

**“UNNATURAL CONDUCT & FORCED DIFFICULTIES”:  
AUSTEN, READING, AND THE PARADOX OF THE FEMININE IDEAL**

by

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## ABSTRACT

Though some scholars have maintained that Jane Austen closely adheres to the ideology of courtesy novels and conduct literature, I argue that Austen uses her knowledge of this ideology to reveal the flaws in reader assumptions about the presumed commonsensical nature of the courtesy novel and its feminine ideal. Austen is familiar with the conventions of eighteenth-century fiction, but, rather than adopting its tropes in her own work, she uses realism to parody its excesses and improbabilities; this realism then works against reader expectations and exposes paradoxes inherent in the courtesy novel and in conduct-book literature itself.

In my thesis I observe how Austen uses courtesy novel tropes to expose or even mock the courtesy novel's inherently unrealistic qualities, and I do so by examining the act of "reading" in her novels: specifically, I argue that the literal reading that Austen's characters engage in does not produce the expected outcomes predicted by conduct books and courtesy novels; that the figurative reading of one character by another demonstrates the dangerousness and unsuitability of the heroine as "open book," as conduct books and courtesy novels urged her to be, as well as the irrationality and hypocrisy of acting the part of "closed book" to her intended lover; and, finally, that the act of reading an Austen novel is intended to prevent the absorption or interpretation of unrealistic ideals, through insistence on (more) realistic outcomes and through narrative intervention.

## **DEDICATION**

To Dr. Oliver,  
for her dedication, commitment, and investment in me and my education  
for the time, talent, advice, and grace that she has contributed to this project

To my sister, Bethany,  
for never losing interest in my passions and pursuits

To my mother and father,  
for everything

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## ABBREVIATIONS

<i>E</i> .....	<i>Emma</i>
<i>MP</i> .....	<i>Mansfield Park</i>
<i>NA</i> .....	<i>Northanger Abbey, Lady Susan, The Watsons, Sanditon</i>
<i>P</i> .....	<i>Persuasion</i>
<i>P&amp;P</i> .....	<i>Pride and Prejudice</i>
<i>S&amp;S</i> .....	<i>Sense and Sensibility</i>

## INTRODUCTION

LYDIA: Here, my dear Lucy, hide these books. Quick, quick! Fling *Peregrine Pickle* under the toilet—throw *Roderick Random* into the closet...so, so—now lay *Mrs. Chapone* in sight, and leave *Fordyce's Sermons* open on the table.

LUCY: O burn it, ma'am! The hair-dresser has torn away as far as *Proper Pride*.

LYDIA: Never mind—open at *Sobriety*.

Richard Brinsley Sheridan, *The Rivals*

In 1784, the Austen family performed Sheridan's play *The Rivals* in front of their friends and family at the Steventon parish (Tomalin 40). Although Jane Austen would only have been eight at the time, and might not even have participated on the stage, the scene quoted above captures an opposing dynamic between popular literary genres of the eighteenth century that closely mimics Austen's own eventual observations. At the end of Chapter V in *Northanger Abbey*, Austen embarks on a defense of the novel that laments the genre's "Lydias"—the fickle fans who nurse their *Peregrine Pickles* in private, but who perpetuate the sullied reputations of their favorite novels by refusing to publicly condone their own choice of reading material. These young women, Austen writes, would proudly produce any copy of *The Spectator* they were reading, but, when caught with a copy of fiction, each and every one of these ladies "lays down her book with affected indifference, or momentary shame" (36). Austen's famous soliloquy faced more than one intimidating foe: an early penchant for sexual or otherwise unsavory content in the novel's earliest examples created a stigma against the genre that was cherished long after

novelists began to scrub their writing clean, and nothing cherished the stigma longer than that bastion of moral ideology so popular in the eighteenth century—the conduct book.

Though in *The Rivals* its pages are reduced to papering Lydia's curls, the conduct book, also known as the courtesy book, and the ideas it contained became such an influential force in eighteenth-century culture that its originally nascent dictates gradually became part of what Nancy Armstrong calls "the domain of common sense" (63). When addressing young, genteel women, this common sense centered around defining proper female attitudes and behaviors on three levels: first, the interiority of a woman's virtues; second, her behavior as it arises from those virtues; and third, how her behavior does or does not secure the right kind of man for her marriage partner. Conduct literature was written under the assumption that any woman can possess the correct virtues and behaviors by modeling her own character on the constructed feminine ideal that conduct literature displays. What does this ideal woman of virtue look like? In *The Young Ladies Conduct; or Rules for Education*, Essex describes her, by referencing her as depicted in Fenelon's *Telemachus*:

She is mild, simple-hearted, discreet; her Hands despise not Labour... there is not found in her either Passion, Self-Conceit, Levity or Humoursomeness, as in other Women...her Mind, no more than her Body, is ever set off with vain Ornaments; her Imagination, tho' lively, is bridled by her Discretion; she speaks not but for Necessity; and if she opens her Mouth, the sweet Perswasions, and the native Graces, distil from her Lips. (126–27)

Conduct literature promised that any woman who meticulously observed its dictates was capable of becoming this paragon of female excellence. Such a woman, however, would have a difficult

task before her, for conduct literature's influence extended to many different subjects. In modern scholarship, conduct literature is used to evaluate a variety of values and ideals in the long eighteenth century, and conduct books are an important reference point in such varied works as Nancy Armstrong's *Desire and Domestic Fiction*, Hazel Jones's *Jane Austen and Marriage*, Sylvia Kasey Marks's *Sir Charles Grandison: The Compleat Conduct Book*, Kathleen M. Oliver's *Samuel Richardson, Dress, and Discourse*, Jacqueline Pearson's *Women's Reading in Britain*, and Ingrid Tague's *Women of Quality*.

Conduct literature's particular focus on a woman's inner character caused it to uphold intangible virtues such as meekness, modesty, gentleness, and kindness, but it was still highly involved with the minutia of a woman's outward behavior, with what she wears, drinks, plays, dances, studies, sews—and reads. Conduct literature concerned itself with women's reading because literature could be at once a legitimate use of a woman's free time and a dangerous occupation that could ruin her education, morals, and marital potential. A proper course of reading, such as one assigned by conduct literature, was useful both for occupying a young woman's ample leisure time, and for counteracting the naturally bad tendencies that were supposed to be part of a woman's nature. Novels, on the other hand, set a poor example for readers' conduct and left romantic illusions in their heads that could cause faulty judgment—particularly in the area of marriage where a young woman's unrealistic expectations might stand in the way of a suitable match.

A plethora of conduct manuals was published throughout the eighteenth century, and the authors did not always see eye to eye—for example, Thomas Gisborne calls “absurd” John Gregory's advice that, if a woman should actually feel love for her husband, she should take

pains to conceal the fact from him. Yet, when it comes to an evaluation of the novel and its effects on the female mind, the denunciations are fairly uniform. According to conduct literature, the novel is supposed to “hurry [women] into marriages terminating in unhappiness” (Gisborne 217), “give a romantic turn to the mind,” “[create] fatal mistakes in conduct” (Gregory 93-94), and “inculcate such light, over-gay Notions, as may by unperceiv’d Degrees soften and mislead the Understanding” (Wilkes, *An Essay* 27). It is no wonder that James Fordyce, in his *Sermons to Young Women*, declares that “she who can bear to peruse [novels] must in her soul be a prostitute” (91).

If conduct literature paints a dismal picture of the novel’s merits, the novel itself is not always its own best advocate. In her defense of the novel, Austen pointedly attacks the tendency of novelists to undervalue their own work: “I will not adopt that ungenerous and impolitic custom so common with novel writers, of degrading by their contemptuous censure the very performances, to the number of which they are themselves adding” (36). Ironically, a courtesy novel heroine is very unlikely to indulge in reading an actual novel: in Sarah Fielding’s *The History of Ophelia*, the eponymous heroine maintains her childhood innocence through the contents of her library, which are composed only of theological and historical works; in Charlotte Smith’s *Emmeline*, the heroine’s literary collection is more specifically composed of “Spencer and Milton, two or three volumes of the Spectator, an old edition of Shakespeare, and an odd volume or two of Pope” (8). Yet, while any courtesy heroine worth her salt has stockpiled a library of serious literature, other characters who overindulge in romances and novels often carry unrealistic expectations of the world, accompanied by wild imaginations and silly fantasies.

Even outside of the text, novelists could be ambivalent about their medium: in the preamble to her first novel, *Evelina*, the most Frances Burney dares to expect from her fictional effort is that, if it does not improve her readers, at least it does not harm them (10). *Evelina*, of course, vastly exceeded Burney's modest expectations; critics praised her novel not only as entertaining, but also as instructive for young readers (Pearson 197). Frances Burney's success stemmed from a shift in novel writing in which a new kind of fiction, a courtesy novel, blended the entertainment of novels with the didactic morality of conduct literature. Edward Jacobs argues that this tradition of courtesy novels began in the mid-eighteenth century with Samuel Richardson, a writer whose fiction became acceptable because "his virtuous, didactic style offered an antidote to the allegedly immoral and corrupting tradition of fiction practiced by [previous female novelists]" (614). Richardson's courtesy novel model gained tremendous popularity, and women novelists after Richardson used it to validate their own writing; in her article on female writers in the eighteenth century, Ruth Perry specifically identifies Richardson's influence on Frances Sheridan, Charlotte Lennox, Charlotte Smith, and Frances Burney, among others (126; 129). These novelists that adopted conduct book ideals managed to gain conduct literature's explicit approval and eclipse earlier definitions of the genre, although conduct literature was still damning "bad" novels well into the nineteenth century. Like her literary predecessors, Austen was aware that conduct books and courtesy novels were being regularly blended; Armstrong writes of Austen specifically that "Austen knew perfectly well her readers had identified [conduct book] rules not only with common sense, if not always with nature, but also with the form of the novel itself" (63). Thus, the "common sense" nature of conduct literature fits in well with the claims to realism that novels made. The public must have

agreed—this marriage of genres proved to be particularly successful, and, as Linda Hunt writes: “the line between the conduct books and the female novels of the period [became] often quite thin; the two genres at times virtually shade one another” (9).

Courtesy novels intimately aligned themselves with conduct books, and by extension became acceptable texts for young women to read because they based reward and punishment on a system of meritocracy and created models of female excellence that readers were encouraged to emulate. Yet, because of this blending of genres, the courtesy novel is rife with paradoxes: it is fiction that purports to present a realistic depiction of life, yet, despite its presumed realism, it intentionally promotes an idealized model of feminine behavior imported from conduct-book literature. In addition, the genre’s reliance on conduct book ideology forces it to condemn itself as reading material.

If, as Armstrong claims, Austen was aware of conduct literature’s inroads in the novel form, how does she use this knowledge within her own writings? Austen, though a voracious reader of novels and courtesy novels alike, criticized the feminine ideal as exemplified by the courtesy novel heroine as unrealistic and “absurd.” Of Sarah Burney’s courtesy novel *Clarentine* she says: “It is full of unnatural conduct & forced difficulties, without striking merit of any kind” (qtd. in Waldron 2). Austen’s own writing eschews these improbabilities in favor of a natural approach—indeed, one of her neighbors said of *Emma* that it is even “too natural to be interesting” (4).

Though some scholars have maintained that Austen closely adheres to the courtesy novel platform, I would argue that Austen uses her knowledge of its rules to reveal the flaws in reader assumptions about the presumed commonsensical nature of the courtesy novel and its feminine

ideal. Austen is familiar with the conventions of eighteenth-century fiction, but, rather than adopting these tropes in her own work, she uses realism to parody their excesses and improbabilities; this realism then works against reader expectations and exposes paradoxes inherent in the courtesy novel and in conduct-book literature itself. In my thesis I observe how Austen uses courtesy novel tropes to expose or even mock the courtesy novel's inherently unrealistic qualities, and I do so by examining the act of "reading" in her novels: specifically, I argue that the literal reading that Austen's characters engage in does not produce the expected outcomes predicted by conduct books and courtesy novels; that the figurative reading of one character by another demonstrates the dangerousness and unsuitability of the heroine as "open book," as conduct books and courtesy novels urged her to be, as well as the irrationality and hypocrisy of acting the part of "closed book" to her intended lover; and, finally, that the act of reading an Austen novel is intended to prevent the absorption or interpretation of unrealistic ideals, through insistence on (more) realistic outcomes and through the intervention of a first-person, omniscient narrator.

### ***Review of Literature***

Despite my arguments to the contrary, scholars have not always seen so much distance between Austen's heroines and those of the courtesy novels. Even during Austen's lifetime, her novels were being analyzed on the basis of their wholesomeness and morality. Although her contemporary critics might find Elizabeth Bennet to be too pert and witty, they generally accepted Henry Austen's portrayal of "Dear Aunt Jane," and found in her books, "many sober and salutary maxims for the conduct of life" (qtd. in Waldron 4). In her essay, "A Woman's

Portion: Jane Austen and the Female Character,” Linda Hunt argues that Austen gradually shifts into the role of a moralist in her later writings. Focusing only on the last three novels that Austen wrote as examples of the conduct literature influence in her writing, Hunt uses Austen’s inexperience and changing attitude to explain her earlier work’s resistance to this same influence: “As Jane Austen matured as a novelist, the accepted feminine ideal became a challenge...she was both more fully convinced than ever before of the social definition of femininity and also more confident artistically” (10). Hunt argues that Austen tries in her later novels, almost as an artistic challenge, to create a realistic version of the feminine ideal; yet, as I argue, this ideal is inherently unrealistic, and therefore impossible for Austen, or anyone, to convincingly create in fictional form. Hunt even writes that Austen defines realism as a mixture of the good and the bad, and conduct literature leaves no room for the bad in its definition of the ideal female. I am also unconvinced by Hunt’s assertions that Austen grew to accept this ideal as preferable without evidence from outside the novels—after all, shortly before her death, and long after she had published *Mansfield Park*, Austen wrote to her niece that, “pictures of perfection as you know make me sick & wicked,” and that Anne Elliot is “almost too good for me” (*Letters* 335).

In her 1974 article, “The Conduct-Book Heroine of *Mansfield Park*,” Marian Fowler, too, considers Austen’s novel in the light of conduct literature ideology, and in the character of Fanny Price finds a model of the feminine ideal. Initially, though, Fowler is misleading in her description of *Mansfield Park*’s popularity: she claims that Austen was motivated to draw her heroine from conduct literature because of the popularity courtesy novel heroines enjoyed. Her further assertions that *Mansfield Park* was very popular in its day (a consequence, it is implied,

of Fanny's conduct literature roots), and that Austen's "family and friends approved wholeheartedly" (34) of the heroine downplays the relative unpopularity of the novel when compared with the earlier success of *Pride and Prejudice* whose heroine, Elizabeth Bennet, could be considered a conduct literature nightmare. In addition, in placing Fanny as courtesy novel heroine, Fowler focuses on minor points of her behavior, such as her lack of wit, while ignoring elements that don't support her thesis, such as Fanny's similar lack of conversational skills—a defect neither supported in conduct literature, nor emulated by courtesy novel heroines.

This narrow focus on behavior is similarly problematic in Penelope Fritzer's *Jane Austen and Eighteenth-Century Courtesy Books*. After a strict comparison of conduct literature recommendations to specific instances of behavior in Austen's novels, Fritzer argues that Austen generally falls in line with conduct literature ideology. Yet, her points of agreement are so minute that they ignore both the behavioral departures and complications within the broader scope. Elizabeth Bennet may prefer reading to cards, but what about her ready wit, her physical robustness, and her independent willfulness in the face of her mother's wishes? Fritzer acknowledges that Elizabeth does depart from the ideal at some points, but claims that she never strays "from the spirit" (54) of conduct literature, without clarifying exactly what that spirit is. It certainly isn't the spirit that preferences male over female desire or claims that modesty, meekness, and reserve are the most attractive features for a man to find in a woman.

Later scholars have responded to the problematic and contradictory behavior of Austen's characters by arguing that her relationship with conduct literature is essentially ambiguous. In writing about manners in Austen's novels and eighteenth-century society, Paula Byrne acknowledges that the relationship between the author's works and the conduct literature code is

“ambivalent,” attributing the mixture of behaviors to Austen’s appreciation of good manners, yet simultaneous abhorrence of hypocrisy. In recognizing this ambivalence, both Laura Voracheck in her article “Intertextuality and Ideology: Jane Austen’s *Pride and Prejudice* and James Fordyce’s *Sermons to Young Women*” and Jacqueline Reid-Walsh in her article “She Learned Romance as She Grew Older: From Conduct Book Propriety to Romance in *Persuasion*” try to define a middle ground where Austen’s heroines at times adhere to and at times break away from conduct literature ideals. Though this middle ground incorporates all the varieties of character behavior, its flexibility comes at the cost of a strong understanding of Austen’s attitude toward conduct literature and its specific dictates. The difficulty of reading into a character’s behavior is further highlighted in Barbara Horowitz’s article “Lady Susan: The Wicked Mother in Jane Austen’s *Work*.” Horowitz points out that, though the reader of Austen’s short novel *Lady Susan* is aware of the title character’s bad tendencies and deplorable character, Lady Susan can incorporate conduct literature dictates so effectively into her behavior that other characters are almost duped into believing that she is a good person.

Thus, due to behavior’s potentially deceptive appearance and its inability to measure definitively adherence to the feminine ideal in Austen’s works, a more successful method of analysis is modeled in Patricia Spacks’ 1983 article “The Talent of Ready Utterance: Eighteenth-Century Female Gossip.” In her comparison of the conduct book’s portrayal of gossip to the function of gossip in Austen’s *Emma*, Spacks does choose to examine some significant instances of behavior in the novel, but her analysis also broadens to incorporate characterization, plot structure, and themes. This approach creates a much more definitive argument where Spacks concludes that gossip is a potentially enlightening and liberating source of power for women, and

is also “the foundation and the means of written narrative” (13). In my examination of reading in Austen’s text, I will similarly avoid cataloguing narrow instances of behavior and will, instead, examine characters, plot structure, and the authorial voice as well as the literal act of reading in Austen’s novels.

### ***Research Methodology***

In my analysis of Austen’s novels, I combine two socio-historically-based theoretical methodologies—new historicism and literary history. Although some deem both literary history and new historicism to be passé, together they offer a flexible, complex, and historically grounded methodology for analyzing literary texts from the Regency period.

Literary history is problematic in several respects: it not only emphasizes the study of canonical works, but it also serves to create the canon, as Annette Kolodny has argued. In addition, it tends towards formalistic analysis of textual elements, as well as a teleological approach to literary history. Finally, literary history (particularly feminist literary history) has been rightfully accused of engaging in essentialism, by reading fictional works as indicative of real, lived experience. Yet, literary history has as its primary emphasis the analysis of the development of and changes to specific genres and literary conventions, and it is these latter aspects of literary history that I mean to employ in my examination of Austen’s novels.

New Historicism informs my project in the following ways: first, the belief that, “literary and non-literary ‘texts’ circulate inseparably” (Veeder 2) is central to my own examination of the relationship between novels (literary texts) and conduct books (non-literary texts). Georgian-era conduct books and domestic novels constantly reference each other, with conduct books

repeatedly denouncing novels and with novels consciously incorporating elements and ideology from conduct books into their own narratives. Another tenet of new historicist practice is the belief that, “every expressive act is embedded in a network of material practices” (Veeser 2); significantly, the material practices of reading and writing inform Austen’s own texts and the manner in which she chooses to construct them. Finally, new historicism argues that history and the arts influence each other, and my thesis suggests that Austen was cognizant of the effect of novels and other literary texts in providing readers with narratives for the interpretation of their own lived experiences.

