about all members of the family, such as someone away for a long period

would need to know” (Chapman 1932b, xl; Le Faye 1995a, xvii). The implied reader of these letters is known and has an established relationship with Jane Austen which is evident in her selection and treatment of her subject matter to each.

These bound editions invite the impersonal reader to read from one letter to the next as novels are read. However, in a novel, even one that has a very limited point of view, all information necessary to the plot line is eventually revealed to the reader. In these letters, there is no such assurance. The letters were written in networks, which means that letters written by Jane Austen are missing information which had been communicated by other letter writers. Frances Ferguson points out that “the interpretation as well as the composition of letters is likely to involve a collaborative effort” (1981, 109). And it must be noted that modern scholarship is missing most of the letters written to Jane Austen. With the exception of a few business letters, there are no surviving letters which Austen received, and therefore any reading of the letters must be incomplete. The remaining letters are then, as Chapman states, “fragments—fragments of observation, of characterisation, of criticism” (1932b, xlii). However, in the bound edition, because there are no breaks separating the letters and no indication of time lapsed between them, Austen’s personal correspondence is more likely to be read as an epistolary novel.³ Readers have some expectation, not consciously as they are surely aware that these letters are not fictional, but subconsciously, simply arising from the formal aspects of the publication. The seasoned novel reader looks for such things as character development, exposition, and plot. However, as letters they do not offer these literary considerations. When the readers’ expectations are excited in this way, they must surely be disappointed in the lack of coherence.

Any reproduction of the letters, whether facsimile copied, typeset, or carefully cited in an academic paper such as this one, cannot reproduce the experience of actually receiving and reading the original letter. The experience of reading the letters in a bound edition which looks and feels like other forms of literature corrupts their reception. While scholars attempt to find new ways of reproducing the letters in order to give the most authentic experience, examining the former attempts suggests that no solution is possible. Reading Austen’s letters in any reproduction draws readers outside of the authentic letter reading experience and confirms that these letters were not meant for their eyes.

Finding Austen: Austen's Voice in Her Letters and Novels

Despite the challenges inherent in the study, reading Austen's letters with the intent of locating her as a writer is not completely hopeless. Readers of the bound editions of the letters must be aware of the hazards of reading them in such editions, but may be able to navigate a useful interpretation. Similarly, readers must be constantly aware that these letters have formal aspects which are lost on modern readers, and that the intended audience is very different for the letters than for the novels. If the modern critic keeps these stipulations in mind, the letters offer valuable insight as to how Austen creates kinship within her addressor/addressee relationship in the letters. The linguistic tools Austen uses to create this relationship are very similar to the linguistic tools she uses in her novel writing. In both, Austen uses specific speech patterns in order to extract a desired reaction from her audience, therefore creating a kinship. When read in close conjunction with the novels, the letters can help literary critics understand how these novels produce a feeling of familiarity between the narrator and reader which has kept them popular from their first publishing until today.

The sympathetic reader feels a kinship, or a closeness, not only with the novels' heroines, but also with the writer herself. These novels have transcended time, place, and the situational differences of generations. Readers feel that they know Jane Austen after reading her novels. As Kathryn Sutherland puts it, "her novels absorb us deeply and [...] we cannot believe that they will not lead us back to their author" (2002, xviii). Critics and readers alike are eager to read her personal letters in order to enhance their relationship with Jane Austen. By their nature, personal letters have a conversational style. Austen's narrative style recaptures that conversational approach. Consequently, readers of the novels feel that they have had an intimate conversation with the writer herself when they read her fictional narrative. The genius of Austen is that the unaffected personal letter writer and the crafted fictional voice of the narrator in the novels are one and the same. In the novels, the two persons which Altman describes in letter writing are Austen's narrator and her reader, rendering this close personal relationship a reality rather than a fantasy.

Because Austen's conversational style engenders a unique intimacy between reader and writer, the linguistic structures become fundamental to a heightened understanding of the audience's reac-