### ***Chapter Outlines***

Chapter One begins my investigation by examining the reading material of Austen’s heroines and how it does—or does not—affect these heroines in the ways expected and predicted by conduct books and courtesy novels. Conduct literature and courtesy novels alike portray women as extremely impressionable—like sponges that will soak up any reading material with which they come into contact. As in Edgeworth’s *Belinda* or Lennox’s *The Female Quixote*, Austen’s characters interact with and are influenced by the things they read; they are also, however, capable of interpreting, resisting, and applying their reading material rather than merely internalizing it. Catherine Morland and Fanny Price are both confronted with what the conduct books would identify as “bad” reading: for Catherine, it is the sensationalism of Gothic novels; for Fanny, it is the moral ambiguity of *Lover’s Vows*. Rather than confusing their worldviews, however, these texts aid the heroines in recognizing and interpreting their realities, allowing them to “read” the world around them more accurately than those characters who have

not seriously engaged with or contemplated the same literature. Of course, Catherine overstates General Tilney's evil propensities—he is no murderer—but she is correct in identifying him as morally bankrupt; *Lover's Vows* provides Fanny with an accurate depiction of the true state of affairs at Mansfield Park. For Austen, “bad” reading is not really bad at all, but instead offers insights into motivations and actions of which women would otherwise remain ignorant, often to their detriment (Ellis 3–7).

Characters such as Mrs. Morland, Anne Elliot, and Marianne Dashwood, on the other hand, use “good” reading—even conduct literature itself—to try and influence their own behavior or the behavior of others. Both Mrs. Morland and Anne Elliot offer serious reading as an antidote for others' lovesickness; Marianne Dashwood assigns herself a six hour-per-day “course of serious study” (260) as a means of curbing her sensibility. Rather than transforming the readers conduct, however, these well-meant efforts are essentially ineffective, or at least only minimally helpful to the characters' real-life problems. Henry Crawford's reading of Shakespeare is similarly an example of good reading—particularly when compared with the earlier play *Lover's Vows*—but, rather than intending for his performance to benefit Fanny Price, Henry's impassioned reading is a manipulation of identities that only morally confuses her.

My second chapter examines the problems Austen posits when characters “read” the body language of others, analyzing how Austen's depictions of these “readings” undermine the conventional wisdom of the conduct book. Conduct book literature suggests that young women should be “open books,” that is, transparently readable to others, and the courtesy novel heroine upholds the ideal of the female as an “open book” through her body, which physically betrays her thoughts and emotions through blushes, sighs, faints, and tremors—signs of innocence or

artlessness. Conduct literature also, however, strongly warns against women revealing romantic affections to men until such time as they properly declare themselves. As James Fordyce writes, “[Men] refuse their admiration, where it is courted: where it seems rather shunned, they love to bestow it” (60). According to conduct literature, to adopt reserve towards a male object is not only desirable as a matter of virtue, but will actually promote his affection. In Austen’s novels, however, extreme prudence proves risky to women such as Jane Bennet and Jane Fairfax who attempt to shield their emotions behind a veil of reserve. As Charlotte Lucas explains so explicitly: “If a woman conceals her affection...from the object of it, she may lose the opportunity of fixing him” (*P&P* 15). As both Jane Bennet and Jane Fairfax discover, for a woman in one of Austen’s novels to give the appearance of rejecting a man’s attentions is to risk losing that attention completely—it simply isn’t realistic for women to expect that coolness on their part will attract admirers. Even Mr. Collins, who seems to appreciate the intricacies of female delicacy more than anyone, finds his affection for Elizabeth cooling after two or three firm repulses of his proposal.

Marianne and Elinor Dashwood are less concerned with proper courtship behavior than they are each naturally inclined toward a different dictate of conduct literature—Marianne is a very open character, while Elinor is a very closed one. While these heroines are innately open and closed at the beginning of the novel, they gradually force their behavior to conform to an extreme version of their natural selves. In attempting to keep her love for Edward a secret, Elinor’s repression causes her to suffer from suspense and physical pain. In attempting to emulate the behavior of heroines of sensibility, Marianne indulges in and encourages an emotional excess that creates a serious illness and nearly kills her. Rather than endorsing a

paraded or inauthentic model of behavior, Austen applauds Catherine Morland and Anne Elliot for displaying natural emotions, and, in Anne's case, for using discernment in her reserve. Because of her natural openness, Catherine is unable to conceal many of her thoughts and emotions from others; as such, she is easily read by Henry Tilney, who quickly becomes aware of her attachment to him. Rather than charging Catherine with immodesty, however, Austen rewards her artlessness with Henry's love. Anne Elliot also uses open behavior to communicate with Captain Wentworth, but her openness is perhaps applied more wisely—instead of simply existing as an object to be read, Anne reads Captain Wentworth's body language for signs of his returning affection. As long as Wentworth affects indifference, Anne adopts reserve; when Wentworth's body language displays his love and appreciation for her, Anne reciprocates with expressive behavior.

Chapter Three then explores the ways in which Austen introduces and subverts the tropes or conventional plotlines of courtesy novels as a way of exposing their inherently unrealistic properties. One of the central paradoxes of the courtesy novel is its tendency to urge its readers to use conduct literature ideology as a guidebook to life, while simultaneously presenting a heroine whose strange adventures and romantic amours contradict the dull and dutiful life imagined for the feminine ideal. While Austen adheres to the expected conventions of her genre to a certain extent, her effort to present life as realistically as possible prevents her heroines from engaging in these strange adventures or from finding fulfillment through adherence to the dictates of conduct literature. Yet, though they are not assaulted in carriages or kidnapped from masquerades, Austen insists that her characters can be heroines in the midst of their normal lives. Even more than being realistic, these lives are desirable: the few characters

who do live out the role of a courtesy novel heroine, such as Jane Fairfax or Eliza Williams, find themselves entangled in painful and unwanted circumstances.

The two Austen heroines who most consistently rely on novelistic imaginings are Marianne Dashwood and Emma Woodhouse. Marianne views herself as a sentimental, romantic heroine, yet she ultimately finds that her intended plot does not proceed as planned precisely because real life operates differently from novels. Emma Woodhouse continuously recycles novel plots for her own matchmaking purposes. Although she calls herself an “imaginist,” Emma is really more of a revisionist, for all the many marital schemes that she constructs are borrowed from eighteenth-century novels. Emma attempts to weave novelistic plots into the small town doings that surround her, but she continuously fails because she is forcing others into fictional stories, not paying attention to the realities of their lives. Only when Emma faces reality does she find happiness and allow others to enjoy happiness as well.

The dictates of conduct literature paint marriage as a responsibility and parental authority as binding, and courtesy novels portray the domestic role that emerges from adherence to these duties as self-actualizing for the female characters. Yet, though Austen’s heroines are pressured to accept these conventional marital plots, they ultimately resist them by placing their own happiness before domestic fulfillment. In *Pride and Prejudice*, Elizabeth Bennet refuses two offers of marriage because she does not wish to marry without love and mutual respect, despite the realization that she may never receive another offer. In *Mansfield Park*, the timid Fanny Price boldly refuses to marry the wealthy Henry Crawford, despite Sir Thomas’s insistence that it is a great match. However, in *Persuasion*, Anne Elliot does follow the advice of her elders—and spends the next eight years of her life regretting it. Even then, she does not try to relieve her

years of suffering by accepting an offer where there is no love or respect. While courtesy novels portray the role of a spinster as ridiculous—even selfish—Austen’s heroines will risk becoming a member of that state before they will enter into anything except a companionable marriage.

My third chapter also outlines the ways in which Austen attempts to recall her readers to the real world, reminding them that no work of fiction should be emulated in reality. Austen ensures that her readers recognize her own novels as fiction, not as guides upon which her readers should model their own lives. Instead of adopting and living through fiction, as Emma does, Austen’s most successful readers are informed by the Gothic novels or political plays that they read without being transformed by them. Instead of allowing readers to accept comfortably the fiction that she offers, Austen always reminds us that we are reading a novel through her intrusive narrative voice, the use of summary for love scenes, and the novels’ abrupt closures. Unlike many of her literary predecessors, Austen does not pretend to be an “editor” presenting readers with a “found” manuscript; her novels do not pretend to be anything but fiction.

In my conclusion, I examine the future direction of reading in Austen’s novels by applying the arguments of my previous chapters to her unfinished manuscript, *Sanditon*. Although it is only composed of twelve chapters, *Sanditon* includes significant material on literal reading, reading the body, and the use of courtesy novel plots. Rather than shifting her views on conduct literature and incorporating the feminine ideal in her work, as Linda Hunt argues, Austen’s final writing continues to invert, parody, and even mock the tropes of conduct literature and courtesy novels alike.

## CHAPTER ONE – “She Never Had Any Objection to Books”: Literal Reading

If any single moment could serve as the death knell for conduct literature in Austen’s works, it would be at the end of Chapter XIV in *Pride and Prejudice* when Mr. Collins picks up a copy of Fordyce’s *Sermons* with which to wile away the evening. The literary selections of this boorish clergyman are likely to incite readers’ aversion to books of a similar vein, and Mr. Collins has also just voiced a condemnation of novels that could hardly be endearing to the readers of *Pride and Prejudice*: “a book was produced; but on beholding it (for every thing pronounced it to be from a circulating library,) he started back, and begging pardon, protested that he never read novels” (51). Although Mr. Collins’s opinions are not aligned with those of the Bennet family, this scene is an exemplary model of the general biases for and against different genres of reading material in eighteenth-century society: novels are unrealistic and dangerous, while conduct books are laudable and instructive.

Like Kitty and Lydia Bennet, however, who express astonishment at Mr. Collins’s sentiments, Austen herself was no literary snob—she notes in a letter that her entire immediate family had no fear of a circulating library, and that they were “great Novel-readers & not ashamed of being so” (*Letters* 26). Thus, Mr. Collins’s choice could hardly be seen as Austen’s endorsement of the *Sermons*—yet, neither is this scene a straightforward denunciation of conduct literature. After Lydia’s rude interruption, Mr. Collins notes to Mrs. Bennet that “I have often observed how little young ladies are interested by books of a serious stamp...It amazes me, I confess;--for certainly, there can be nothing so advantageous to them as instruction” (52). Mr. Collins’s remarks may not often be insightful, but this statement does not entirely differ from Elizabeth’s later declaration to her father concerning Lydia’s improper behavior: “If you, my

dear father, will not take the trouble of...teaching her that her present pursuits are not to be the business of her life, she will soon be beyond the reach of amendment” (176). Elizabeth recommends parental intervention, Mr. Collins advocates literary instruction—both, however, agree that Lydia must be “taught” the proper kind of behavior. Mr. Collins’s use of conduct literature does not necessarily condemn that genre as foolish, even if Mr. Collins is, himself, a fool; unlike courtesy novels, Austen does not use reading materials in her novels as a straightforward indicator of a character’s foibles or merits.

Mr. Collins is not mistaken in his assessment of Lydia or her need for instruction, rather, the flaw in Mr. Collins’s choice is his use of reading material as a vehicle for this instruction. Austen presents all books as only minor influences on behavior and character; the most significant influences are people, as examples of good and bad behavior and as mentors providing guidance and advice, whether good or bad. Lydia is uncontrollable because her mother has *taught* her to be so, through her example and through her words; no conduct book can influence Lydia, precisely because she has been encouraged to act otherwise. Thus, in Austen’s novels, reading does not have the absolute sway over women’s character that conduct literature assumes; in addition, when certain reading materials do affect her characters, they are never influenced by such materials in the ways the courtesy novels exemplify and conduct literature predicts.

### ***“An Injured Body”: Novels in the Eighteenth Century***

Leisure time for English women from the middle and upper stations greatly increased during the eighteenth century: household goods that had traditionally been produced by women

in the home were now being manufactured in the marketplace with more efficiency; instead of appreciating a wife for her skills or ability to perform labor, the middle classes were gradually learning to value non-working wives and daughters as symbols of gentility (Earle 10; Laurence 116-17, 273; Watt 44-45). Contemporary commentators lamented women of leisure's apparent laziness, but conduct literature viewed the social stigma against working women as problematic in an entirely different way—it claims that young women were simply left with too much time on their hands. Women were considered to be unstable and in need of constant supervision lest they lapse into naturally bad tendencies; this difficulty, together with women's lack of employment opportunities, allowed women to possess an amount of leisure time that many considered potentially dangerous to their temperament and education. Thomas Gisborne opens his chapter "On the Employment of Time" by stating that, "To occupy the mind with useful employments is among the best methods of guarding it from surrendering itself to dissipation" (210), while John Gregory claims to have seen women advance towards degeneracy due to a lack of domestic employment that "would have rendered them respectable and useful members of society" (60). Yet, instead of leisure time causing women to seek frivolous entertainment outside of the home, as many assumed, twentieth- and twenty-first-century critics have noted that an increase in this leisure time actually corresponds to an increase in female literacy (Pearson xi; Watt 44). Conduct literature may have encouraged this rise in female literacy because conduct writers often used reading as a cornerstone of their model for female occupation: Fordyce writes that, with books, a woman "need never be at a loss," and that, through reading, she can avoid "the toils of restless amusement, and the sighs of immoderate mirth" (204).

Not every book, however, could provide both amusement and respectability: Fordyce warns his audience against indiscriminate reading, and labels one particular genre of reading material—the novel—as “utterly unfit for [young women]” with few examples of texts that “you can read with safety, and yet fewer that you can read with advantage” (91). Conduct literature paints women as impressionable readers who tend to absorb whatever material they are exposed to. Correct reading would guide them to the right path—Wilkes describes how the perusal of “Judicious Authors” will “regulate [readers’] Affections, enliven their Spirits, and enlarge their Prospects” (*An Essay* 28)—but bad reading is sure to mislead their imaginations and, consequently, their view of reality. As Jacqueline Pearson notes, eighteenth-century culture viewed novels as sexually stimulating and unrealistic; women who read them were certain to develop idealistic expectations about love and marriage that could not be fulfilled in real life (82-83). Thus, Fordyce claims that novels “lead to a false taste of life and happiness” and “leave the female readers with this persuasion at best, that it is their business to get husbands at any rate, and by whatever means” (75).

Fordyce does make an exception for one novel writer, however— “I cannot but look on [the novels] of Mr. Richardson as well entitled to the first rank” (71), he writes, and praises the author’s “inexpressible pathos and delicacy” and “exalted standard of female excellence” (72). Richardson, and the novelists who adopted his courtesy novel model, gained conduct literature’s approval by explicitly adopting its dictates; conduct books’ denouncement of novels, then, creates a paradox where courtesy novels, though novels themselves, must condemn all novels as dangerous reading material. Austen notes this phenomenon in *Northanger Abbey* when she complains that novelists are “scarcely ever permitting [novels] to be read by their own heroine,

who, if she accidentally take up a novel, is sure to turn over its insipid pages with disgust” (23). The traditional courtesy novel heroine, who always models exemplary behavior for her young readers, limits her literary experience to a collection of proper volumes. As noted in the introductory chapter, the heroines of Sarah Fielding’s *The History of Ophelia* and Charlotte Smith’s *Emmeline* limit their reading to serious subjects such as history, theology, epic poetry, and religious pamphlets. The inimitable Clarissa Harlowe from Samuel Richardson’s *Clarissa* speaks approvingly of the following works:

Stanhope’s *Gospels*; Sharp’s, Tillotson’s and South’s *Sermons*; Nelson’s *Feasts and Fasts*; a sacramental piece of the Bishop of Man, and another of Dr. Gauden, Bishop of Exeter; and Inett’s *Devotions*; . . . a *Telemachus* in French, another in English; Steele’s, Rowe’s, and Shakespeare’s plays; that genteel comedy of Mr. Cibber, *The Careless Husband*, and others of the same author; Dryden’s *Miscellanies*; the *Tatlers*, *Spectators*, and *Guardians*; Pope’s, and Swift’s, and Addison’s works. (525-26)

This serious literature is an obligatory aspect of any heroine’s life: it is partially responsible for shaping her virtues, and it also reveals to the reader the steadiness and worthiness of her character.

The impressionable young women of courtesy novels with a penchant for “bad” reading, on the other hand, are prone to outbursts of strange behavior, ranging from the mildly bizarre to the downright ludicrous. For example, in Charlotte Lennox’s novel, *The Female Quixote*, the heroine, Arabella, spends an isolated childhood reading romances in her father’s library. Out of touch with reality, and over-influenced by her choice of literature, Arabella becomes “a strict

Observer of romantic Forms” (26); when her father dies and she is introduced into society by her cousin and love interest, Glanville, her inability to distinguish between reality and fiction leads to a series of ridiculous scenarios, peculiar behaviors, and hilarious social *faux pas*.

While the adventures of readers such as Arabella tend to serve as cautionary tales, Austen’s heroines can encounter similar reading materials without losing their sense of reality, just as they can read serious literature without necessarily benefiting from its instruction. Though Austen’s characters encounter a wide variety of texts, from Catherine Morland’s Gothic novels to the Bennets’ copy of Fordyce’s *Sermons*, the impact of these materials on each heroine’s character sharply differs from the formulaic model of courtesy novels. Austen generally acknowledges the respective good and bad reputations of different texts, but she does not allow these reputations to dictate the relationship between a heroine and her book of choice. First, unlike courtesy novel heroines, Austen’s characters do not merely absorb the texts they encounter—with experience, they can analyze, describe, apply, accept, or reject them. Second, there are no streamlined repercussions for “good” and “bad” reading: good material does not always deliver the enlightened ideas and positive character change that it promises; bad material, when properly interpreted, provides the heroine with realistic knowledge of people and the world.

### ***“A Course of Serious Study”: Good Reading***

Austen’s use of literary texts is complicated by the variety of characters she assigns to certain genres. There is no “code” through which her readers can be deciphered: Catherine Morland is an ingenuous young woman with a passion for the Gothic—but Isabella Thorpe is a

romping, flirting hussy with nearly identical novelistic taste. Mr. Collins is still not the most desirable advocate for conduct manuals, but not every character who utilizes conduct literature is so negatively portrayed, and some instructive texts are even supported by the heroines. Marianne Dashwood in *Sense and Sensibility*, Anne Elliot in *Persuasion*, and Mrs. Morland in *Northanger Abbey* not only recognize the popular perception of serious reading's virtuous effects, but they actually try to use didactic texts as a means of guiding behavior (their own behavior or the behavior of others). By employing conduct literature against perceived improper behavior, these characters are mimicking the example of courtesy novel heroines and expecting similar results—these results, however, though promised by courtesy novels and conduct literature alike, are never obtained. Instead, all three of these readers' engagement with conduct literature is met with an ambiguous, and not particularly helpful, end; thus, the impact of Anne, Marianne, and Mrs. Morland's readings of "good" literature suggests the acceptance of conduct-book ideology during Austen's time, but also suggests Austen's critical perception of this ideology and her doubts that such a course of reading effects changes in personality or circumstances. Anne might be performing the role of courtesy heroine, Marianne attempting to perform it, and Mrs. Morland attempting to make her daughter perform it, but though their initial use of "good" reading may appear to support conduct books, their lack of success more pointedly denies Austen's approval of such literature.

Although Marianne Dashwood's initial literary pursuits are not clearly novelistic—her taste, at first, lies in poetry—Robert Uphaus notes in his essay "Jane Austen and Female Reading," that Marianne shows evidence of familiarity with novels of sensibility, and that this knowledge partially guides her romance with Willoughby (338). When Marianne's sentimental

worldview meets with tragic results, she reverses her literary habits and dedicates herself to serious study: “By reading only six hours a-day, I shall gain in the course of a twelve-month a great deal of instruction which I now feel myself to want” (260). Clearly, Marianne believes that serious reading is able to influence and steady her behavior—but how effective is her scheme? Her sister, Elinor, views it with some credulousness, “smiling to see the same eager fancy...at work in introducing excess into a scheme of such rational employment and virtuous self-control” (260). Marianne predicts a heavy contrast between her previous life and her penitential future, but Elinor recognizes that Marianne’s fundamental character is the same in both—that her sister’s “eager fancy” is present in the moments of joy and the moments of melancholy. Conduct literature touts its own ability to shape a woman’s character, but Marianne’s alteration in study habits does not alter the kind of person that she is. In fact, imposing drastic change on Marianne’s personality is not even desirable, for her eventual marriage to Colonel Brandon is partially successful because the same characteristics that cause her original emotional susceptibility yield a heart that “could never love by halves” (288). Besides, even if the right books *could* alter Marianne’s character, Austen later implies that she is not much of a steady reader: “the family were again all restored to each other...and if not pursuing their usual studies with quite so much vigour as when they first came to Barton, at least planning a vigorous prosecution of them in the future” (267).

Anne Eliot similarly views consumption of serious prose as a method of curbing excessive emotion, but she does not have her own emotion in mind—instead of requiring change herself, Anne sets her sights on curing the distraught, mournful Captain Benwick. Captain Benwick’s recourse to poetry after the death of his fiancée is closely linked with his depression

and melancholy; Anne even implies that Benwick's poems are dangerous to his health. Anne desires to counter the emotional indulgence of poetry by fortifying Benwick's reading habits with serious prose—she recommends “such works of our best moralists...as calculated to rouse and fortify the mind by the highest precepts, and the strongest examples of moral and religious endurance” (85). Anne pays lip service to the claims of serious reading, yet she expresses doubt over the success of her literary balancing act. Soon after she and Captain Benwick part, she reflects on her counsel: “Anne could not but be amused at the idea of her coming to Lyme, to preach patience and resignation to a young man whom she had never seen before; nor could she help fearing, on more serious reflection, that...she had been eloquent on a point in which her own conduct would ill bear examination” (85). Though Anne has obviously been exposed to the very texts that she recommends, she recognizes, even while supplying them to Captain Benwick, that they have done little to relieve her own melancholy.

Benwick notes the recommended texts, “promised to procure and read them” (85), and is eventually roused from his melancholia enough to marry Louisa Musgrove. Yet, to say that moralist literature is what occasioned this change would be to ignore the doubts that Anne expresses over her recommendations. In fact, though Anne knows that Captain Benwick reads the texts that she recommended, she does not credit his eventual recovery to her literary advice; instead, Anne speculates upon learning of his engagement that, “of course they had fallen in love over poetry” (135), a conjecture that is later corroborated by Charles Musgrove's description of the lovers: “Benwick sits at her elbow, reading verses, or whispering to her, all day long” (176). In his essay “Captain Benwick's Reading,” Peter Robinson argues that, rather than supporting melancholic indulgence, Benwick's penchant for poetry is a “means of communication” that

helps him to connect first to Anne, and then to Louisa (151). Anne's recommendations are sincere, but she wishes rather than believes that they are a certain antidote; the subsequent plot of the novel does little to enforce the idea that serious prose is required to brace unchecked emotions. Like Marianne's heart, Benwick's poetry, instead of harming his character, is partially responsible for his eventual happiness with Louisa.

Unlike Anne and Marianne, Catherine Morland never expresses the slightest interest in serious reading. In fact, in an early chapter of *Northanger Abbey*, we are informed that she only enjoys books "provided they were all story and no reflection" (7), and that an aunt's efforts to impress her with a sober lecture is ineffectual (52). Yet, these past failures do not slacken the drive of Catherine's mother, Mrs. Morland, when that matronly woman tries to cure her daughter's low spirits with a well-applied essay. It is implied early in the novel that between her "lying-in and teaching the little ones" (6), Mrs. Morland is not afraid to substitute didactic literature for more direct parental advice when her time is scarce. When Catherine shows signs of low spirits upon returning home from Northanger Abbey, Mrs. Morland decides that her daughter has grown too accustomed to the ways of richer friends and that she regrets the simplicity of home life. Subsequently, Mrs. Morland rustles up a volume of *The Mirror*, which, as R.W. Chapman hypothesized, probably contained the essay *Consequences to little folks of intimacy with great ones, in a letter from John Homespun* (NA, 372 n. 178). Though we are never given a chance to try the essay's effect on Catherine—Henry Tilney's unlooked-for entrance negates its necessity—the scenario created by Mrs. Morland is less useful as a study of conduct literature's influence than it is a symbolic representation of what is wrong with conduct literature in the first place. *The Mirror* is a well-meant tool, but its misapplication implies that a

certain distance exists between the book itself and the actual problems of its individual readers. Even had Henry's timing been more conducive to Mrs. Morland's aims, the essay would have fallen flat on Catherine's ears because her low spirits have nothing to do with a pining for the Abbey's grandeur; in the same way, actual conduct literature cannot assist its readers because the issues it addresses, or the solutions that it provides, are not necessarily relevant to its readers' real lives. Mrs. Morland's essay does not just fail to be useful—it never has a chance of being useful because it is not applicable to Catherine's situation.

Although Austen's characters attempt to endorse serious reading according to conduct literature prescriptions, good reading is unable to create the behavioral change with which courtesy novels and conduct manuals credit it. Rather than blindly absorbing good literature and internalizing its precepts, Austen's heroines resist its injunctions, give up on its usefulness, and sometimes, as in Marianne's case, forget to read it at all. Good reading can instruct, and maybe partially influence, but it is incapable of altering a reader's character or reforming her behavior.

### ***“All Story and No Reflection”: Reading the Gothic***

Just as good reading and good girls don't always go together, bad girls are not the only characters who enjoy bad reading in Austen's novels. Gothic literature, particularly the “horrid” novels that Catherine Morland enjoys, is not on any conduct manual's “to read” list, yet many different characters in *Northanger Abbey* confess to enjoying it: Catherine states that she does “not much like any other” kind of reading (79); the well-educated Henry Tilney claims that he has read “hundreds and hundreds” of novels, including Gothic ones, at times sharing them with his proper sister, Eleanor (78); the artificial Isabella Thorpe's love of the Gothic is evidenced by

the long catalogue of horrid novels that she guides Catherine through; even rude, crude John Thorpe, though he claims to “never read novels,” is a fan of Mrs. Radcliffe and Mr. Lewis (32). With such a variety of taste, sense, and propriety among the Gothic-lovers of *Northanger Abbey*, bad reading cannot be associated with a particular type of person. As with good reading in Austen’s works, a character’s choice of reading material does not automatically label him or her as sensible or silly, good or bad, and it does not assume that certain genres will always produce a particular effect on their readers. Instead, a text’s usefulness to its fictional reader, or, that reader’s ability to evaluate and apply a text to their life, is a more significant and definitive indicator of Austen’s views on different genres.

Although *Northanger Abbey* features many fans of the Gothic, the plot most closely follows the genre’s effect on one character in particular: the heroine, Catherine Morland. In her article, “Reading by the Book in *Northanger Abbey*,” Barbara Benedict notes that, “Modern critics have attacked Catherine for her lack of critical distance from her reading,” adding herself to this set by writing that, “[Catherine] apparently loses her sense of reality, social placement, even duty in her reading” (n. page). These critics have shaped a narrative wherein Catherine allows her indiscriminate reading of Gothic novels to skew her view of reality. As a consequence, she conjures up a sordid story around Mrs. Tilney’s supposed murder until Henry Tilney exposes her foolishness for what it is—mere fantasy. This interpretation places Catherine in the company of Charlotte Lennox’s imaginative Arabella and Maria Edgeworth’s whimsical Virginia St. Pierre, yet, far from adhering to the tropes of courtesy novels, *Northanger Abbey*’s treatment of the Gothic at once recognizes the genre’s problematic reputation and argues for its usefulness to a far-from-deluded heroine.

In eighteenth-century novels such as *The Female Quixote*, delusion and bad reading are closely linked; the heroine, Arabella, constantly reveals her overindulgence in romances through her absurd manner of speaking. When she is not citing the adventures of romantic heroes and heroines as precedent for her own strange actions, she is confusing her friends and acquaintances by mimicking archaic speech patterns with injunctions such as, “Hold, impious Man...and do not give Thanks for that which, haply, may prove thy Punishment” (122), and “Inhuman Wretch...think not thy cruel Violence shall procure thee what thy Submissions could not obtain” (338). Although, like Arabella, Catherine is described as an early practitioner of bad reading, she betrays no signs of this influence through her language. In fact, Catherine’s conversation is quite sensible when compared with that of Isabella Thorpe: when Catherine is five minutes late for an appointment, Isabella has been waiting, first “at least this age,” next “these ten ages at least,” and then, “this half hour” (24); when she and Catherine part it is with “smiles of most exquisite misery, and the laughing eye of utter despondency” (47). Catherine, on the other hand, responds to these extremes with much more moderate expressions of emotion or affection. When Isabella dramatically expresses her wretchedness over their separation at a ball, Catherine responds by sensibly asking, “My dear Isabella, how was it possible for me to get at you? I could not even see where you were” (39). After carrying on about the impropriety of standing up a second time with the same partner, Isabella asks Catherine if “it would quite shock you to see me do such a thing,” to which Catherine simply replies: “No, not at all; but if you think it wrong, you had much better change” (40). In her language, Catherine is rather the opposite of an Arabella; the style of her favorite fiction does not overpower her natural good sense.

Just as she does not embellish her language, Catherine does not romanticize her life as do Isabella and *Belinda's* Virginia St. Pierre. Virginia, whose little exposure to the world includes a variety of dramatic novels, allows these romances to entirely shape her ideas of love. In contrast to the steady, sensible character of the heroine, Belinda, Virginia indulges in romantic fantasies over a man she has never met—in fact, she falls in love with a portrait! After one glance, Virginia's thoughts and dreams are haunted by an obsession for the painted male figure: “her imagination, exalted by solitude and romance, embodied and became enamoured of a phantom” (469). Catherine does not have such romantic expectations for her brief acquaintance with Henry Tilney; in fact, she deemphasizes her attachment to Henry when Isabella tries to paint a different picture: ““you should not persuade me that I think so very much about Mr. Tilney, for perhaps I may never see him again.’ ‘Not see him again!...I am sure you would be miserable if you thought so.’ ‘No, indeed, I should not’” (26). It is Isabella, in fact, who tries to play the romantic heroine when she describes the trials of her attachment to James Morland: “Oh! Catherine, the many sleepless nights I have had on your brother's account!...I am grown wretchedly thin I know” (87). In contrast, Austen makes of point of keeping her own heroine well-fed and well-rested in spite of love's tribulations: “Catherine's unhappiness...took the direction of extraordinary hunger, and when that was appeased, changed into an earnest longing to be in bed” (41). Rather than betraying her susceptibility for the Gothic, or for novel-reading in general, through outlandish words and actions, Catherine's character is very little affected by sentimentality or fantasy in the first part of *Northanger Abbey*. She is enamored of her books, but she rejects their linguistic and narrative tropes as a pattern for her everyday life. In every sense of the word, she is her sensible parents' daughter.

The second part of *Northanger Abbey*, however, inverts the previous structure in which Catherine remains a resolutely average heroine in the face of reader expectations; now, the Abbey itself is staunchly lackluster and it is Catherine who uselessly expects Gothic tropes. Catherine's literary exposure to Gothic abbeys leads her hopes astray: where she predicts a fireplace of "ample width and ponderous carving of former times," there is only a modern Rumford, "with slabs of plain though handsome marble" (118); a proper Gothic window should have "painted glass, dirt and cobwebs," but Northanger Abbey's are "so large, so clear, so light!" (118). These disappointments, along with her memorable confusion over a packet of laundry lists, are clearly linked to Catherine's reading habits; however, her ultimate recognition of her own foolishness in regard to these matters is a significant part of Catherine's maturation. Much more damning, both in the plot of the novel and in the subsequent interpretation by critics, is the story that Catherine shapes around the late Mrs. Tilney's death. The suddenness of Mrs. Tilney's illness, Eleanor's convenient absence from home at the time of her death, and General Tilney's disinclination to visit the room where his wife died immediately awaken Catherine's suspicions of foul play; General Tilney's habit of staying up after the family has retired for the evening next leads her to conclude that, using the plot of Radcliffe's *A Sicilian Romance* as inspiration, "Mrs. Tilney yet lived, shut up for causes unknown, and receiving from the pitiless hands of her husband a nightly supply of coarse food" (138). After her clandestine visit to Mrs. Tilney's chamber alone, Catherine is embarrassed by its modern appearance; the room's cleanliness and comfortableness contradict her more sensational expectations. Still, due to signs of General Tilney's real cruelty, Catherine clings to her previous mistrust, and, when confronted by Henry, continues to suspect the General's implication in his wife's death. It is only when Henry

expresses shock over her suspicions that Catherine finally abandons them altogether: “Henry’s address, short as it had been, had more thoroughly opened her eyes to the extravagance of her late fancies than all their several disappointments had done” (146). Later, Catherine imputes her fanciful imaginings to the influence of her favorite literary genre: “Charming as were all Mrs. Radcliffe’s works...it was not in them perhaps that human nature, at least in the midland counties of England, was to be looked for.” (147).

Yet, though Catherine’s suspicions are certainly exaggerated, there is a second narrative that runs alongside her imagined Gothic plot—and it also concerns the General and his cruelty. As Mary Waldron writes in *Jane Austen and the Fiction of Her Time*, “Austen’s subversion of the Gothic plot has far more complexity than the usual burlesque of it...Catherine’s problems are real” (33). Catherine gains awareness of these potential problems when she first spends an entire day with General Tilney. Her impression of their time together is one of discomfort: “she had gone to her appointment preparing for happiness which it had not afforded...in spite of their father’s great civilities to her—in spite of his thanks, invitations, and compliments—it had been a release to get away from him” (93). This uneasiness is reflected in the General’s children as well, for even Catherine notes how their attitudes change with the loss of his presence: “The happiness with which their time now passed...made her thoroughly sensible of the restraint which the General’s presence had imposed” (162). During her stay at Northanger, Catherine continues to express unease in the General’s company, and confusion over his character—in fact, she is afraid of General Tilney before she even suspects him of any wrongdoing: “Catherine attempted no longer to hide from herself the nature of the feelings which...he had previously excited; and what had been terror and dislike before, was now absolute aversion” (132). Catherine is only

marginally aware of what the reader already sees—despite his civility and courteous behavior, General Tilney is a violent, greedy, and manipulative man.

In addition to her general unease in his presence, Catherine finds many of the General's actions to be unnatural and suspicious: he will not have the portrait of his late wife hung in his room (132); he will not allow anyone to enter the place where she died, a circumstance for which neither Eleanor nor Henry offer any explanation for; he spends the evening pacing in the drawing room (137); and even his speech is often duplicitous, filled with an undercurrent of unspoken meaning. When General Tilney suggests that the family visit Henry's home to share a meal together, he is insistent that the repast be as simple as possible; when the family arrives at Woodston, however, he has very different expectations. Catherine is unable to comprehend this gap between the General's speech and action: "why he should say one thing so positively, and mean another all the while, was most unaccountable! How were people, at that rate, to be understood?" (156). Catherine has long been accustomed to the straightforward language and sensible, generous behavior of her own family and she has no precedent through which to understand the General's behavior. She expresses confusion over his early walks because "Neither her father nor Mr. Allen did so" (129); the General's mercenary motivations, the parental tyranny over his children, and his short, unforgiving temper are similarly inexplicable to Catherine because they are foreign to her past experiences.

Thus, when Catherine identifies General Tilney as a Radcliffean villain, she is interpreting his behavior through the only model available to her—the Gothic. It is only through her stories that she learns about the kind of harshness and despotism that General Tilney displays, and Gothic fiction dictates not only the possibility, but also the probability that a

domestic tyrant such as General Tilney will commit the crimes that Catherine predicts. Catherine then uses this identity to interpret his character and actions—“she felt secure from all possibility of wronging him” because he has “the air and attitude of a Montoni!” (137). While Catherine is mistaken in the manifestation of the General’s cruelty, she is far more correct in her explanation than Henry cares to admit when he discovers her in his mother’s room.

Catherine’s willingness to adopt Henry’s viewpoint at all turns causes her to quickly abandon her Gothic plot in the face of his criticism, but Henry’s own explanation—that “We have not all, you know, the same tenderness of disposition” (145)—falls laughably short of describing the real state of things at Northanger Abbey. In fact, Henry deserves neither the genius of correctly interpreting his family’s situation, nor the credit of exorcizing Catherine’s mistake, for the merit of Catherine’s own interpretation is vindicated through the General’s future actions. The undercurrent of cruelty in the General’s character is thoroughly exposed through his treatment of Catherine: our heroine is forced out of his home because of disappointed greed, and her life is endangered by an unaccompanied, seventy-mile journey on the road that the General chooses not to relieve and not to prevent. General Tilney’s faults have always been present in the text, but this episode fully exposes him to the reader, to Catherine, and to Henry as the evil man that Catherine originally describes. Although Catherine earlier decides that Gothic novels are poor exhibitors of “human nature” (147), she justly remarks after discovering the General’s motives for disgracing her that, “in suspecting General Tilney of either murdering or shutting up his wife, she had scarcely sinned against his character, or magnified his cruelty” (183). Instead of losing her sense of reality in a sea of Gothic plots, Catherine uses Gothic

literature as a guide to accurately interpret her reality in ways that other readers, who do not seriously engage with Gothic fiction, cannot.

### ***“It Was Truly Dramatic”: Reading Plays***

Fanny Price is another dedicated reader in Austen’s fiction, although her taste in literature widely differs from Catherine Morland’s. Fanny is portrayed reading Shakespeare, histories, biographies, poetry, travel literature, conservative essays—in short, the ideal library of a courtesy novel heroine. Despite her more conservative literary habits, however, at least one form of bad reading crosses Fanny’s path—the play, *Lover’s Vows*. As Syndy McMillen Conger outlines in her article “Reading *Lovers’ Vows*: Jane Austen’s Reflections on English Sense and Germany Sensibility,” German plays were suffering from a bad reputation during Austen’s time. One contemporary review of *Lover’s Vows* criticizes its negative portrayal of the upper classes and regrets that “neither the taste of a British public will have improved, nor their morals meliorated, by the importation of any productions of the German stage” (qtd. in McMillen Conger 102). In addition to the general injunction against German imports, Edmund and Fanny’s specific protests against the controversial content of *Lover’s Vows* are enough to label the piece as bad reading: Edmund claims that the piece is “exceedingly unfit for private representation” (110), and Fanny is astonished that her friends should be accepting parts “so unfit to be expressed by any woman of modesty” (108).

Despite the play’s unsuitableness, however, Fanny does not shrink from reading it. Indeed, not only does she skim through the entire play soon after her cousins select it for their

theater, but she comes to know the text quite well as rehearsals continue. In her anxiety over Edmund and Mary's parts she "had read, and read the scene again" where their characters confess a mutual attachment (131); the necessity of constantly prompting Mr. Rushworth through his lines causes Fanny to "[learn] every word of his part herself, but without his being much the forwarder" (130); and when Mrs. Grant must skip an important rehearsal, Maria Bertram argues that Fanny can take her place just as well, "for she could put Mrs. Grant right the other day in twenty places" (135). In addition, Fanny is the most constant audience member at rehearsals—clearly, she is both familiar with the text and thoroughly exposed to the play itself.

Yet, instead of being absorbed by the play, as indiscriminate readers such as Maria and Henry Crawford are, Fanny engages with the text in an enlightening and beneficial way. Each actor is too narrowly absorbed by his or her own part to take note of events and emotions that are forming off stage; instead, they are characterized by "the selfishness which, more or less disguised, seemed to govern them all" (104). Fanny, by contrast, is able to recognize and learn from the play as a whole because she is removed from the central action. The play *Lover's Vows* contains obvious parallels to the situation of Austen's characters, and, for many actors, the line between art and life is blurred. Fanny is aware of these parallels: it is she who is the "courteous listener," the attendee of rehearsals, the prompter, the fill-in, and the observer of both the on-stage and, more importantly, the off-stage action. Before rehearsals begin, Fanny is alarmed about the conduct of others such as Maria, Julia, and Henry Crawford, but after Edmund disagrees with her observations she "supposed she must have been mistaken," and sincerely "meant to think differently in future" (92). The text of the play, however, exposes the realities at Mansfield Park, and reawakens Fanny's previous suspicions.