tion to her. The linguistic aspects of her writing, both in the letters and the novels, have been addressed regularly by critics. Deborah Kaplan, in her essay "Representing Two Cultures," suggests that Austen's language in her letters functions as most private women's letters do during this period; by bridging the gap between the male and female spheres of society, at once upholding and questioning the status quo (1988, 211–12, 226). Gooneratne claims that Austen uses coded language to keep the secret meanings private and between only herself and Cassandra (1970, 17–19). In these two instances, as in most of the linguistic studies, the language's effect on the reader is not explored. The importance of reader response is often neglected in critical discussions of her novels in relation to her letters. Most critics, for example, find it important to discuss the similarities between the "cruel" humor found in her letters and the ironic phrasing found in her novels. Margaret Drabble argues that the characters in the novels portray a hypocritical, rather than overt, cruelty which renders it humorous and negligible or, at the very least, acceptable ([1974] 2003, 11). Drabble seems to be discussing only the characters, suggesting that they are humorous due to their own folly rather than a purposeful cruelty. However, Drabble is also inadvertently referring to the reader's response to the humor; the hypocritical nature of the characters does not affront the audience, and therefore is humorous and acceptable. There is a problem reconciling the mean aspects of this humor with both the reader's positive reaction and her perceived notion of the authoress, who has traditionally been portrayed as decorously genteel. Because of this difficulty, the umbrella term used to describe this language has become "wit."

The term, as used to discuss Austen's phrasing, is difficult to locate, and, therefore, becomes slippery and devoid of actual meaning. Juhasz, for example, explains that "there is more to Austen's sentences themselves than factual information. There is also, for example, their wit." She explains that the wit is found when an "accurate description is succeeded by a remark which, through its wit, suddenly changes the point of perception and thus puts the event in an altered context that reveals a ludicrous element" (1987, 89–90). Juhasz's statement illustrates the problem with the term "wit." Her argument uses wit to define itself. For her, the wit, which is characteristic of Austen's letter writing, is defined by use of witty remarks. Later in the essay, the presence of wit is used to argue that Austen's voice remains the same between her letters and her novels. While it is true that her voice is similar in the two genres, in order for wit and other linguistic strategies to be a useful tool for understand-

ing Austen, they must be more specifically located within her phrasing and the reader's reaction to it. Only then is it possible to explore their social implications and the relationship they create between the reader and writer.

Discussing the letters with the novels is complicated by this very reader-writer relationship. Each letter is written with a specific reader in mind, and therefore the intended audience is one who is initiated into a relationship with the writer already. There are inside jokes and Austen anticipated her reader's reactions to her remarks. Therefore, when using the letters to contribute to an understanding of the novels it is important to find the areas in the novels which most closely resemble the letters in the style of their writing. In her novels the opening exposition and the dénouement closely resemble the letters because the narrator is speaking directly to the audience with the purpose of giving relevant information. This is very much how the letters function. In them, Jane Austen is herself the narrator, relating people, places, and events to an audience who, like Cassandra, while familiar with the subjects, is not present at the time. In these areas of the novels the linguistic tropes Austen uses become as recognizable as they do in the letters, suggesting that the narrator is Jane Austen herself. While her early novels are written using more formal conventions and her later novels become more playful as she becomes more comfortable with her own writing style, these linguistic trademarks remain similar throughout. However, as Austen grew older her letter-writing style changed subtly. The letters become more literary, or as E. M. Forster puts it, they "improve," after 1811, coinciding with her first publication ([1936] 1965, 186). Marilyn Butler argues that Austen becomes more serious as she grew older in response to the changes which were affecting her world (1985, xvii). She was becoming more aware of herself as an increasingly public figure as her identity as an authoress was becoming less secret. The letters written before then were written while she was drafting and redrafting her early novels. Language and phrasing patterns in her early letters are, then, most like the natural ideas that she was carefully crafting into publishable material, and therefore most useful to this study.

The "wit" that Juhasz struggles to place shares a common ground in Austen's letters and novels, although, because the novels have different formal constraints, the manifestation of that common ground is not identical in the letters and novels. In the letters Austen often tells a story objectively and then adds her own comment after

the exposition. For example, when writing to her sister Cassandra about her brother Edward's health, she says:

He was better yesterday than he had been for two or three days before, about as well as he was when he was at Steventon—He drinks at the Hetling Pump, is to bathe tomorrow, & try Electricity on Tuesday;—he proposed the latter himself to D^r Fellowes, who made no objection to it, but I fancy we are all unanimous in expecting no advantage in it. (1799, 42)

The information that she is giving is exact and without any editorial comment. However, after the story has been told, she adds her own conjecture, at once stating her own opinion and assigning this opinion to everyone in their immediate circle. In this case, she fancies that they all expect no advantage. The comment is funny for several reasons. After a disinterested account of events, the judgment surprises the reader. It also very subtly draws attention to the silliness of new experimental medicine, which is not expected to do any good, of Edward, who is suggesting his own treatment, and of Dr. Fellowes, who is so worthless at his profession that he allows his patient to prescribe his own treatment. It also creates a comfortable space for these observations. If “we are all” agreed on the fact that the electric therapy is not helpful and that Edward is silly, then it normalizes these judgments. It creates solidarity among a group of people who are presumably making similar judgments but would customarily not mention them. It also allows Cassandra, after reading this letter, to enter into the same feelings as a large group of her acquaintances.