First, Julia learns of Henry Crawford's true sentiments through the same snub that effectively leaves her out of the production—her relegation to a secondary status beneath her sister takes place both theatrically and romantically in her real life. Austen writes that Fanny “saw and pitied much of this in Julia” even while the rest of Julia's family fail to take notice: “The inattention of the two brothers and the aunt to Julia's discomposure...must be imputed to the fullness of their own minds” (128). Henry Crawford and Maria, on the other hand, use the sensibility of their emotion-charged scenes to pantomime more clandestine feelings on the stage, even to the extent that Mr. Rushworth begins to suspect Maria's motives for “so needlessly often [rehearsing] the first scene between her and Mr. Crawford” (129). Yet, it is only Fanny who makes the connection between Henry Crawford's behavior in the theatre and his general character, and, in doing so, confirms the intimacy that she had previously suspected he and Maria were encouraging. Edmund Bertram and Mary Crawford also have real-life interests in their characters: Edmund and Anhalt are both clergyman, Mary has, at times, some of the pertness and forwardness of her character Amelia, and each encourages a romantic tension between himself/herself and the other that manifests itself in their characters' mutual attraction. It is this last similarity that most disturbs Fanny, for she recognizes that, through their interaction in the play, Edward is increasingly in danger from Mary. The “unsteadiness” of Edmund's moral resolutions against acting is persuaded away by his own self-deceptive logic under a slew of shaky excuses—Fanny, however, is all too quick to recognize the romantic underlying factor and “his happiness under it” (125). Mr. Rushworth, of course, ironically casts himself as the unwanted suitor—a part so obviously similar to the one he plays in real life that even Fanny cannot profit in knowledge through the comparison.

Reading and even assisting in the play are not condemnable acts for Fanny—throughout her experience she continues to believe that “she had not done wrong herself” (125) by participating—and, instead of becoming susceptible to the dangers of bad reading, Fanny is better prepared to accurately evaluate her companions’ characters in the future. No other character is so keenly aware of sentiments, behaviors, and private feelings of others at Mansfield Park, and, while Fanny’s knowledge partially stems—as it does at other times—from her role “outside” of the action, the text of *Lover’s Vows* further contributes to her knowledge about the characters of friends and family.

This awareness is later shaken, however, when Fanny listens to Henry Crawford’s reading of the play *Henry VIII*. Although it is not an actual conduct manual, a Shakespeare play can similarly be considered “good” reading within the narrative of *Mansfield Park*: not only do the discreet Fanny Price and the prudent Edmund Bertram morally approve of the play, but Shakespeare’s works were acceptable material for women to not only read, but to edit and write about as well (Bloom Gevirtz 60). Fanny describes Henry’s reading thus: “to *good* reading, however, she had long been used...but in Mr. Crawford’s reading there was a variety of excellence beyond what she had ever met with” (264). Morally, Henry’s choice of texts is good; stylistically, his performance of this text is much better than good—yet the right kind of reading can be abused when its meaning or effect is manipulated.

In writing about this scene, Susan Harlan claims that Henry “appropriates Shakespeare’s language as a vehicle by which he performs himself: that is, constructs himself as a subject” (43). Though Harlan is emphasizing Henry’s ability to create a distinctive identity, her argument is no less relevant to Fanny’s perspective of the reading: by displaying good reading before Fanny,

Henry is using Shakespeare as a platform to recreate himself in front of her as a new character. Earlier in *Mansfield Park*, during the rehearsals of *Lover's Vows*, Fanny notes of Henry that, "She did not like him as a man, but she must admit him to be the best actor" (129). Henry's improper behavior towards Maria and Julia supersedes his fine acting in Fanny's consciousness and, despite his obvious thespian superiority, she can only "admit" that he is the best. In this new scene, however, Fanny's reflections are altered: "His acting had first taught Fanny what pleasure a play might give, and his reading brought all his acting before her again; nay, perhaps with greater enjoyment" (264). This "greater enjoyment" stems from the absence of Maria, whose presence during *Lover's Vows* drew out Henry's inherent rakishness; rather than remembering and profiting from the warning of that first play, however, Fanny is happier to forget the failings of Henry Crawford in her enjoyment of *Henry VIII*. Fanny fails to hide the evidence of her interest in Henry's words, and the scene becomes a moment of encouragement to the man she wishes to repulse and repudiate: "the inference of what [Lady Bertram's] niece, alive and enlightened as she was, must feel, was elevating [to Henry]" (265). Unlike *Lover's Vows*, the obvious shortcomings of which put Fanny on her guard, *Henry VIII's* essential acceptability as a play lends itself to the moral ambiguity both of Henry's acting and his character.

As with other instances of reading in Austen's novels, good reading in *Mansfield Park* is ineffective; it is begun with good intentions, but it never actually benefits those it most claims to assist. In Fanny's case, this discrepancy poses a serious risk because the acceptability that is supposedly inherent to Shakespeare's plays proves to be dangerous to her objective, moral viewpoint. By contrast, *Lover's Vows* replicates the tendency of Gothic fiction to expose to women knowledge of the world that was previously concealed from them (Ferguson Ellis 3-5).

For women such as Catherine Morland and Fanny Price, bad reading reveals aspects of society—and exposes aspects of their own lives—that would otherwise remain hidden.

Austen's characters share many of the same views, stereotypes, and prejudices with her eighteenth-century society; yet, while the prejudices and expectations that surround certain genres of literature are clearly communicated in her work, her characters interact thoughtfully and realistically with each text—whether good or bad. Serious reading may not transform Captain Benwick's character or life, but it gives him new material to peruse, and a new topic through which he communicates with Anne. Catherine Morland never throws herself from a cliff or spies a ravisher around every corner, but she does lapse into silly behavior at times that is undeniably linked to her Gothic literary habit. Books are influential to the readers within Austen's novels, but they never decide the course of readers' temperament or their lives: Austen is interested in portraying realistic heroines, whose reading habits reflect their characters rather than their virtues.

## CHAPTER TWO – “His Eyes Received the Truth From Hers”: Reading the Heroine

According to Fitzwilliam Darcy, Jane Bennet does not look like a woman in love: “Her looks and manners were open, cheerful, and engaging as ever, but without any symptom of peculiar regard; and I remained convinced . . . that though she received his attentions with pleasure, she did not invite them by any participation of sentiment” (151). Yet, Jane Bennet has done exactly what conduct-book literature prescribed—she has hidden her amorous feelings for Darcy’s friend, Bingley. In *A Letter of Genteel and Moral Advice to a Young Lady*, the Reverend Wetenhall Wilkes advises young girls, while in general company, to be as “open, cheerful, and engaging” as Jane Bennet: “Upon the whole, you will find, that in Good-nature, Singleness, or Simplicity of Heart, unaffected Complaisance, a certain Openness of Behavior, an agreeable Negligence, and in an unconstrain’d Carriage, the Art of Good-breeding chiefly consists” (138). However, Wilkes also suggests that, when confronted with a suitor, the young woman be “circumspect and reserv’d”: “When a Lady is address’d by her Votary, let his Proposals be ever so honourable, she ought to be cautious how she places her Affections. She should carry herself at a genteel Distance, lest the Conquest afterwards be reckon’d cheap” (159). However, by adhering so strictly to conduct-book advice, Jane Bennet nearly loses the man she loves—indeed, does lose him until others intercede on her behalf.

Because conduct-book ideology permeates the eighteenth-century courtesy novel, the heroine’s true feelings for the hero must be demonstrated in non-verbal ways that the hero himself presumably cannot interpret, but that others can. Thus, in eighteenth-century courtesy novels, the act of “reading” is not restricted to the physical page of a book; the bodily movements and gestures of a novel’s heroes or heroines are similarly susceptible to reading and

interpretation by other characters—and by the novel’s readers themselves. Unable to speak her desire, or even, in some cases, unaware of her desire, the heroine innocently displays her emotion through bodily language, which, in turn, confirms her virtue—that is, she is an “open book” whose innocence prevents her from hiding her thoughts and emotions. Paradoxically, however, the heroine is also charged with concealing from the hero any sign of her inevitable affection; for him, she becomes illegible, a “closed book,” preserving and increasing his esteem.

As the case of Jane Bennet attests, Austen’s heroines are not so fortunate—they tend to be misread, whether they are “closed” or “open” books to their lovers. If “closed books,” Austen’s heroines are viewed as emotionally cold and unfeeling; if too “open,” they are viewed as potentially promiscuous. Austen’s novels urge sincerity and simple openness with the prospective suitor—neither coldness, as conduct books urged, nor emotional excess, as courtesy novels portrayed, but an honest, forthright show of interest. To subscribe to the extremes portrayed in conduct books and courtesy novels is dangerous emotionally and physically; instead, learning to “read” and engage in bodily “conversation” with a suitor proves the best means of securing his interest.

### ***“Could I have Read Your Feelings”: Legibility and the Eighteenth-Century Body***

In his *Sermons*, James Fordyce claims that young women who affect to display inauthentic virtue are sure to be discovered in their falseness: “no degree of candour can persuade us to believe, that such women...do not play a part, and under the mask of this seeming severity, this violent affectation of virtue, harbour passions of a very different kind” (46). Regardless of a woman’s verbal merit and correct speech (her “candour”), Fordyce and other

conduct book authors maintain that a women's true virtue, or lack thereof, is displayed in her physical features; these assertions are supported by the eighteenth-century theories on body language that Juliet McMaster describes in her book *Reading the Body in the Eighteenth-Century Novel*: “[The eighteenth century elevated] the semiotic system of gesture and facial expression as a language more universal and more trustworthy than words” (102). Encouraged involuntary body language included the blush: “Nature has made you blush when you are guilty of no fault...it is the usual companion of innocence” (Gregory 20-21); an obvious self-consciousness: “that retiring delicacy, which avoids the public eye, and is disconcerted even at the gaze of admiration” (20); as well as palpitations, sighs, or faints. Correctly identifying a woman's merit, then, is a matter of “reading” her body for these signs of innocence, or, conversely, the corruption of innocence that Fordyce describes in the following passage:

They have forgotten to blush; their foreheads are hardened into shamelessness. Their eyes formerly soft, virtuous, downcast; those very eyes that effused the soul of innocence, have learnt to stare, and roll with unbounded wantonness...their hands are the hands of Harpies. Their feet go down to death, and their steps take hold on Hell. (52)

Fordyce reads the body—eyes, forehead, feet, hands—as a method of assessing inner character. A woman who is able to mask or counterfeit her emotions has replaced innocence with art; thus, physical displays of virtue in a young woman are not only encouraged, but are also required as a confirmation of her innocence.

Courtesy novel heroines respond to these injunctions by becoming “open books”—their inner emotions are outwardly displayed through blushes, sighs, palpitations, swoons, tremblings,

and even illnesses. When Evelina Anville receives unexpected attentions from the hero, Lord Orville, she writes, “I could not speak; but felt myself change colour, and stood, for some moments, silent and looking down” (73). The mental agony that Celestina endures when her fiancé, Willoughby, leaves her is manifest in her physical response: “she became extremely faint, her knees trembled, a cold dew hung on her forehead” (157). These heroines’ transparent emotions enable other characters to read their thoughts and feelings easily: in Richardson’s *Sir Charles Grandison*, Sir Charles and Harriet Byron are not acquainted for long before Charlotte Grandison and Lady L. are teasing Harriet about her affection for their brother—the knowledge of which is mined from Harriet’s legible body: “But think you, that we could not see, on an hundred occasions, your heart at your eyes? --That we could not affix a proper meaning to those sudden throbs just here, patting my neck; those half-suppressed, but always involuntary sighs” (2:421). Feminine transparency may at times be inconvenient, but it acts as a necessary and indisputable confirmation of a heroine’s virtue and delicacy.

Emotional display is even more significant in those courtesy novels that contain characteristics of sentimental fiction, or novels of sensibility. Particularly during the heyday of the cult of sensibility, these novels provided a medium through which readers could freely indulge in their emotions by using “pathos” to create an “emotional, even physical response” (Todd 2). The heroine of sensibility is often a figure central to this pathos: it is the tragedy of her noble suffering that encourages the reader’s empathy while she simultaneously models proper emotional displays through her own body. Just as open behavior confirms a heroine’s virtue, body language validates her aspirations to sensibility, for “authentic sensibility can be demonstrated only through active and pragmatic gestures” (Batchelor 2). The emotional displays

of novels of sensibility, while meant to inspire empathy, could also border on the extreme; by the time Austen was writing *Love and Freindship* in 1790, she is parodying this excessive sentimentality through her own heroine who responds to distress with humorous exaggeration: “It was too pathetic for the feelings of Sophia and myself—We fainted alternately on a sofa” (n. page). In novels such as Richardson’s *Clarissa*, however, the heroine’s sensibility, though extreme, is earnest, and she draw praise and emotion from the other characters for physical displays such as “putting her hand over her eyes and forehead, the tears trickl[ing] through her fingers” (1070) and “her trembling knees seeming to fail her, [dropping] into the next chair; her charming face...sinking upon her own shoulder (844). Clarissa’s sensibility marks her as delicate, virtuous, and superior to the more insensitive characters in the novel, and many courtesy novel heroines followed her example by engaging in excessive emotional display.

Thus, heroines display their emotions to every relation, every friend—every one, in fact, except their lovers. The heroes of courtesy novels are often immune to the physical language of their heroine’s body; this is not to say that these men are indifferent to feminine emotion—on the contrary, they are often affected by and attracted to the image of a suffering female—but rather, they tend to misread women’s bodies and misunderstand their involuntary signs of affection. In Charlotte Smith’s novel *Emmeline*, the heroine’s struggle to cope with an inconvenient affection for Godolphin is constantly interpreted by him as a tenderness for his rival: “Emmeline was low and dejected...Every thing he observed, confirmed Godolphin in his persuasion that her heart was wholly Delamere’s” (371). Though Emmeline’s body displays signs of her affection for Godolphin, he misinterprets these signs and, instead, creates alternative reasons for their existence. Inaccurate readings tend to exclusively exist between heroes and heroines: male

characters such as Lord L. in *Sir Charles Grandison* and Mr. Tyrold in *Camilla* have little trouble interpreting the heroine's blushes and palpitations, even while Sir Charles and Edgar Mandlebert find the bodies of their beloveds to be illegible.

Because these male love interests can only selectively read their heroines' bodies, such heroines can at once to possess the open book qualities that conduct manuals praise while maintaining the requisite modesty on the subject of personal affections. Not only does conduct literature expect women to conceal their love from the object of their admiration, but certain authors actually recommend that women conceal their love from themselves. John Gregory writes that "It is even long before a woman of delicacy dares avow to her own heart that she loves," and he insists that this only occurs after all efforts "to conceal it from herself fail" (40). He warns that, in matters of love, even placing confidence in a trusted friend is a risky measure, for, should the secret be revealed, the "shame" of an unrequited affection will be multiplied (40-41). Courtesy novel heroines maintain this delicate obliviousness by continually mistaking the warmth of their affections for more platonic feelings of gratitude, friendship, and even a sisterly regard. Evelina Anville's acceptance of Lord Orville as a friend, and as a brother-figure, allows her to "believe that my good opinion and esteem of Lord Orville might be owned without suspicion, and felt without danger" (321). Evelina cannot recognize her own feelings; thus, her guardian, Mr. Villars, must identify Evelina's affections on her behalf: "You flattered yourself, that your partiality was the effect of esteem, founded upon a general love of merit, and a principle of justice: and your heart, which fell the sacrifice of your error, was totally gone ere you suspected it was in danger" (308). It is only upon this warning that Evelina recognizes her love for Lord Orville; indeed, it is not uncommon for a third party to intervene with a courtesy

novel heroine and explain to her the state of her own thoughts and emotions—the heroine’s delicacy disables her from making such observations herself. Thus, heroines succeed in at once embodying the characteristics of an “open” and a “closed” book: their emotions are readily displayed through their bodies, but when their affections accompany these displays, both they and their potential lovers remain oblivious.

Unlike their predecessors, Austen’s heroines do not benefit from this convenient paradox. When Jane Bennet and Jane Fairfax suppress their amorous feelings, as recommended by conduct book literature, the objects of their affection legitimately question their fondness for them; however, when Catherine Morland openly displays her fondness for Henry Tilney, he finds himself flattered—and interested. In addition, Austen clearly demonstrates that physical and emotional damage caused by following the behavioral extremes exemplified by conduct literature and sentimental courtesy novels: when Elinor Dashwood tightly suppresses her romantic feelings for Edward Ferrars, she is presumed lacking in feelings of any kind, not only by her lover, but also by her friends and family; further, she becomes emotionally isolated. And, when Marianne Dashwood’s exuberant body language reveals to one and all her love of Willoughby in the manner of the sentimental heroine, she not only becomes vulnerable to Willoughby’s callousness and cruelty, but to condemnation and censure by others. According to Austen, the advice offered by conduct books and courtesy novels is bad advice; instead, Austen implies that a simple openness and interest in a male suitor is the only honorable method of proceeding in matters of love.

### ***“The Opportunity of Fixing Him”: Courting Open and Closed Books***

Conduct literature’s injunctions on body language are closely associated with its rules of courtship for women: the necessity of open or closed body language, after all, is instrumental to a woman’s ability to secure a husband. If expressive bodies are attractive for the innocence and purity that they convey, Fordyce is certain that reserved manners on the subject of affections are equally to a woman’s advantage—indeed, he writes that women should conceal their affections as the surest way to gain a lover: “[Men] refuse their admiration, where it is courted: where it seems rather shunned, they love to bestow it” (60). Similarly, Wilkes suggests that “Easy Compliances, extinguish the Desire for Marriage” (*Letters* 159). When Mr. Collins refuses to acknowledge Elizabeth’s repeated rejections of his proposals of marriage, he is surely blinded by pride and egotism, but he is also founding hopes for her eventual acceptance on the very real idea that women will demur even with the objects of their secret affection: as Collins says to Lizzie, “perhaps you have even now said as much to encourage my suit as would be consistent with the true delicacy of the female character” (83). Women in Austen’s novels do not possess this “true delicacy” to the extent that Mr. Collins conjectures or conduct literature demands, precisely because it is a false delicacy. In fact, Austen reveals the extreme dangers of adhering to such misbegotten notions of delicacy, most notably through her depiction of the travails of Jane Bennet.

Jane Bennet is, perhaps, the most poignant example of adherence to the poor advice proffered by conduct books. Both she and Elizabeth accept conduct literature’s encouragement for female reserve: Jane, through her demure behavior towards her love interest, Mr. Bingley, and Elizabeth through her comments to Charlotte Lucas, which echo conduct literature’s anxiety

over a woman's acknowledged affections: she warns Charlotte that "if a woman is partial to a man, and does not endeavor to conceal it, he must find it out" (15). Elizabeth approvingly notes that Jane's affections are "not likely to be discovered by the world in general, since Jane united with great strength of feeling, a composure of temper" (14). To display an absolute preference would be unwise, but Elizabeth is confident that Bingley will be encouraged by a modest admiration on Jane's part. This assumption, however, is based upon Elizabeth's intimate knowledge of her sister's character and shyness—Elizabeth tries to parse conduct literature's behavioral paradox by expecting Bingley to read her "dear Jane" as easily as she can. She assumes that the lover, perhaps most of all, would read through proper reserve and be attentive to his beloved's partiality for him.

Charlotte Lucas, however, does not place so much faith in this method of courtship; she, instead, emphasizes the necessity for a woman to promote a man's attentions pointedly: "there are very few of us who have heart enough to be really in love without encouragement. In nine cases out of ten, a woman had better show *more* affection than she feels" (15, italics original). As Charlotte follows this statement into the arms of Mr. Collins, it is difficult to give credence to her advice; yet, though Charlotte may be derided as shallow or unfeeling for her views on money and love, guarded heroines will discover at least some truth in her maxim. Elizabeth Bennet later acknowledges its justice when Jane Bennet's reserve brings her dangerously close to losing Mr. Bingley: "[Mr. Darcy] declared himself to have been totally unsuspecting of her sister's attachment;--and she could not help remembering what Charlotte's opinion had always been" (160). Mr. Bingley is not confident enough to solicit Jane's hand without first being secure of her affections, and their marriage is only effected after Mr. Darcy bypasses Jane's guarded behavior

and positively tells Mr. Bingley of her feelings (284). In this instance, following conduct book advice is disastrous for handling the affairs of the heart.

Jane Bennet is rivaled in propriety and reserve only by the character of Jane Fairfax from *Emma*. In this novel, the hero, Mr. Knightley, praises Jane Fairfax for her “superiority both of mind and manner” (224), and describes her as nearly equal to the conduct book ideal: “Her sensibilities, I suspect, are strong—and her temper excellent in its power of forbearance, patience, self-control” (226). The only flaw, in fact, that Mr. Knightley will allow Jane is her excessive reserve; Emma Woodhouse, in her consternation over Jane’s perfections, describes more emphatically what she sees as Jane’s impenetrable façade: “She was, besides, which was the worst of all, so cold, so cautious! There was no getting at her real opinion...She was disgustingly, was suspiciously reserved” (132). In every sense of the word, Jane is a “closed” book, unreadable and illegible to others. Instead of even sharing her opinions, she will only voice common thoughts: “I gave what I believed the general opinion, when I called [Mr. Dixon] plain” (138).

Of course, Jane Fairfax’s reserve is much more complicated than Jane Bennet’s because it stems, not from a desire to hide affection *from* a suitor, but to hide a very real engagement *to* a suitor from the rest of the world. Unbeknownst to Emma, or any other resident in Highbury, Jane Fairfax is already secretly engaged to Frank Churchill, and her efforts to conceal her affections from the world lead to her cautious behavior. Her guarded conversation on every subject, including her time at Weymouth and the character of Mr. Dixon, leads Emma to conjecture that Jane Fairfax is the victim of an unrequited love affair. Emma is so misguided by this idea that even when Frank Churchill’s pointed remarks elicit telltale emotions from Jane, such as her

“smile of secret delight” and a “deep blush of consciousness” (191), Emma mistakes their true meaning.

Emma is not alone in her misreading: Jane Fairfax’s veiled emotions succeed in fooling her family, her friends, and, nearly, her fiancé. Even though he is ostensibly secure of her affection, Frank Churchill begins to doubt Jane Fairfax’s love when her efforts at secrecy cause her to withdraw completely from his attentions: “I met her walking home by herself, and wanted to walk with her, but she would not suffer it...I was mad enough, however, to resent.—I doubted her affection” (346). Jane Fairfax’s behavior is even more problematic than Jane Bennet’s because it is not only ambiguous, but inconsistent—Jane unequivocally demonstrates her love for Frank Churchill through their engagement, then alters the display of her affection until he becomes as confused as Mr. Bingley about her true feelings. Frank Churchill’s outward flirtations with Emma, behavior that he defends as a necessary ruse, cause Jane to misread his affections in turn: “[she was] provoked by such conduct on my side, such shameful, insolent neglect of her, and such apparent devotion to Miss W., as it would have been impossible for any woman of sense to endure” (346). Even though Frank Churchill and Jane Fairfax are aware of their mutual regard, a regard verified by their engagement, outward behavior so strongly affects each character’s perception of the other that the duplicity they are forced to adopt leads only to confusion, misreading, resentment—and a broken engagement. It is not until Frank Churchill learns of Jane Fairfax’s plans to immediately take a governess position that he seriously recognizes and responds to the threat of her loss; once they meet in person and openly communicate with one another, he has “A great deal of very reasonable, very just displeasure...to explain away,” but they conclude the conversation “reconciled” and “dearer,

much dearer, than ever” (348). For both Jane Bennet and Jane Fairfax, adopting reserve is inconsistent with a successful courtship; it is only when their affections are acknowledged, whether directly or indirectly, that they come to an understanding with their respective partners.

Fordyce’s assertion that men are attracted to women’s reserve is problematic, so Austen suggests, and his warning that open affections will repulse a man of sense proves equally false in the narrative of Catherine Morland. Catherine, one of Austen’s most expressive heroines, is characterized by the narrator as possessing a “disposition cheerful and open, without conceit or affectation of any kind” (8-9); this description is proven accurate throughout the novel by Catherine’s “open book” behavior and artless conversation. Not only are Catherine’s thoughts and feelings easy to read through her body language, but she also unconsciously displays her affection for Henry Tilney to those around her. After meeting Catherine only twice, Henry’s sister Eleanor ends their conversation “with some knowledge of her new acquaintance’s feelings,” while Catherine has not “the smallest consciousness of having explained them” (51). Catherine’s inability to disguise her feelings is consistent with conduct literature’s injunction against imitating or hiding emotional responses; however, because of her open behavior, she fails to hide her affections from Henry himself. Rather than being limited to the selective readings of courtesy novel heroes, Henry can easily read the feeling of his legible heroine: when he proposes to Catherine, that narrator writes that “her heart in return was solicited which, perhaps, they pretty equally knew was already entirely his own” (180). Henry’s awareness of Catherine’s feelings does not discourage his affections, as Fordyce insists; instead, her admiration actually encourages Henry’s esteem, for “in finding him irresistible, [she became] so herself” (95), and, at the end of the novel, the narrator writes, “I must confess that his affection originated in nothing

better than gratitude, or, in other words, that a persuasion of her partiality for him had been the only cause of giving her a serious thought” (180). Rather than involving her in discomfort or embarrassment, Catherine’s open behavior rewards her with the love of Henry Tilney; in Catherine’s plot, revealing her affections is almost indispensable to gain a happy ending.

Conduct literature praises the display of open behavior in a woman, and, in all three of these plots, such behavior is generally encouraged. Yet, the function or the usefulness of open behavior in Austen’s novels actually counters conduct literature’s ideas of propriety: rather than displaying innocence, open affection is necessary to avoid misunderstandings amidst the uncertainty of courtship. As Charlotte Lucas notes, “there are very few of us who have heart enough to be really in love without encouragement” (15), while courtesy novel heroines are courted despite their illegibility, Austen’s novels do not expect men to persevere with little or no hope of success. It is Catherine Morland, with her open affections, who discovers that the clearest path to matrimony is one of communication and candor.

### ***“The Same Excessive Affliction”: The Pain of Revision***

In Austen’s novels, the most significant dichotomy of open and closed behavior occurs in the characters of *Sense and Sensibility*’s two heroines. Elinor Dashwood possesses “a strength of understanding, and coolness of judgment,” and “her feelings were strong; but she knew how to govern them” (6); her sister, Marianne, is described as “eager in everything,” and, while she is “generous, amiable, interesting,” she is also “everything but prudent” (6). In these ways, as in the two most significant earlier examples, the heroines’ open and closed behavior stems from their natural character—yet, where Jane Bennet is only shy and Catherine Morland is simply artless,

Elinor and Marianne Dashwood also artificially build upon such behavior due to desire for sensibility or the need to veil emotional expression. In a sense, they attempt to revise their natural abilities into the more excessive behavioral requirements of “open” and “closed” books. In their attempts to model open or reserved characters, however, the heroines endure detrimental harm to their physical well-being and, in Marianne’s case, to her reputation.

Elinor begins the novel as a steady and sensible woman. Yet, though she has strong self-control, she does not voluntarily shun her family’s confidence—when discussing Edward Ferrars with Marianne, she estimates her affection with caution, but she does not decline to admit or discuss her admiration. The circumstances of Edward’s engagement, however, soon make it necessary for Elinor to regulate her behavior and emotions more carefully. When Lucy Steele reveals her and Edward’s secret engagement, Elinor is fully aware that her rival must be acting from motives of suspicion and jealousy: “What other reason for the disclosure of the affair could there be, but that Elinor might be informed by it of Lucy’s superior claims on Edward?” (105). In addition to keeping Lucy’s secret from her family, Elinor is determined to prevent Lucy’s satisfaction by betraying no affection for Edward herself: “she could not deny herself the comfort of endeavoring to convince Lucy that her heart was unwounded” (106). Thus, not only must Elinor struggle to mask her emotions and behave with composure towards Lucy, but she feels obliged to pursue Lucy’s confidence as a method of diverting her rival’s suspicion: “she particularly wanted to convince Lucy, by her readiness to enter on the matter again...that she was no otherwise interested in it than as a friend” (105). It is essential to Elinor’s success that she maintains absolute control over her emotions and expressions; thus, though she is naturally cautious in her affections, Elinor is further thrust into the role of a “closed book” by the

interference of Lucy and the role that she must play in front of her. As Elinor later admits to Marianne, she would not voluntarily choose to adopt so much reserve in her behavior: “if I had not been bound to silence, perhaps nothing could have kept me entirely...from shewing that I was *very* unhappy” (199, italics original).

When Elinor artificially adopts a reserved role, this internalized, repressed unhappiness has the consequence of psychological and emotional pain. Indeed, the strain that Elinor lives under exists almost from the moment of Lucy’s revelation: “[she spoke] with a composure of voice, under which was concealed an emotion and distress beyond any thing she had ever felt before” (102). Elinor must continue this exertion through Lucy’s conversation, Edward’s visits, and her own sister’s selfish neglect. When Lucy and Edward’s secret is eventually broken to the world, Elinor’s composure breaks alongside it, fully revealing the pain of her repression:

For four months, Marianne, I have had all this hanging on my mind, without being at liberty to speak of it to a single creature...it was in a manner forced on me by the very person herself, whose prior engagement ruined all my prospects; and told me, as I thought, with triumph. –This person’s suspicions, therefore, I have had to oppose, by endeavouring to appear indifferent where I have been most deeply interested...If you can think me capable of ever feeling—surely you may suppose that I have suffered *now*. The composure of mind with which I have brought myself at present to consider the matter, the consolation that I have been willing to admit, have been the effect of constant and painful exertion. (198-99)

It is not until she learns of Lucy and Edward’s broken engagement that Elinor is completely released from the strain of her reserved emotions. Before Elinor learns of Lucy’s secret, her

behavior towards Edward is characterized by the balanced openness that Austen endorses; in seeking to alter this behavior in the presence of Edward and Lucy, however, Elinor buries her relationships and her self along with her emotions. Though this reserve stems more directly from Lucy's jealous suspicions than Elinor's attempts at propriety, Elinor's actual behavior clearly resembles the masking of affections that conduct literature recommends. Regardless of her motivations, the pain that Elinor endures as a result of this repression discourages the adoption of extreme reserve.

Like her sister, Marianne builds upon her natural tendencies to create an artificial display of behavior. Rather than being sensible and cautious, however, Marianne is romantic and eager, with open feelings and affections; yet, in addition to her natural tendencies, Marianne pointedly pursues the physical displays of sensibility that courtesy novel heroines espouse. Her belief in sensibility's ability to elevate her experiences—and even her person—above the mundane, causes Marianne to vigorously defend its ideologies: she “resolved never to be taught” Elinor's self control (6), she “abhorred all concealment where no real disgrace could attend unreserved” (41), and she scorns Elinor's “closed book” behavior:

[T]o aim at the restraint of sentiments which were not in themselves illaudable, appeared to her not merely an unnecessary effort, but a disgraceful subjection of reason to common-place and mistaken notions. Willoughby thought the same; and their behavior, at all times, was an illustration of their opinions. (41)

Marianne's beliefs cause her to pursue emotional expression to excess: after her father's death, she and her mother indulge in sorrow and their grief “was voluntarily renewed, was sought for, was created again and again” (6); when Willoughby leaves Devonshire, Marianne is left in with

“violent sorrow” which she not only gives way to, but “feed[s] and encourage[s] as a duty” (59). At other times, her sensibility takes the form of dramatic monologues on the beauties of nature, prompting Elinor to comment drily that “It is not every one...who has your passion for dead leaves” (67).

Marianne is able to disguise her feelings when she must: after Edward’s engagement is revealed she promises Elinor to behave complacently in front of Mrs. Jennings, and “she performed her promise of being discreet, to admiration” (199). Even her body remains composed as she hears Mrs. Jennings speak “with an unchanging complexion,” “only moving from one chair to another,” and having “only a spasm in her throat” (199). Though she is capable of masking her emotions, Marianne chooses to display them as evidence of her superior sensibility, and explicit in her open behavior is an attempt to model an ideal defined by heroines of sensibility.

Marianne is certainly successful in conforming her actions to this ideal, but her exaggerated behavior does not translate well in her actual life. Rather than elevating their persons, Marianne and Willoughby’s openness heaps on them the surrounding community’s mockery: “Such conduct made them of course most exceedingly laughed at; but ridicule could not shame, and seemed hardly to provoke them” (41). Their neighborhood’s derision is quickly succeeded by misinterpretations concerning their relationship; even Marianne’s family cannot reconcile the conflicting language, actions, and emotions that surround her supposed engagement. Elinor is disconcerted by Marianne and Willoughby’s silence about this engagement, but Mrs. Dashwood reads into Marianne and Willoughby’s body language a confirmation of their understanding: “I have not wanted syllables where actions have spoken so

plainly. Has not his behaviour to Marianne and to all of us...declared that he loved and considered her as his future wife?" (61). The family's speculation is shared by their surrounding friends: Mrs. Jennings claims that a report of Marianne's engagement "has been known all over town this ever so long" (135), and Colonel Brandon supports this claim by stating to Elinor that "your sister's engagement to Mr. Willoughby is very generally known" (129). Though her open behavior is supposed to allow for clear interpretations of Marianne's actions or emotions, every character, including Elinor, misinterprets Marianne's and Willoughby's relationship; Marianne is not engaged, but if her family and friends do not assume that such an understanding exists they are forced to label her conduct as forward or even promiscuous.

Marianne's open affection for Willoughby not only sets up her eventual disappointment, but her emotional indulgence upon his abandonment further breaks down her health and spirits. In her first grief after learning of his unfaithfulness, she refuses to "exert herself" and claims, "I must feel—I must be wretched" (141). In a romantic moment, she even walks within sight of Willoughby's house to say a last farewell, a willful action that eventually leads to her nearly fatal fever: "My illness, I well knew, had been entirely brought on by myself, by such negligence of my own health, as I had felt even at the time to be wrong" (262). Marianne's excessive sensibility is punished by her disappointment and illness, and even her eventual marriage to Colonel Brandon feels like a concession: for the woman who cherishes the belief that "no one can ever be in love more than once in their life" (70), there must be some mortification in marrying a man for whom she feels only "strong esteem and lively friendship" (288).

Marianne is punished as the result of displaying excessive emotion, yet, in *Northanger Abbey*, Catherine Morland is rewarded for her own openness. While Catherine and Marianne

both have open behavior, the difference in their conduct, and, thus, the difference in their outcomes, stems from the authenticity of their actions. Catherine is naturally ingenuous, and is praised for being “open, candid, artless, guileless, with affections strong but simple, forming no pretensions, and knowing no disguise” (152). Catherine’s openness is an extension of her character—she simply cannot help expressing her joys and sorrows for the world to see, and her candor is displayed equally in front her family, Henry Tilney, and even the Thorpes. Marianne, however, in her attempts to model a heroine of sensibility, forces her body into extreme sentimental postures and emotional expressions. Marianne chooses to display open behavior as it suits her ideas of sensibility; thus, she readily exposes her affections for Willoughby while also hiding the truth of their relationship from Elinor and Mrs. Dashwood. Austen condemns Marianne’s emotional displays as excessive, inconsistent, and partially artificial: her punishment is in proportion to her affectation.

The Dashwood sisters adopt two very different, almost opposing methods of displaying emotion: Marianne tells Elinor that, “We have neither of us any thing to tell; you, because you communicate, and I, because I conceal nothing” (126). Yet neither of those are strictly true: Elinor cannot communicate, as she seeks to shield herself and her family from the humiliation of a love attachment that cannot—so it seems—be returned; Marianne conceals the truth of her relationship with Willoughby, in that he has promised her nothing. For both young women, the paths of strictly closed book and entirely open book result in mental and physical suffering. Conduct literature recommends openness or reserve on the assumption that women can mold their behavior into the appropriate model; as the emotional extremes of *Sense and Sensibility* demonstrate, however, in Austen’s novel adopting artificial emotions or repressing those

emotions altogether is accomplished only through extreme physical and emotional pain. In addition, not only does Marianne become ill in response to her open emotion, but she nearly ruins her reputation as well. Honest sentiments, such as those demonstrated by Catherine Morland, are laudable; seeking to manipulate another's perception of those sentiments, however, is destructive to the heroine's well being and allows her body to be misread by other characters.

### ***"How Were His Sentiments to be Read?": The Female Reader***

If imitating both open and closed books is problematic for Austen's characters, how should the ideal heroine monitor her physical expression of emotion? In *Persuasion*, Anne Elliot regulates her emotions not by subscribing to a particular pattern of behavior, but by becoming, herself, a reader of other's bodies. Through her own readings, Anne is able to regulate her behavior in response to the thoughts and actions of others; specifically, by reading Captain Wentworth's body language, Anne adjusts her openness or reservation in proportion to his displayed feelings for her. In her article on reading the body in *Persuasion*, Robyn Warhol notes that Anne is uniquely situated as a keen observer, or "reader," of the characters around her: "the novel's heroine must be almost obsessed with the act of looking, an activity which...was not associated with female characters in the novels of Austen's predecessors" (6). Anne focuses her gaze on nearly every character in the novel, but no one person feels her look so keenly as Captain Wentworth—from his initial behavior towards her, she correctly guesses that he still resents her decision eight years before, that he, in fact, "had not forgiven Anne Elliot" (54). Yet, further observations provide a more nuanced reading of Wentworth's feelings: he rescues Anne from the interfering attentions of her nephew, and, after a morning walk, he insists that Mrs.

Croft take a tired Anne home in her carriage. Through these events, Anne is convinced that Wentworth's continues in his interest and concern for her, and his actions provide proof that "he could not be unfeeling" (77). During the latter event, Anne not only is impressed by the circumstances, but also by Wentworth's expressive body: "She was very much affected by the view of his disposition towards her which all these things made apparent" (77). Though Anne recognizes that Wentworth is, at the least, affecting indifference towards her, she is consoled by what she reads as his involuntary interest in her well being:

Though condemning her for the past, and considering it with high and unjust resentment, though perfectly careless of her, and though becoming attached to another, still he could not see her suffer, without the desire of giving her relief. It was a remainder of former sentiment; it was an impulse of pure, though unacknowledged friendship. (77)

Anne is buoyed by Wentworth's revealing actions, but, as long as he also behaves as if becoming "attached to another," she maintains a discreet reserve in her behavior towards him. Anne's "reading" of Wentworth convinces her of his merit and also helps Anne avoid the embarrassment of displaying her continued affection before he is prepared to receive it.

Anne's reserve is a response to Wentworth's bitterness, but, after she learns that he will not marry Louisa Musgrove, she again modifies her behavior in response to physical signs of his returning affection. This time, in re-reading Wentworth's body language, Anne's efforts are not in vain—after an exhilarating conversation, she is convinced that he loves her, not only because of their discourse, but because of his expressive emotions: "sentences begun which he could not finish—his half averted eyes, and more than half expressive glance,—all, all declared that he had

a heart returning to her at least” (150). When Anne reads these new emotions in Wentworth’s looks, she responds by becoming, herself, more physically inviting. She invites him to speak with her “gentle ‘How do you do?’” (146), and maneuvers herself into an aisle seat at the concert, “with a vacant space at hand” (153)—thus, making herself both figuratively and literally “available.”

Though Anne and Wentworth’s conversations also provide material for understanding each other’s emotions, it is significant that, until Wentworth’s absolute proposal, their words can never directly confront the subject of their affections. Instead, they discuss the romance of Captain Benwick and Louisa Hargrove, and their body language assists in drawing parallels to their own relationship: talking of Fanny Harville, Captain Wentworth claims that “A man does not recover from such a devotion of the heart to such a woman!” but his visible emotion applies these words to Anne: “from some other consciousness, he went no farther” (148). When a conversation between Mrs. Musgrove and Mrs. Croft turns to the subject of long engagements, Anne “felt its application to herself,” and exchanges with Wentworth “one, quick, conscious look” (186). Finally, during Anne’s conversation with Captain Harville on the relative constancy of men and woman, she is well aware of the subject’s importance to her own situation, and concludes their debate in agitation: “She could not immediately have utter another sentence; her heart was too full, her breath too much oppressed” (189). Captain Wentworth catches the hint, and applies this conversation to himself in his proposal, writing, “I am every instant hearing something which overpowers me,” and “Dare not say that man forgets sooner than woman” (191).