The novels incorporate a similar linguistic element. However, in the novels Austen is not pressed for space, so she is able to articulate fully. After a lengthy account of Captain Wentworth and Anne's previous relationship, the narrator states that “It would be difficult to say which had seen the highest perfection in the other or which had been the happiest; she, in receiving his declarations and proposals, or he in having them accepted” (Austen [1818] 2003b, 26). In *Mansfield Park*, after several pages of explanation as to the circumstances surrounding Fanny Price's move to Mansfield Park, the narrator states that

The division of gratifying sensations ought not, in strict justice, to have been equal. For Sir Thomas was fully resolved to be the real and consistent patron of the selected child, and Mrs. Norris had not the least intention of being at any expense whatever in her maintenance. (Austen [1814] 2003, 9)

In both instances the structure of the comments is very similar to that in the letters, objective description is followed by a comment. Such humorous comments illuminate human folly. The young lovers are competing for the distinction of having the most pleasure in their situation and Mrs. Norris feels more pleasure for a circumstance in which she has no intention of being helpful. These comments are also structured in such a way that they enforce a common feeling in the reader, as the comment in her letters allows a space in which to be comfortably critical. If “it would be difficult to say,” then the reader does not expect to find more accurate information elsewhere and can be content to simply be amused by the portrayal of young love. If the sensations of Sir Thomas and Mrs. Norris should not, “in strict justice,” have been equal, then it is not left to the reader’s judgment whether or not the feelings of the two parties were justifiable. These comments secure a space where the reader and the narrator are in accord, without allowing the reader to distance herself further from the story than the narrator allows. The comments are at once humorous and insightful.

This is just one of the ways Jane Austen secures this space of common thought between her narrator and her reader. In her letters to her sister Cassandra she often assigns a reaction or a point of view to her sister. She instructs Cassandra that “as soon as you have cried a little for joy,” she should continue learning about their brother Frank’s promotion (1798b, 32). This may seem insignificant, but the intimacy between the writer and the reader is pronounced in this passage. It illustrates the fact that the “letter-writer’s sense of the letter-reader’s self [...] frequently appears stronger than the writer’s sense of [her]self” in epistolary communication (Ferguson 1981, 111). Jane knows that Cassandra will cry, and she teases Cassandra about her delicate emotions. The implication that Cassandra’s crying will impede her ability to read the rest of the letter may or may not have been realized. However, there are other instances where a reaction is solicited, and in fact forced upon the reader, and Cassandra is not the only correspondent treated with this degree of familiarity. In a letter about an upcoming visit, Jane tells Martha Lloyd, a very close friend, that, “you are to dine here on tuesday to meet James Digweed, whom you must wish to see before he goes to Kent” (1800, 59). Martha is not present while Austen is conversing with her, so through the means of her letter she assumes that Martha will want to see James Digweed. Martha has no choice in the matter, unless a contradiction follows in her response letter to Jane.

Jane resolves the problem that her conversational style of letters presents, that of the absent respondent, by either presuming to know the feelings of the reader or providing responses. Often her letters become a feigned conversation between herself and her reader as she “not only makes assertions but asks questions, makes conjectures, and provides replies” (Kaplan 1988, 216). For example, in another letter concerning the same James, she states that:

James Digweed has had a very ugly cut—how could it happen?—It happened by a young horse which he had lately purchased, & which he was trying to get back into its stable [. . .] Yesterday he got up the Horse again, & for fear of something worse, was forced to throw himself off. (1798c, 27)

This passage shows that the letter is acting as an imagined dialogue between the two sisters. As James Digweed’s cut is explained, Jane assumes Cassandra’s question, and answers as to how it happened. Later, after relating the circumstances surrounding the cut, she again assumes what Cassandra’s next question will be and answers it. The presumed question is, “How is James Digweed now and what has become of his horse,” the answer is that he is still wary of riding and the horse is still flighty. The way that Austen holds the entire conversation is significant to her literary style. She knows Cassandra so well that Cassandra’s voice is heard in the letter. Jane is at once holding the entire conversation while she is drawing attention to how well she knows her sister, presuming that this is the conversation they would have if Cassandra were sitting next to her.