Wentworth and Anne's indirect communication culminates in the moments after his letter of proposal: "He joined them; but, as if irresolute whether to join or to pass on, said nothing—only looked. Anne could command herself enough to receive that look, and not repulsively. The cheeks which had been pale now glowed, and the movements which had hesitated were decided" (193). Whether confronted with a Louisa or an Anne, Wentworth is not a particularly adept reader, but he and Anne come to a final, clear understanding in this meeting. Anne is able to balance reserve and expression by reading and responding to Wentworth's feelings; though her reserve still costs effort and her expression still carries risks, Anne can successfully use both by recognizing the proper time for their application.

Anne, as the successful model for regulating behavior in Austen's novels, is far removed from the courtesy novel heroines who expect to exhibit both dramatic emotion and virtuous reserve according to their convenience. Anne engages in acts of sensibility—she quotes poetry to herself during an autumn walk and possesses a powerful sense of empathy; yet, Anne's superiority and her merit stem from her acts of kindness, her consideration, and her generosity rather than excessive displays of emotion. Anne, the narrator tells her readers, has "an elegance of mind and sweetness of character" (11), and her actions are simply an extension of these qualities; in this way, Anne resembles the natural openness of Catherine Morland rather than the studied behavior of characters such as Elinor and Marianne Dashwood, Jane Bennet, and Jane Fairfax. While these women suffer rejection and pain for artificially adopting the personas of "open" and "closed" books, authentic behavior, when displayed with discretion, is an encouraging and proper way of communicating with other characters in Austen's novels.

### CHAPTER THREE – “The Imagination...Had Outstripped the Truth”: Life and the Novel

In the first volume of *Sir Charles Grandison*, Mr. Reeves begins a letter to the heroine’s guardian with this shocking news: “We know not what is become of our dearest Miss Byron!” (1:116). Harriet Byron is, in fact, in the hands of the spurned rake Sir Hargrave Pollexfen, who, made desperate by Harriet’s rejections, tries to claim her hand in marriage by force. In what Harriet will later describe as her “sad story” and a “shocking affair” (1:150; 1:168), she is kidnapped from a masquerade and imprisoned in a strange house, where she narrowly avoids a compulsory marriage; she then is whisked away in her kidnapper’s carriage, but rescued by the man of her dreams after he battles for her freedom on the open road to Harriet’s cries of “O save me! save me!” (1:141). Though she is shaken by these events, Harriet’s prediction that “a transaction so shocking is not very unhappily concluded” is fulfilled even beyond her wildest hopes when she becomes the wife of her rescuer, Sir Charles Grandison (1:168).

Harriet’s adventures are not unique among the pages of courtesy novels, and many heroines must survive a series of unrealistic, but exciting adventures before they can realize a happy conclusion. Yet, the use of amorous adventure and fantastic circumstance to entertain readers is problematic when heroines are supposed to act as models of behavior for young readers. Conduct literature does not suggest that its feminine ideal engage in such escapades; on the contrary, the life that conduct books imagine for their readers is one characterized by steadiness and regime. John Gregory describes the activities that should fill a typical day: “various kinds of exercise,” “different kinds of women’s work,” “the domestic concerns of a family,” “dress, dancing, music and drawing,” and “books as improve your understanding” (31). In recommending domestic amusements, conduct books are concerned with the management of

women's time, and they frequently allude to the rigid scheduling of each activity using phrases such as "time allotted," "regular habit," "regularly allotting," "occupy the time," and "Let all your Diversions be...well timed" (Gisborne 212-222; Wilkes, *Letters* 75). The purpose of this management was to prevent women from possessing any unoccupied hours: "By thus ordering and dividing your Time, no Part of it will lie heavy upon your hands" (Wilkes, *Letters* 79). A woman's schedule, as described by conduct literature, should be busy with domestic concerns and improving amusements; in fact, conduct book writers are anxious for their readers to avoid any potentially thrilling experiences and exhibit protracted unease over nearly all amusements outside of the home (Gisborne 135-209; Gregory 31-37). The life of a feminine ideal is neither exciting nor adventurous, and is, instead, characterized by repetitive and dull obligations.

An important part of the courtesy novel's instructional potential is couched in the virtuous example of its heroine—yet, instead of strictly adhering to conduct literature's suggested activities, these heroines are often kidnapped, assaulted, found to be secret nobility, bequeathed with a sudden inheritance, and more. The ubiquity of these adventures is significant: Clarissa Harlowe, Harriet Byron, Pamela Andrews, Ophelia Lenox, and Emmeline Mowbray are among those who are kidnapped; Evelina Anville, Celestina de Mornay, and Emmeline discover that they are secretly noble heiresses; Evelina is assaulted in a carriage and a pleasure garden; Harriet refuses no less than six marriage proposals; Clementina della Porretta battles insanity. Austen lamented the lack of realism that these adventures lent to courtesy novels, criticizing them as "improbable" and even "absurd." In a letter to her sister, Cassandra, Austen expresses these sentiments in her review of Mary Brunton's novel *Self-Control*:

I am looking over *Self Control* again, & my opinion is confirmed of its' [sic] being an excellently-meant, elegantly-written Work, without anything of Nature or Probability in it. I declare I do not know whether Laura's passage down the American River, is not the most natural, possible, every-day thing she ever does.

(234)

Austen's own novels, by contrast, are noted for their realism; indeed, one of her neighbors described *Emma* as "too natural to be interesting" (qtd. in Waldron 4). This is not to say that Austen entirely abandons the conventions of eighteenth-century fiction, but, rather, that the tropes of previous novels are often useful to her only so far as they can be subverted and parodied to create an ironic realism, or they can be placed as a "temptation" for her heroines before they follow a plotline independent from their literary predecessors.

Just as the courtesy novel heroine's impossible adventures are incompatible with the dull life of the conduct book feminine ideal, both courtesy novel plots and conduct literature duties are rejected as incompatible or unrealistic for the women of Austen's novels. Heroines such as Emma Woodhouse and Marianne Dashwood are attracted to the extravagant plots of courtesy novels, but their efforts to engage in such plots are continually stymied by the reality of life. Fanny Price and Elizabeth Bennet, by contrast, are given many opportunities to follow the advice of parents and/or guardians and enter into the matrimonial duties that conduct literature portrays as necessary and even self-actualizing for women, but both heroines reject these duties and advice as incompatible with personal happiness. Instead, Austen's heroines discover their happy endings by making rational choices on their own and by acting in accordance with the reality of

their lives.<sup>1</sup> Specifically, in Austen's novels, adhering to courtesy novel plots or conduct book dictums is followed by negative outcomes that encroach on the happiness of her heroines; instead of finding self-actualization through these plots and dictums, Austen's characters create positive outcomes by thinking and acting for themselves.

### ***"A Woman's Portion": Rejecting the Domestic Ideal***

Though courtesy novels generate exciting adventures for entertainment value, their simultaneous adherence to conduct literature dictates can create a paradoxical disparity between the principles espoused by a novel's characters and that same novel's plot, actions, or results; that is to say, a gap sometimes exists between courtesy novels' "words" and "deeds." Courtesy novels communicate morality in "words" by directly presenting didactic views on a social custom or idea through the opinions of proven moral characters. These preachings can be lengthy, and generally create a noticeable break in the text, such as when a reformed Mr. B. writes out for Pamela her expected marital obligations or Sir Charles Grandison pulls Harriet Byron aside to expostulate on propriety in dress. "Deeds," by contrast, can communicate approval or disapproval of the same customs, but through the more nuanced form of characters' actions and the results of the plot. Thus, Pamela is not only told how to behave as a wife, but she also demonstrates correct behavior to readers when she discharges her marital duties. Sometimes a disparity occurs when these two dialogues portray opposing truths in a single text. For example, in Maria Edgeworth's *Belinda*, the heroine is lectured by the staunch moralist Mr. Percival on the dangers of first loves, or, at least, of believing that a person can only love once:

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<sup>1</sup> Austen's heroines are, of course, fictional, and the "reality of their lives" does not exist. In using such terms as "reality" or "real life," I am referring to the comparative realism of Austen's novels when contrasted with her literary predecessors.

“I scarcely know an idea more dangerous to domestic happiness, than this belief in the unextinguishable nature of a first flame” (226). Yet, though the text didactically insists on the fallacy of a “first flame,” at the end of the novel, Belinda is united with Clarence Harvey, her own first choice.

How do courtesy novels reconcile these disparate discourses? In *Belinda*, the novel proves through its plot that the heroine is capable of overcoming a first love: after absorbing Mr. Percival’s advice, Belinda recovers from her first passion and becomes engaged to another man. It is only when fate intervenes that she and Hervey are able to marry. In *Sir Charles Grandison*, which espouses similar views on first love and insists, along with conduct literature, that women marry as a duty despite their prior feelings, the heroine also marries the first man of her choice. However, the text claims that, should she not have been so fortunate, its didactic mandates would have prevailed: “Pho, pho, never fear but Harriet would have married before my Brother and Clementina had seen the face of their second boy” (7:406). Thus, though *Belinda* and *Sir Charles Grandison* create satisfying and romantic endings, they are careful to insist on the verity of conduct literature’s maxims. If fate had not intervened, they claim, both heroines would have done their duty.

Austen is similarly concerned with creating a happy ending, but she does not feel the need to balance her plots by directly communicating morals through the didactic musings of her characters. In addition, when Austen’s heroines shirk the “duties” of marriage and parental obedience, she validates their choices instead of excusing them. If Austen’s heroines do not follow conduct literature’s ideology through their plots and actions it is because such ideology is incompatible with their personal happiness, not because fate has intervened.

Unlike several courtesy novel heroines, Elizabeth Bennet never claims a preference for the single life, but she does, through the rejection of several proposals, refuse to marry for the sake of duty or obedience. She first levels this refusal at Mr. Collins, whose attempts to engage Elizabeth in matrimony initially meet with a chilly reception; yet, he is confident that “when sanctioned by the express authority of both your excellent parents, my proposals will not fail of being acceptable” (84). Conduct literature paints parental authority as absolute, and parental injunctions as binding: Wilkes writes, “Let your Obedience to your Mother, be therefore your Delight and Exercise. God has given her Power over you... You are to please her in all Circumstances; to comfort her, on all Occasions; to obey her Commands, with Pleasure” (*Letters* 120). Though Wilkes also advises his readers not to be pressured into marriage without “cordial Affection” (no mention of love), he allows parental authority to have considerable weight in matters of matrimony.

Even more significantly, both conduct literature and courtesy novels describe marriage as a woman’s duty—a state that she should enter into through whatever avenue is available to her. Though conduct books, again, pay lip service to the importance of marrying with affection, they are equally convinced that any properly motivated suitor can inspire such feelings in a woman. John Gregory writes that, “[As] Nature has not given that unlimited range in your choice, which we enjoy, she has wisely and benevolently assigned to you a greater flexibility of taste on this subject,” and claims that a woman marries “because she esteems [a man], and because he gives her that preference” (48). Thus, even a lack of affection is little pretence to avoid matrimony: *Sir Charles Grandison* labels the marriage state as “a duty to enter into,” and claims that those who shirk it exhibit “a kind of faulty *indulgence* and selfishness,” when they desire “to live single”

(7:411). “A woman out of wedlock,” the novel claims, “is half useless to the end of her being” (1:25), implying that a single woman is not only selfish, but unfulfilled when she is not engaging in domestic concerns. Harriet Byron describes matrimony as inherently self-actualizing for women: “How indeed do the duties of a good Wife, of a good Mother, and a worthy Matron, well performed, dignify a woman!” (1:25).

Though Elizabeth is not insisting on the single life when she rejects Mr. Collins, she is certainly risking her chance of becoming a wife and mother during a time when women held little power in the marriage market. Hazel Jones notes that in 1851, 365,000 more women than men were living in England and Wales and that “Twenty-five per cent of gentlemen’s daughters in Jane Austen’s lifetime never married, either through choice or, more commonly, lack of opportunity” (173). As Mrs. Selby notes in *Sir Charles Grandison*, some women cannot be blamed for living single because they never had a chance to accept a proposal; Mr. Collins, however, is giving Elizabeth that chance, and, as he himself too correctly observes, “it is by no means certain that another offer of marriage may ever be made you” (83). Of course, Elizabeth does receive another, even grander offer of marriage from Mr. Darcy—only to turn him down as well. Until Elizabeth can choose to marry for her own satisfaction and her own happiness, she does not choose to marry at all. The pressures of “duty” are strong, particularly after Mr. Collins’s proposal: Mrs. Bennet demands her compliance, the likelihood of Elizabeth receiving another proposal is not high, and she will even be saving family from pecuniary embarrassments by becoming the future mistress of Longbourn. Yet Elizabeth does not even hesitate; she is already convinced that conduct literature’s portrait of marriage as self-actualizing for women is flawed without the love and companionship that she requires.

Of all Austen's heroines, Elizabeth Bennet is perhaps most unlike *Mansfield Park's* Fanny Price, yet both the outspoken Elizabeth and the timid Fanny are united in their opposition against imposed, dutiful marriages. In addition to facing the familial and financial considerations that Elizabeth shares, Fanny is further pressured to marry Henry Crawford because of the contrast between her virtue and his rakishness: while attempting to support Henry's proposals, Edmund paints Fanny as the young man's moral savior: "he will make you happy; but you will make him every thing" (275). The heroine's responsibility to reform a rakish hero before marrying was a contested idea in eighteenth-century courtesy novels, though the trope was well-established enough by 1747 for Samuel Richardson to warn the readers of *Clarissa* against "that dangerous but too commonly received notion, *that a reformed rake makes the best husband*" (36, italics original). Richardson's warning is demonstrated in the story of Clarissa, who attempts to reform Richard Lovelace, but fails, and later by Harriet Byron, who refuses to exert such influence over Sir Hargrave Polexfen; yet, Richardson, along with other courtesy novelists, consistently portrays women as virtuous reformers of fallen males, if not rakes specifically. In courtesy novels, women not only espouse conduct literature's dictums, but, just as their bodies can be read for signs of innocence, they can become a "text" or conduct "manual" for the male characters to read and be transformed by. Kathleen M. Oliver notes this effect in Richardson's *Pamela*: "If we view Pamela, someone in the service of others, as text, as conduct book herself...then Mr. B. 'reads' the conduct book of her person, and, in reading, becomes reformed, restored" (62). Despite Richardson's protests, the rake John Belford is reformed by the heroine's example in *Clarissa*, and later, in *Sir Charles Grandison*, Lord W. and Mr. Grandison leave off their loose ways and find happiness in domestic comforts and virtuous wives.

Conduct literature similarly portrays women as reclaimers of masculine virtue, who, in addition to embodying the figure of a virtuous wife, are capable of securing the moral character of their husbands. Thomas Gisborne writes that a wife has “influence” over the “conduct and character of her husband” (245), and that she is even responsible for his salvation: “She who sets the pattern of slighting one Christian ordinance...contributes not only to lead her husband into the same fault, but likewise to weaken his attachment to every other Christian ordinance” (250). Such a wife will have to “answer at the day of retribution for having betrayed her husband into a neglect of his eternal welfare” (250). If a woman’s influence is properly exerted, however, this sobering outcome is easily avoided, for John Gregory guarantees that “there is a dignity in conscious virtue which is able to awe the most shameless and abandoned of men” (25). Thus, though courtesy novels and conduct literature warn against marriage with rakes, they also indirectly support such unions by insisting on the reforming power of a virtuous woman.

Following in the steps of this precept, Fanny’s companions insist that she is capable of reforming Henry Crawford by engaging in the role of his dutiful and pious wife. Fanny, however, exclaims against the plan: “I would not engage in such a charge...in such an office of high responsibility!” (275). Fanny is not tempted to try her powers any more than she is influenced by her uncle’s commands, her marital obligations or responsibilities, and the financial advantages of such a match. As a dependent living in her uncle’s family, Fanny is not only disregarding the wishes of her guardians, but complicit in her refusal of Henry Crawford is a refusal to relieve the pecuniary difficulties of her immediate family. Sir Thomas emphasizes this point when he sends Fanny to her family in Portsmouth for the first time in nine years: “[A] little abstinence from the elegancies and luxuries of Mansfield Park, would bring her mind into a

sober state...Her Father's house would, in all probability, teach her the value of a good income" (289). Yet, despite these considerations, neither Fanny nor Elizabeth will accept an idealized domestic role as a substitute for companionable happiness in marriage; Fanny, in addition, will not act as a vehicle for reformation, despite the fact that such a marriage will be her "triumph" and "glory" (284-85). She recognizes, in fact, that, far from giving her cause for triumph, a marriage to morally lax Henry Crawford will only make both "miserable." Her assertion is later justified through Henry's behavior, since his elopement with Maria "fully acquitted [Fanny's] conduct in refusing him" (355).

Elizabeth and Fanny secure their happy endings by refusing to engage in matrimony on the terms of duty and reformation that conduct literature elevates, despite their friends' and family's wishes; Anne Elliot, however, delays her own happiness by relying too heavily on the merit of parental obedience and the infallibility of her family's judgment. Eight years before the novel opens, Anne dissolves an engagement with Frederick Wentworth under the advice of her godmother, Lady Russell, and the certain knowledge of her family's disapproval. Though, according to conduct literature, women ostensibly have the ability to refuse a suitor they dislike, this privilege does not extend to choosing a partner against their parent's inclination: "Above all Acts of Disobedience, I caution you against marrying, without [your mother's] Consent. Never encourage the most honourable Address, or Proposals, without her Approbation" (Wilkes, *Letters* 121). This injunction proves difficult for Anne, who struggles to reconcile the melancholy and pain of her separation from Wentworth with the merit of obedience that she practices towards Lady Russell. Once she is happy in Wentworth's affections, she declares that her past behavior was "perfectly right," and tries to justify her decisions by arguing that "I

should have suffered more in continuing the engagement than I did even in giving it up” (198). Yet, at the beginning of the novel, when her future is less certain, Anne’s feelings are the opposite: “she should yet have been a happier woman in maintaining the engagement, than she had been in the sacrifice of it” (29), and the consequences of Anne’s decisions are painted in strong terms: “Her attachment and regrets had, for a long time, clouded every enjoyment of youth; and an early loss of bloom and spirits had been their lasting effect” (28). Anne places her trust in the wisdom of parental authority, but, though a mother-figure is purported to be “more experienced” and therefore a “better judge” of female conduct (Wilkes 119), Anne’s story only proves the merit of her own superior insight.

Anne’s eight years of melancholy could have been eight years of joy as Mrs. Wentworth if she had ignored conduct literature’s injunctions and made a marital choice based upon her own judgment; Elizabeth Bennet and Fanny Price avoid lifetimes of regret by asserting their ability to choose a husband, regardless of the duties and obligations that would compel them into marriage with a family-sanctioned spouse. Courtesy novels are quick to reflect conduct literature’s advice while also often twisting their plots to ensure a providential ending, but Austen’s heroines gain happiness through choices that belie, and even contradict the same advice. Rather than excusing, or dismissing her heroine’s actions, Austen applauds both the results and the convictions that influence their rejection of “duty” in its several forms.

### ***“Errors of Imagination”: Attempting the Courtesy Novel Plot***

Unlike the conduct literature ideal, whose life is a pattern of duty, the courtesy novel’s heroine and her story is tempting to Austen’s heroines because it promises, not only the

excitement of adventure, but also future romance and a happy ending. Courtesy novels engage in female wish fulfillment; they often display a satisfying ending by rewarding their heroines with money, nobility, and a genteel husband, and they promise similarly pleasing results in the real lives of those readers who model such a heroine's virtuous behavior. Two of Austen's heroines, Marianne Dashwood and Emma Woodhouse, take these courtesy novels at their word. In modeling herself as a heroine of sensibility, Marianne uses courtesy novel plots to predict and guide the action of her life, while Emma appropriates novelistic plots to support her matchmaking aspirations. Both, however, discover that a disparity exists between life and the novel, and rather than courtesy novel plots becoming a vehicle for fairy tale endings, such narratives must actually be discarded and real life embraced before happy endings can occur.

At first, Marianne despairs over fulfilling the courtesy novel plot because she lacks a suitor who will complement her role as a heroine of sensibility. Before meeting Willoughby, Marianne laments the lack of eligible bachelors: "Mama, the more I know of the world, the more am I convinced that I shall never see a man whom I can really love. I require so much!" (14). Just as Marianne desires to meet with a man of feeling, she attempts to mold her own person into the perfect heroine of sensibility: she dramatically expostulates on the charms of Norland when the Dashwoods leave Sussex (21), she adopts popular sentiments on the picturesque (73), and emphasizes the superiority of her taste, a trait which G.J. Barker-Benfield describes as common form for the sensible heroine: "Sentimental fiction held up a specific range of subjects with implicit aesthetic value: artfully produced informal and irregular gardens, wild landscapes, melancholy poetry, romance...Gothicism, peasants, and banditti" (206). At some point in the novel, Marianne expresses a passion or admiration for each of these sentimental expressions, and

she believes that she has found her ideal man of feeling when Willoughby appears to do the same: “Their taste was strikingly alike. The same books, the same passages were idolized by each...He acquiesced in all her decisions, caught all her enthusiasm” (36). Indeed, Marianne explicitly characterizes Willoughby as a sentimental hero, describing him as “the hero of a favourite story” (33).

Marianne does not specify the title of her “favourite story,” but several scholars have pointed to Charlotte Smith’s novel *Celestina* as a courtesy novel with striking parallels to Marianne and Willoughby’s romance in *Sense and Sensibility* (Labbe n. page; Magee 120). In *Celestina*, the hero—perhaps not-quite-so-coincidentally named George Willoughby—abandons the eponymous heroine on their wedding day. Though *Celestina* is ignorant of the reasons for Willoughby’s disappearance and receives only sparse communication from him, she remains true to their engagement. Like her literary predecessor, Marianne is apparently abandoned by her own Willoughby when he must precipitately leave Devonshire with little explanation: “It is all very strange. So suddenly to be gone!...Something more than what he owed to us must have happened” (59). Later in *Celestina*, the hero and heroine meet at a party after a long period of separation during which each believes the other to be indifferent; when compared with Willoughby’s moment of coldness at the ball in *Sense and Sensibility*, the two scenes are very similar:

[T]he well known figure, the well known face of Willoughby, emaciated and pale as they were, instantly struck her. An involuntary and faint shriek testified the impression they made...[Willoughby] imputed that emotion to her consciousness of her attachment to her new favourite; and darting at her a look of impatient

reproach, he forced himself through the croud...The agitation of poor Celestina could not be concealed. (Smith, *Celestina* 375)

At that moment [Marianne] first perceived [Willoughby], and her whole countenance glowing with sudden delight...but her touch seemed painful to him, and he held her hand only for a moment...turned hastily away with a slight bow and joined his friend. Marianne, now looking dreadfully white, and unable to stand, sunk into her chair, and Elinor...tried to screen her from the observation of others. (Austen, *S&S* 132).

Both heroines meet unexpectedly with the hero in a public place, and subsequently struggle to control their outward emotions when he rebuffs them; both continue to insist on the hero's merit, though only Celestina's constancy is vindicated when her Willoughby is able to satisfactorily explain his absence, and they are finally united. To the end, the Willoughby of *Celestina* remains a man of feeling and a true hero of sensibility; as in novels such as *Camilla* and *Evelina*, Willoughby and Celestina's separation is caused by a series of misunderstandings based on visual misreadings and verbal miscommunications. Even after John Willoughby's snub, Marianne expects that his behavior stems from this kind of miscommunication rather than malice, writing "You have perhaps been misinformed, or purposely deceived, in something concerning me" (140).

When Willoughby's rejection is nearly proven by his cold letter and rumored engagement, Marianne projects a novelistic fantasy where, as in *Celestina*, he returns to her with penitence and a ready explanation for his mysterious behavior: "her imagination placed before her a letter from Willoughby, full of tenderness and contrition, explanatory of all that had passed,

satisfactory, convincing; and instantly followed by Willoughby himself” (151). Marianne’s daydream, however, remains fictional. Willoughby has never been a hero of sensibility, and his initial enthusiasm or “taste” for Marianne’s aesthetic interests is a sham: “I endeavoured, by every means in my power, to make myself pleasing to her, without any design of returning her affection” (242). Marianne’s novelistic expectations blind her to the reality of Willoughby’s character and cause her to deceive her friends and family, and to shirk the common civility. Rather than experiencing the wish fulfillment of a courtesy novel’s happy ending, Marianne, ironically, receives the least-romantic dénouement of any Austen heroine, marrying Colonel Brandon on the basis of “strong esteem and lively friendship” (288). In attempting to mold herself into a heroine of sensibility, Marianne ignores the consequences that her words and actions have in her real life. As her actions prove, she believes that her story will end happily if she can only follow in the steps of Celestina, yet, despite her efforts to model herself into the ideal heroine, this narrative can only deliver a fulfilling ending in a fictional, rather than a realistic capacity. Marianne has been deceived by Willoughby, by herself, and by the courtesy novel.

Unlike Marianne, Emma Woodhouse is less concerned with plotting her own story than she is intent on arranging the plots of others. As an “imaginist” (263), Emma struggles to accept or be content with her day-to-day Highbury existence, instead creating a succession of narratives in her head and casting her friends and neighbors in the leading roles. Without fail, these recycled novelistic plots fail because Emma is forcing others into fictional stories instead of paying attention to actual circumstances; courtesy novel plots are exposed as unrealistic and their heroine’s behavioral models fall apart when applied in real life. In addition, *Emma* insists that an

everyday existence and natural characters are significant enough to warrant their own narratives; that is to say, even in her normal life, Emma can be a heroine.

Though Emma is always the reader's heroine, she does not occupy this position in her own life for the majority of the novel; instead, Emma projects the heroine-role onto the women in her community—Harriet Smith in particular, who, as the “natural daughter of somebody” (19) is an ideal candidate for the eighteenth-century role of “foundling heiress.” In her book *Bastards and Foundlings*, Lisa Zunshine describes two different treatments of illegitimate heroines in eighteenth-century literature: in the first, a truly illegitimate heroine cannot overcome the moral failings of her birth and, tainted by the parent's sins, is susceptible to her own moral downfall (think of Eliza Williams in *Sense and Sensibility*); in the second, a young heroine overcomes the ignominy of her illegitimacy through personal virtue and the attachment of a wealthy hero only to be discovered as a legitimate daughter of rich, noble parents at the story's end (183).

Frances Burney's novel *Evelina* and Charlotte Smith's novels *Celestina* and *Emmeline* provide classic examples of the second illegitimacy plot—the same narrative that Emma clearly intends for Harriet to follow. Initially, Harriet's situation is reminiscent of illegitimate heroines in her ambiguous social status: as unclaimed daughters, Evelina, Celestina, Emmeline, and Harriet must navigate a precarious social position that limits their autonomy and their movement in social space. To be unclaimed (or, illegitimate) is to exist outside of an acceptable social circle—both figuratively, as the heroines' abilities to marry well are brought into question, and literally as they remove themselves or are forced out of common social space. Evelina describes this phenomenon when she identifies herself as a “nobody” and illustrates the role's telling effect on her social interaction, writing, “she sat like a cipher, whom to nobody belonging, by nobody

was noticed” (340) and “Since I, as Mr. Lovel says, am *Nobody*, I seated myself quietly...and not very near to any body” (288, italics original). When Emma seeks to introduce Harriet into a proper social sphere, she recognizes Harriet’s problematic social standing and vows to save her from the degradation of the ensuing isolation: “*She* would notice her; she would improve her; she would detach her from her bad acquaintance, and introduce her into good society” (19, italics original).

Rather than recognizing or attempting to address the evils of Harriet’s reality, however, Emma predicts, and even assumes, that her friend’s problems will be solved with the same stroke of fate that the courtesy novel heroines exemplify in their own narratives. First, Evelina, Celestina, and Emmeline are able to overcome the ignominy of their birth through beauty and personal virtue: Evelina is “an angel” (36) and her eventual husband is secured by her “natural love of virtue,” “a mind that might adorn *any* station,” and “modest worth” (346-47); Celestina is a “beautiful and interesting object” (65) who has “good sense” and “unaffected simplicity of manners” (350); Emmeline not only possesses “extreme beauty” (110), but she is also attractive for “the naïveté of her manners” and the “generous sympathy of her nature” (110; 48). With these women as examples, Emma contends with Mr. Knightley that Harriet’s claims of beauty and good-nature—akin to the “modest worth,” “simplicity,” and “naïveté” of past heroines—are enough for any man to overcome more material objections: “a girl as Harriet is exactly what every man delights in...Oh! Harriet may pick and choose” (51).

Emma’s confidence in Harriet’s marriage-ability is only matched by her confidence in Harriet’s exalted birth. With little other evidence than Harriet’s generous allowance, Emma admits that, “in a legal sense she may be called Nobody,” but argues that such a claim “will not

hold in common sense” (50). Emma is confident that Harriet will similarly share in courtesy novel heroines’ good fortune: like a plethora of eighteenth-century foundling heiresses, Evelina, Celestina, and Emmeline’s success in attracting aristocratic husbands is quickly followed by the discovery of their rightful family members—an event which confirms their legitimacy, ensures their nobility, and secures them financially. Emma’s confidence in Harriet’s similar fate is so deeply engrained that she cannot imagine another possible plot exists: “There can scarcely be a doubt that her father is a gentleman...That she is a gentleman’s daughter is indubitable to me” (50). Austen, however, does not follow the logic of eighteenth-century novels which bestows marriage only on the truly legitimate—and, therefore, truly worthy—heroines. Realistically, bastard daughters such as Harriet were not shut out of the marital state because of ignominious birth, although it did somewhat hurt their prospects, and Harriet Smith does not have to prove herself to be from exalted or legitimate parentage before she can be rewarded with a husband (Zunshine 183). When Harriet’s parentage is eventually revealed, Emma must acknowledge the foolishness of her unfounded hopes: “She proved to be the daughter of a tradesman...Such was the blood of gentility which Emma had formerly been so ready to vouch for!” (379). Though Harriet has all the markings and misfortunes of a courtesy novel heroine, Emma errs in her dependence on fate to turn the tide of Harriet’s fortune and in her romantic notions about marriage and class structure—not every foundling has rich and noble ancestry waiting to be revealed, and not every young man will allow beauty and good nature to overpower his pecuniary interests.

Before Emma can realize her mistake, however, she has already tried to engage Harriet’s affections towards two suitors: first, Mr. Elton who, rather than falling for Harriet’s beauty and

merit per the courtesy novel hero, dismisses her marital potential with a snide, “Every body has their level” (105). After this failure, Emma turns her attention to Frank Churchill whose brief, but exciting, interaction with Harriet sparks Emma’s interest in a second narrative plot—the damsel in distress. Eighteenth-century literature was, as Sarah Morgan writes, “littered with endangered virgins” (28): in novels from *Evelina* to *Sir Charles Grandison*, the heroine is susceptible to sexual attack, and her chastity—and by extension, as Morgan argues, her very identity—is negotiated among the male figures that gain physical or emotional influence over her. A sexual threat, embodied in the figure of the rake, can only be neutralized through the intervention of a second type of male—the hero.

Harriet’s confrontation with a band of gypsies immediately carries this plot to Emma’s mind, and she is quick to spot the similarities between Harriet Smith and a similarly endangered heroine such as Harriet Byron. When Sir Hargrave Polexfen kidnaps Harriet, she is not directly assaulted; yet, although Sir Hargrave actually intends to marry the heroine, she considers the event nothing less than a violation of her will, and, eventually, her virginity. Harriet struggles with her kidnapper and succeeds in frustrating Sir Hargrave’s original plot, but it is only through the intervention of Sir Charles that Harriet can truly be saved. When compared with Harriet Byron’s endangerment, the circumstances of the attack on Harriet Smith are noticeably, and humorously, benign: “Harriet was soon assailed by half a dozen children, headed by a stout woman and a great boy, all clamorous and impertinent in look, though not absolutely in word” (262). The relative lack of peril in Harriet’s attack does not deter Emma from drawing conclusions based on eighteenth-century plots of assault: “Such an adventure as this,—a fine young man and a lovely young woman thrown together in such a way, could hardly fail of

suggesting certain ideas to the coldest heart and the steadiest brain” (263). In *Sir Charles Grandison*, Harriet Byron’s rescue lays a foundation of gratitude towards Sir Charles that leads to her attachment and love, and Emma quickly anticipates this end for Harriet: “It was not possible that the occurrence should not be strongly recommending each to the other” (263).

At first, Emma’s prediction has some merit—when Harriet appears to reveal her attachment to Frank Churchill, she speaks of “the service he rendered,” “an inexpressible obligation,” and “when I saw him coming—his noble look—and my wretchedness before” (268). Yet we later discover that the service Harriet speaks of is not Frank Churchill rescuing her from the gypsies, but Mr. Knightley rescuing her from Mr. Elton’s snub at the ball, one that is “a much more precious circumstance” (319). Not only is Mr. Knightley the true hero and the actual object of Harriet’s affections, but her preference speaks to a reexamination of “heroism” in Austen’s novels that Morgan comments on: “Women in Austen’s novels don’t need rescuing because they are not put in an inherently physical relation to a man” (44). When Emma creates a story around Harriet’s attack she privileges an unrealistic model of female danger that ignores Emma’s own past experience—after all, Emma is faced with Mr. Elton’s unwanted attentions in their return journey from the Weston’s Christmas party, yet she is never struck by a sense of danger or the need to be rescued from Mr. Elton’s attentions. The impropriety of traveling alone with a man causes heroines to be particularly susceptible to assault in a carriage: when Burney’s Evelina finds herself alone in Sir Clement Willoughby’s vehicle, and being misdirected away from her home, she immediately perceives her danger: “Never, in my whole life, have I been so terrified...I saw not a human being, or I should have called for help” (100). Emma, even after her hand is seized and Mr. Elton begins making “violent love” to her, is much more discomfited by

his unexpected proposals than she is concerned with her virginity because, really, Mr. Elton is not much of a threat (103). Instead of trying to jump out of the carriage, as Evelina almost does, Emma remains calm, collected, and self-controlled. Rather than expressing anxiety over her heroine's virginity or endorsing the traditional heroic gesture of Frank Churchill that presupposes the fragility of female sexuality, Austen redefines heroism through Mr. Knightley's act, one that centers on the real discomforts women faced in their everyday lives.

With the lack of adventurous circumstances that Emma faces, it is perhaps ironic that she completely misreads the only novelistic plot that is truly in front of her, for, as Linda Bree points out: “[Jane Fairfax and Frank Churchill’s] ‘story’ turns out to be one much more familiar in terms of the plots of the novels of the time” (139). Emma is unable to identify Jane Fairfax and Frank Churchill’s secret engagement, so she recasts Jane as the victim of an unrequited love affair and reinterprets Jane’s behavior through the lens of this plot. Though Jane Fairfax chooses to visit her aunt so that she may have an opportunity of meeting Frank Churchill, Emma turns this circumstances into the story of a failed first love: “an ingenious and animating suspicion enter[ed] Emma’s brain with regard to Jane Fairfax, this charming Mr. Dixon, and the not going to Ireland” (125). If any mystery in Jane’s behavior subsequently arises, Emma attributes it to her love for Mr. Dixon and reads in Jane’s body language signs that she is “apparently cherishing very reprehensible feelings” (191) and indulging in “dangerous pleasure” (172). Through such fantasizing, Emma develops her plot with surprising detail:

Emma was very willing now to acquit her of having seduced Mr. Dixon’s affections from his wife, or of any thing mischievous which her imagination had suggested at first. If it were love, it might be simple, single, successful love on

her side alone. She might have been unconsciously sucking in the sad poison, while a sharer of his conversation with her friend; and from the best, the purest of motives, might now be denying herself this visit to Ireland. (131-32)

Heroines such as Harriet Byron, Celestina, and Clementina della Porretta face similar outlooks in their novels when a first love appears to be beyond the reach of matrimony. They react by voicing a desire to stay true to their lover's memory; instead of recovering or marrying another, they wish to remain obscure and retire from society. Harriet declares that she never "could have been happy with any man in the world, but Sir Charles Grandison, after I had known him" (7:411); Celestina voices similar sentiments when she states that, "Whether I shall ever see Willoughby again is very uncertain: But it is very certain that if I do not, I shall never marry at all" (245); when her first love marries another, Clementina begs her parents to "let me be indulged in the single life, in a place consecrated to retirement from this vain world; and we shall *both* be happy" (6:163). Thus, Emma interprets Jane Fairfax's self-denial as evidence that she is shrinking from the pleasures of the world while recovering from a desperate love affair.

As exemplified by Maria Edgeworth's *Belinda*, remaining true to your first love is a debated ideal in eighteenth-century literature. Courtesy novel heroines, however, are almost fiercely assertive of their rights to a first love, and, though other characters scoff at these sentiments, it is not surprising that Emma sides with the heroines' romantic impulses rather than the colder dictums of a novel's prose. Thus, like Harriet, Clementina, and Celestina who each vow that they will never marry unless it is to their first choice, Emma rejects the idea that Jane Fairfax will recover from her passion to Mr. Dixon through a convenient marriage to Mr. Knightley: "You take up an idea, Mrs. Weston, and run away with it...proof only shall convince

me that Mr. Knightley has any thought of marrying Jane Fairfax” (178). Instead, Emma believes that Jane Fairfax will follow in the steps of her literary predecessors and retire into obscurity—in Jane’s circumstances, such obscurity is inherently obtained in the profession of a governess: Emma describes Jane’s future as a “career or laborious duty” that will “divide herself effectually from [Mr. Dixon] and his connections” (132). Emma, of course, is mistaken in her assumptions: Jane Fairfax is not in love with Mr. Dixon, she is not going to retire from the world, and she is not going to become a governess. In fact, rather than being a victim of circumstances or fate, as even the lucky heroines of courtesy novels must be, Jane Fairfax is a highly active character, and even her reserve, or supposed passivity, is an instrument of her deceit.

When Emma is forced into the moment of epiphany that exposes, yet again, the errors of her plots and causes her to, yet again, express her regrets and vows to change, she still cannot abandon her attempts at controlling the lives of others and fully accept her own role as a heroine. Instead, she convinces herself that it is Harriet, and not she, who will succeed in gaining Mr. Knightley’s affections. It is not until she embraces reality and is able to “catch and comprehend the exact truth of the whole,” that she realizes who the true heroine of the story is: “that Harriet was nothing; that she was every thing herself” (338). Once Emma grasps her role in the story, not even the potential for another narrative can tempt her from becoming Mr. Knightley’s wife:

As to any of that heroism of sentiment which might have prompted her to entreat him to transfer his affection from herself to Harriet, as infinitely the most worthy of the two—or even the more simple sublimity of resolving to refuse him at once and for ever, without vouchsafing any motive, because he could not marry them both, Emma had it not. She felt for Harriet, with pain and with contrition; but no

flight of generosity run mad, opposing all that could be probably or reasonable, entered her brain. (338)

Emma has finally become more concerned with *her* story and *her* happiness than with manipulating the lives of others into narratives that should bring a satisfying conclusion, but fail to be conducive to real life. Emma's own narrative is not as exciting as the fictions she creates—it is “too natural to be interesting” (qtd. in Waldron 4)—but Austen insists that her simple story has significance enough to be a novel of its own.