The dramatic situation incorporating a feigned interaction is often integrated into her novels, creating an intimacy between her narrator and her reader very like that between her and her sister. The literary genre, by its nature, implies an impersonal reader. Austen can have no knowledge of the preconceptions of each individual reader, so she must create a common understanding. Instead of assigning a view to one person, such as crying for joy, she states the opinion that she would like the audience to share as a universal truth. The most pronounced incident where she does this is in the famous opening line of *Pride and Prejudice*, where she states that “it is a truth universally acknowledged that a single man in possession of a good fortune must be in want of a wife” ([1813] 2003, 5). Yet, in less obvious instances, matters of general opinion are stealthily slipped into exposition, as in *Northanger Abbey* when the narrator states that “a family of ten children will always be called a fine family, where

there are heads and arms and legs enough for the number” ([1818] 2003a, 15), or a direct attack against the public, as in *Persuasion* when the narrator states “that Lady Russel [...] should have no thought of a second marriage, needs no apology to the public, which is rather apt to be unreasonably discontented when a woman does marry again, then when she does not” ([1818] 2003b, 7). The audience is given a universal truth which is not to be contradicted, but is rather accepted as part of the story. Therefore, she creates this intimacy of a common understanding even with her very public audience. The Morlands must be a fine family because a family with ten children is always acknowledged to be so. The public cannot be surprised at Lady Russel’s disinclination for a second marriage because a widow is not expected to marry again. This leads one to wonder if the novels really do relate such a faithful portrayal of everyday life, or if instead her minute details are simply told in an irrefutable way. However, in cases where she directly addresses the audience, Austen’s narrator functions in the same way that she herself functions when writing “conversations” with Cassandra in her letters. In *Northanger Abbey*, when the narrator explains the evolution of Henry Tilney’s affection for Catherine, she says that, “it is a new circumstance in romance I acknowledge, and dreadfully derogatory of an heroine’s dignity” ([1818] 2003a, 227). She is responding to a protestation that she assumes her reader will have made. This assumes knowledge of the readers’ thoughts, and an intimacy with their feelings, which is very similar to the knowledge and intimacy shared in the letters.

Another way that Austen creates a kinship with her audience is by using negative language to describe events which would generally be thought of as positive occurrences, and positive language to describe events which would generally be perceived as negative. Most of these instances are used to relate the circumstances of, as Gooneratne puts it, “persons slandered, envied, spied upon, ridiculed, or in some other way victimized by a polite neighborhood” (1970, 18). When she relates, to Cassandra, Mrs. Portman’s entrance into Dorsetshire society she tells her that the “good natured world, as usual, extolled her beauty so highly, that all the neighbourhood have had the pleasure of being disappointed” (1798d, 20). Here, there are two instances which are portrayed as good, while they yield a negative affect. First, the good-natured world’s commendation of Mrs. Portman would seem, in itself, to be promising; however, because the hopes of the neighborhood were raised to a standard which she did not meet, they become negative. Her neighbors are disappointed in

her. However, the circumstance is related in a positive way. The neighborhood's disappointment is described as pleasurable. The passage is at once humorous and economical social commentary. The comment is amusing because it implies that the neighborhood does enjoy the disappointment they have with Mrs. Portman, perhaps because it gives them something to gossip about and to write about in their letters to relatives far away. It is also only funny to those who understand this to be an ironic truth. Similar commentary is made in many of her letters: for example, she tells Cassandra that "Charles Powlett gave a dance on Thursday, to the great disturbance of his neighbours, of course, who, you know, take a most lively interest in the state of his finances, and live in the hopes of seeing him soon ruined" (1798e, 25). The comment is funny if the reader understands small town life. It appears that, in these rustic country neighborhoods, the fortunes of their neighbors are the primary entertainment of society. Jane and Cassandra both would have had a clear appreciation of that small town dynamic. As Vivien Jones points out, "because of their intimate familiarity with each other's views, there is no need for Austen to spell out to Cassandra the kinds of information or opinions which would have been fascinating to modern readers" (2003, xx). Jane assumes that Cassandra is aware of the situation between Charles Powlett and his neighbors, and therefore she is giving her sister more information than is accessible to modern readers.

In the novels the audience is given the background information needed, and therefore this type of phrase can be more explicit. In *Pride and Prejudice*, after Wickham's disclosure of Mr. Darcy's supposed wrongdoings, the narrator states that "everybody was pleased to think how much they had always disliked Mr. Darcy before they had known anything of the matter" (Austen [1813] 2003, 136). The neighborhood is predisposed to dislike, and to delight in the dislike, and they do not scruple to dislike without cause. The justification, in this case, comes after most people's dislike is already fixed, and therefore, is convenient, but is not actually a cause. The knowledge gives the neighborhood new gossip and allows them to revitalize the old gossip. This humorous comment addresses one of the key themes of the novel, prejudice. These comments have levels of meaning. The underlying meaning is comprehended by those who understand something of the human nature about which Austen is commenting. This creates the esoteric joke, and the illusion of a circle of select individuals who understand it, therefore creating another instance of intimacy between Austen and her public audience who understand her nuances.