Both Emma Woodhouse and Marianne Dashwood end their novels disenchanted with the courtesy novel model. Though the lives of adventurous heroines appear to be filled with intrigue and excitement, their behavior, when performed in a more realistic context, is self-destructive and naïve—or, as when Catherine is “kidnapped” by John Thorpe and forced to ride in his carriage, it is only a bore or annoyance. Yet, Austen is not condemning her own heroines to the stale schedule of the conduct literature ideal: Elizabeth Bennet and Fanny Price insist that to perform the marital or parental duties of such an ideal is counter-productive to their personal happiness; their opinions are justified in the story of Anne Elliot, whose spirits and looks fade after she accepts the superiority of familial wisdom and refuses to engage herself without Lady Russell and Sir Thomas' consent. Austen honors both of the former heroines' independent spirits and the self-perception that separates their behavior from the similarly autonomous, but undiscerning actions of Emma and Marianne. At the end of their novels, all five of these heroines have learned to balance independence with judgment, and rely on reality, rather than fantasy, to supply the events of their narratives.

### ***“I Wish I Could Say”: Concluding Austen’s Novels***

As Austen’s most imaginative heroines discover—after a great deal of trouble, of course—trying to live a real life through novelistic tropes invariably leads to disillusionment and failure. Yet, the illusion of reality that courtesy novels boast stems from novelistic conventions established by the novel’s earliest practitioners—or, as some would call themselves, the “editors.” Daniel Defoe’s *Moll Flanders* purports to be the first-hand account of a real woman; the text’s only alteration, claims the “editor,” occurs in the story’s style of language: “she is made to tell her own Tale in modester Words than she told it at first” (1). Later, the epistolary novel’s method of presentation encouraged this facade of editorship. In what William Werner calls “one of the most familiar devices of [eighteenth-century] print culture” (206), Samuel Richardson claims in the preface to his novel *Pamela* to be publishing a real set of letters that he has only edited, a claim that he subsequently maintains in *Clarissa* and *Sir Charles Grandison*. Pamela Andrews, or Clarissa Harlowe, or Grandison’s heroine, Harriet Byron, are supposedly actual women and the actual authors of their own stories and letters. Sarah Fielding mimics, or, perhaps, parodies this trend in the advertisement for her later novel *The History of Ophelia*—the anonymous editor claims to have found the collection of letters in “an old Buroe” (37). By the time Frances Burney published *Evelina* in 1778, she no longer felt the need to disclaim authorship, but she still pays homage to the editorial tradition: “*Whatever may be the fate of these letters, the editor is satisfied they will meet with justice*” (11, italics original).

Although Austen displays no such anxiety for realism through misleading prefaces or introductions, her narrative, as William Nelles points out in his article “Omniscience for Atheists: Or, Jane Austen’s Infallible Narrator,” is quite realistic—far more so than the novels of

supposed editors. Nelles argues that, rather than displaying an omniscient narrator in her works, Austen limits her narrative perspective to that of her heroines, rarely, if ever, producing information for the reader that is not simultaneously known to the main character. In doing so, Austen eschews the “God-like” power of narrator over narratee—a power that Nelles observes in a traditional narrator’s omnipotence, omnitemporality, omnipresence, and telepathy. Instead, Nelles concludes that Austen’s narrator only has the abilities of “a perceptive and thoughtful person, given enough time and sufficient opportunity for observation, to make accurate judgments about people’s character, thought processes, and feelings” (128). Yet, despite the general verity of Nelles’ argument, the final chapters in each of Austen’s novels tend to invert this pattern of realism in favor of a jolting and more obviously fictional conclusion. Rather than concluding her novels with the model of realism that Nelles’s outlines, Austen’s endings remind her readers that they are, in fact, reading fiction.

In most of Austen’s novels, from the beginning up until the conclusion, the narrator is a subtle presence; Austen rarely uses the revealing first person, and, through free indirect discourse, her narration is often woven among the thoughts and feelings of her characters. In the concluding chapters, however, Austen’s narrator is “revealed”—often quite abruptly: she voices opinions, personal statements, and even positions herself as the author of a text by discussing her manipulation of the story and its presentation. The narrator of *Northanger Abbey*, of course, is the most difficult one for readers to forget about, not just in the concluding chapters, but throughout the entire novel. From the first few pages of the book, we are introduced to what will be a constant highly opinionated comparison between Catherine and traditional heroines, one that could only originate from a narrator since Catherine herself does not have the introspective

tendencies to warrant such ironic comments. The narrative voice intrudes to comment on the novel's events: whether a soliloquy on the advantages of ignorance is required or a rousing defense of the novel is called for: "if the heroine of one novel be not patronized by the heroine of another, from whom can she expect protection and regard? I cannot approve it" (23). Austen's later novels do not propel the narrator so quickly into the text, but they do include the narrator's first-person comments in the concluding chapters. The narrator of *Pride and Prejudice* only once interferes: "I wish I could say, for the sake of her family [that Mrs. Bennet became] a sensible, amiable, well-informed woman" (295), but the ending of *Mansfield Park* is scattered with first-person phrases: "My Fanny," "I purposely abstain," or "I only entreat" (362-69).

Each time that the reader is reminded of the narrator's presence, we are forced to acknowledge the influence of an outside force on the story's origination and presentation; this reminder is often strengthened by the narrator's exposure of the story as fiction. In these times, the narrator not only obtrudes with personal, first-person commentary, but actually discusses the story as a fictional construction. Note the following quote in *Northanger Abbey* where the narrator takes credit for the uniqueness of Henry and Catherine's courtship: "It is a new circumstance in romance, I acknowledge...but if it be as new in common life, the credit of a wild imagination will at least be all my own" (180). First, the narrator positions *Northanger Abbey* within the romantic tradition by comparing her hero and heroine's story with couples of the past; then, she comments on the "wild imagination" (her own) that must be responsible for such an unprecedented story. Austen at once reinforces the realism of her novel by implying that Henry and Catherine's relationship has a foundation in "common life," while also exposing the fictional framework of her narrative by crediting its construction to an author. After a note on the

obstinacy of young lovers, the narrator of *Persuasion* subtly reminds readers of her power to craft the story: “This may be bad morality to conclude with,” and uncharacteristically shifts to first person: “but I believe it to be the truth” (109). *Mansfield Park*’s narrator begins the final chapter by promising to wrap up the story quickly: “Let other pens dwell on guilt and misery. I quit such odious subjects as soon as I can, impatient to restore every body, not greatly in fault themselves, to tolerable comfort, and to have done with all the rest” (364).

This promise is so resolutely kept that even the culmination of Edmund and Fanny’s romance is passed over with no dialogue and little description. In fact, all of Austen’s novels are notable for their fast-paced endings and summarized conclusions. *Emma*, by far, maintains the greatest level of detail when discussing the story’s final events: the proposal and acceptance of Mr. Knightley occur in the book’s third volume and thirteenth chapter—six chapters before the novels’ end. In those six chapters, the circumstances and mysteries of Frank Churchill’s engagement are explained, Harriet travels to London and back, Emma reconciles with Jane Fairfax, and finally celebrates her own wedding at the story’s end. All of this information is delivered in the steady, detailed style that characterizes the rest of the book, with the same prevalence of dialogue and description; the reader effectively remains by Emma’s side until the novel’s end. *Emma*, however, is the exception rather than the rule: *Pride and Prejudice*’s conclusion spans only three chapters, *Sense and Sensibility* claims just two, *Northanger Abbey* and *Persuasion* are each given one, while Fanny Price of *Mansfield Park* must be content to conclude her romance in less than three pages. In each of these novels, the same amount of content that we find in *Emma*’s final six chapters is delivered in a much more brusque, fast-paced style. Consider the following paragraph from *Persuasion*:

Sir Walter indeed, though he had no affection for Anne, and no vanity flattered, to make him really happy on the occasion, was very far from thinking it a bad match for her. On the contrary, when he saw more of Captain Wentworth, saw him repeatedly by daylight and eyed him well, he was very much struck by his personal claims, and felt that his superiority of appearance might be not unfairly balanced against her superiority of rank; and all this, assisted by his well-sounding name, enabled Sir Walter at last to prepare his pen with a very good grace for the insertion of the marriage in the volume of honour. (295)

Sir Walter's acquaintance with Anne Elliot's engagement and his reconciliation to her marriage is summarized in a single paragraph, though the period of time covered is not necessarily short since he saw Captain Wentworth "repeatedly." The endings of *Persuasion* and *Emma* focus on a similar element, namely, the reaction of other characters to the heroines' engagements, but where *Emma* draws out its concluding scenes, *Persuasion* speeds them along. This shift in tempo that occurs in all of Austen's novels—even *Emma*, although not until the last few pages—breaks each novel's narrative style, jolting readers out of the steady pace that Austen maintains until nearly the very end of her books.

In addition, after this shift in pace occurs, the narrative similarly shifts in viewpoint: rather than the intimate closeness of a reader-heroine tête-à-tête, the viewpoint broadens to analyze each character's future from a distance lens. While Austen's narrators cannot tell us *everything* about the future—Nelles notes that, even in their concluding summaries, the narrators are "time-bound" (122)—they are no longer confined to the immediate narration of the novel's preceding chapters. We learn that Bingley and Jane "remain at Netherfield only a twelve-month"

(*P&P* 295), that, after her daughters' marriages, "Mrs. Dashwood was prudent enough to remain at [Barton] cottage" (*S&S* 289), and that Harriet Smith's marriage "must ever be unintelligible to Emma" (*E* 378). The final chapters are almost entirely composed of this kind of future information, a technique that emphasizes and exposes an authorial knowledge of the text.

In her conclusions, Austen's also ties up her stories' loose ends by exploring, or re-exploring, characters' motivations—motivations that are either unknowable to the heroine or presented in a format that she could not have experienced. The stories of secondary characters' "off-screen" conduct, thoughts, and motivations are often presented in a manner that neither the heroine nor any individual character could construct on her own or at one time. For example, the narrator explains that the initial story of Mrs. Rushworth's elopement in *Mansfield Park* is cobbled together from Fanny's own knowledge, her aunt Bertram's scattered information, and "some letters to and from Sir Thomas" (353), yet the complete narrative that follows is presented in a clean, unbroken form. The narrator of *Northanger Abbey* takes even more credit for reconstructing the General's actions and motivations, writing, "I leave it to my reader's sagacity to determine how much of all this it was possible for Henry to communicate at this time...I have united for their ease what they must divide for mine" (183). Granted, these finished narratives would eventually be known to Fanny and to Catherine with time, but their format reveals at least a marginally active authorial hand when compared with similar, but more natural explorations of a character's past conduct: Willoughby explains his conduct to Elinor through the dialogue of their meeting; Frank Churchill exposes the mysteries of his secret engagement to Jane Fairfax through a letter to his mother, read within the narrative by Mr. Knightley.

In addition, these reconstructed narratives present information about characters' interiority: in *Mansfield Park*, the motives of Julia Bertram are described in summary after her sister's elopement: "she had had the merit of withdrawing...[t]his had been her motive in going to her cousins" (366). Of course, this information is arguably available to Fanny either second-hand or after her cousin returns, assuming that Julia is willing to discuss her motives. A similar discussion concerning Henry Crawford, however, is accessible only through authorial exposure; without keeping contact with either Henry or his family (even the Grants abscond from the neighborhood after the scandal), a member of the Mansfield community would never know that he excused himself from attending to his estate because he "resolved that writing should answer the purpose of it, or that its purpose was unimportant" and that he stayed to flatter Mrs. Rushworth because "he was mortified" by her indifference (367). Mrs. Clay also breaks communication with Anne and the Elliots in *Persuasion*, but we are still told that she runs away with Mr. Elliot because her "affections had overpowered her interest" (201). By controlling the arrangement of these stories and exposing private knowledge about characters' inner lives, Austen's novels break from realism and deliver a perspective that a creator only could know, or they expose a text's fictional "seams" by manipulating its presentation to the reader.

This is not to say that the endings of Austen's texts are completely unrealistic; in fact, the narrators are bound by many of the same conventions of time and space that limit the rest of the novel, but, the endings acknowledge each novel as a fictional construction much more openly than the preceding text. The obtrusive, first-person narrator, the shift in pace and viewpoint, and not only the exposure of characters' motivations, but the unified, omniscient delivery of this exposure reminds readers that they are, in fact, reading a novel. Austen is not pretending to be an

editor—she is not trying to trick her readers—but the endings of her novels do guard against the courtesy novel's tendency to present itself as a model for real life.

## CONCLUSION

Austen's heroines are readers; often, they are even novel readers. They do not share in the literary prejudices of their courtesy novel cousins—no Austen heroine will be found turning over the pages of a novel in contempt or disgust. Of course, those Austen heroines who most consciously engage with the novelistic form are also the least self-aware—Catherine Morland, Emma Woodhouse, and Marianne Dashwood—while Austen's more serious women do not profess an outright affection for the same literature. Lest this comparison lead to any straightforward assumptions, however, Austen was also creating, at the time of her death, a heroine who would resist both types, who would combine the sobriety of an Anne Elliot with the literary taste of a Catherine Morland—Charlotte Heywood of *Sanditon*.

Charlotte is described as “a very pleasing young woman of two and twenty,” who is “particularly useful and obliging” (303) and “very sober-minded” (317). Perhaps even more importantly, however, Charlotte is a novel-reader, one who is “sufficiently well-read in Novels to supply her Imagination with amusement, but not at all unreasonably influenced by them” (317). The effect of Charlotte's, and other characters', novel reading is readily apparent in the text—not since *Northanger Abbey* has one of Austen's novels so explicitly and so consciously explored the effects of reading and the novel. In fact, despite being composed of only twelve chapters, *Sanditon* seriously engages in the same themes of reading, body language, and novelistic plots that permeate Austen's previous work, and, even in this short fragment, Austen continues to support her past critiques of conduct literature, courtesy novels, and the paradoxes that they create.

Perhaps, in regards to these paradoxes, *Sanditon* is least concerned with that of body language and reading the heroine; that is to say, though body language continues to play a significant role in *Sanditon*, it serves as a natural part of the narrative rather than as a vehicle for discussing and examining female behavior. Charlotte's body is not an object that others explicitly read; instead, she resembles Anne Elliot in her ability to read accurately the body language of others, and, through such readings, to evaluate and establish their character. When Charlotte meets Miss Denham, the latter's body language is not a sign of her reserve or innocence, but, rather, it indicates to Charlotte the kind of person that she is: "Miss Denham's countenance, the change from Miss Denham sitting in cold Grandeur in Mrs. Parker's Drawing-room...to Miss D. at Lady D.'s Elbow, listening and talking with smiling attention or solicitous eagerness, was very striking—and very amusing—or very melancholy, just as Satire or Morality might prevail" (321).

First through Anne, and then through Charlotte, Austen moves away from using body language as a theme or an explicit aspect of characterization, as she did in her earliest novels such as *Sense and Sensibility*. Instead, both latter heroines are keen observers of the characters and situations around them, and both supply a discernment and intuition to their readings, using the knowledge they glean from others to inform their own actions and attitudes. Thus, Austen continues to empower her later heroines with the ability to read and gaze upon others, rather than simply existing as "text" themselves.

While Charlotte closely resembles her most immediate Austen predecessor in her reading of body language, her engagement with novels is reminiscent of Austen's earliest work, *Northanger Abbey*; like Catherine, Charlotte is able to use her knowledge of novels as a tool for

interpreting real life. When she enters a circulating library and local shop, Charlotte is at first tempted to purchase more items than she strictly needs. Upon catching sight of Burney's *Camilla*, however, she changes her mind, reflecting that "She had not *Camilla's* Youth, and had no intention of having her Distress" (316). The eponymous heroine of *Camilla* is led by others to overspend on personal apparel, as Charlotte is tempted to do, and *Camilla's* father is even jailed as a result of the debts that she accrues. In one swift motion, Charlotte recollects the contents of *Camilla*, applies them to her situation, and then acts upon the hint: "she turned from the Drawers of rings and Broches...and paid for what she bought" (316). Though this scenario passes swiftly—it is almost an aside—it is an important indicator of Charlotte's discernment as a reader and an illustration of the novel's assertion that she is "not at all unreasonably influenced by [novels]" (317).

Charlotte, however, is not the only reader in *Sanditon*, though she proves to be the most discerning one. Sir Edward Denham, a resident of the sea-side town, is also a professed lover of literature, especially the novels of Samuel Richardson, but Charlotte soon suspects from his conversation that Sir Edward has not read to any advantage. As they talk, he misquotes, and then he misinterprets poetry, adopts sentimental poses, and peppers his speech with novelistic clichés. He baffles Charlotte with "the number of his Quotations, and the bewilderment of some of his sentences" (321); after some conversation, "She began to think him downright silly" (323). Sir Edward's behavior, we are told, stems from his bad reading. He has "read more sentimental Novels than agreed with him," which, combined with "his not having by Nature a very strong head" (327), leads to a mismanagement of his energies and a misleading of his desires. As a particular fan of Richardson's *Clarissa* and similar seduction stories, Sir Edward believes that he

will make the perfect rake: “Sir Edward’s great object in life was to be seductive...He felt that he was formed to be a dangerous Man—quite in the line of the Lovelaces. –The very name of Sir Edward he thought, carried some degree of fascination with it” (328). Sir Edward’s vision is not only foolish, it is also dangerous to his neighbor, Clara Brereton, whom he determines will be the first object of his seduction: “it was Clara alone on whom he had serious designs...Her situation in every way called for it” (328). Sir Edward is exactly the kind of impressionable reader that conduct literature warns against reading novels: his reading “[creates] fatal mistakes in conduct,” “give[s] a romantic turn to the mind” (Gregory 93-94), and “inculcate[s] such light, over-gay Notions, as may by unperceiv’d Degrees soften and mislead the Understanding” (Wilkes, *An Essay* 27). Sir Edward is, in fact, conduct literature’s conventional female reader.

Thus, ironically, Sir Edward exemplifies the pitfalls of reading novels, while Charlotte uses the kind of discrimination and self-control in her reading that conduct literature typically reserves for men. Charlotte, too, is quick to identify Clara Brereton’s potential as a fictional heroine, and, upon meeting her for the first time, Charlotte “could see in her only the most perfect representation of whatever Heroine might be most beautiful and bewitching” (317). Charlotte, however, is not easily carried away by her observations: though she amuses herself by imagining the perfect plot for Miss Brereton—“She seemed placed with [Lady Denham] on purpose to be ill used” (317)—she is quick to acknowledge Miss Brereton’s actual situation: “while she pleased herself the first five minutes with fancying the Persecutions with *ought* to be the Lot of the interesting Clara, especially in the form of the most barbarous conduct on Lady Denham’s side...they appeared to be on very comfortable terms” (317). As with her use of *Camilla*, Charlotte quickly allows reality to supersede her imagination. In *Sanditon*, Austen not

only inverts conduct literature's predictions by creating a wise and discriminating female novel reader, but she completes the inversion by assigning all of the female reader's typical follies to Sir Edward. Thus, in all of Austen's novels, the only mis-reader, the only character who is carried away by his reading material, is a man.

Although, sadly, we will never completely know the issues and concerns of Austen's future writing, in *Sanditon* she has clearly not abandoned her ironic parodies of conduct literature's dictates, and she is more concerned than ever with the interplay of reading and the novel. Throughout her novels, Austen consistently engages with literal and figurative reading, and, unlike previous courtesy novelists, she just as consistently resists using the act of reading as an opportunity to articulate conduct literature ideology. Instead, in all of her works, Austen identifies the paradoxes inherent to conduct literature's dictates and courtesy novels' examples: first, courtesy novels condemn themselves as reading material and, instead, must seem to support more serious genres of literature; second, both maintain that women must openly display their emotions as means of confirming innocence while simultaneously requiring such women to hide their affections from the male object; third, conduct literature presents a dutiful life for its feminine ideal that the courtesy novel ostensibly supports while allowing its heroine to engage in exciting adventures. In her novels, Austen does not seek to reconcile these paradoxes by adopting the stratagems of courtesy novels; instead, she exposes conduct literature ideology and the feminine ideal as impractical and impossible for real women to accomplish.

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