The narrator in the novels, especially during the exposition and the dénouement, is having a conversation with the audience in very much the same way that Austen is having a conversation with Cassandra. Austen subtly persuades her readers to accept her narrator's opinions as their own, and she purposefully creates a kinship in order to accomplish this goal. Her humor is only accessible to those who enter into this understanding, and therefore is protected from those who would ridicule. Ironic commentary after objective exposition, assumed audience responses, and complicated expressions are just a few of her signature linguistic devices which help create this solidarity. The consistency between her linguistic choices in the novels and in her letters shows that her narrators are artistically refined expressions of herself. Austen herself is her narrator, and by reading the novels, readers are entering a relationship with her.

The Novel Reader: Modern Intimacy with Austen

The problems with reading the letters in a bound edition cannot be overstated. Readers who love Austen's novels, and feel a kinship with her after reading them, sometimes see the letters as a means of becoming more intimate with Austen. However, they cannot recreate the intimacy which they find in the novels. Janet Altman points out that "the epistolary form is unique in making the reader (narratee) almost as important an agent in the narrative as the writer (narrator)" (1982, 88). The addressee is always on the mind of the addressor, dictating what information is written and how the information is communicated. A personal letter is always written with a specific reader in mind, and is uniquely open to interpretation by that reader. Because of the writer's intimacy with the reader, she knows how the reader will interpret the information, and she expects a response to it.

Response is part of the letter-writing experience. Letters are never strictly informational as they are written with the view of eliciting some sort of reaction from the reader. This is why the letter is closer to a conversation than any other literary genre. The reader's response is called upon, and tantamount in the writing of an epistle. Austen's conversational style in her novels re-creates this reader-response experience. The linguistic strategies that she uses in her letters, imposing opinions on her readers, subtly slipping social commentary into a story, and using phrasing which creates a community of understanding, are also used in her novels. Her narrators ventriloquially resem-

ble herself in her first person narratives to her family and friends. This suggests that her conversation with Cassandra and her other recipients is similar to the conversation in which she engages the reader of the novels.

While reading the letters can help novel readers understand why they feel a kinship with Austen, it does not enhance this experience. Rather, it diminishes it. The novels dissolve differences between the reader and the writer while still engaging their responses. The boundaries of time, space, and social practices are suspended when the reader engages in this discussion with Austen through her narrators. These narrators beg the audience to be in agreement with the writer and, because the writer is herself that narrator, the intimacy is similar to that in her letters. However, in the case of the letters, the modern reader was not the intended recipient. Modern readers have limited or no access to the original documents and cannot read them in the same way as the intended recipient. Modern readers cannot readily understand inside jokes and family names which were easily identifiable by Austen and her social milieu. The fact that they are removed from Austen's social world is amplified by these difficulties. In the novels, the social world is re-created for readers, in the letters it exists only for those previously initiated into a relationship with Austen.

The letters exist, published and pilfered by the modern world. They are typeset and bound for easy consumption, but they are not ours. We, as modern readers and literary critics, are eavesdroppers on Austen's private life, a life which we can no longer understand. However, in her novels, Austen allows us to enter the same kind of confidential relationship which we would have as addressees of her letters. Analyzing the letters can help us understand how she creates this intimacy in the novels. Through the novels we can become as intimate with Austen as if she wrote letters specifically to us. The novels make modern readers as important to the text as the recipient was to the letter, allowing us to feel as if we are Cassandra.

Notes

1. The quotation in my title may be found in Austen 1813e, 249. In a study such as this it is interesting to note that Austen herself refers to handwriting and to the physical considerations of letter writing within her own letters. This particular comment is a compliment to Cassandra.

2. These published letters must be distinguished from other collections by writers who gathered and edited their own letters for publication. It is

also, perhaps, earlier critics' familiarity with these literary letters which excited false expectations. Austen's letters were gathered and published long after her death. Written for family members and friends, and willed to nieces and nephews by their recipients, the letters were never intended for publication.

3. Le Faye's edition has a double line in the middle of a page where there is a great shift in time period of location, yet it is extremely easy to continue reading without noticing this small editorial consideration, and therefore does not stop the flow of the letters as narrative discourse.

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