

# 1650-1850: Ideas, Aesthetics, and Inquiries in the Early Modern Era

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Volume 19

Article 11

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2012

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### Recommended Citation

Francesca Saggini (2012) "'THE STORY TOLD WELL': Thought, Feeling, and Speech in Jane Austen's Proposal Scenes," *1650-1850: Ideas, Aesthetics, and Inquiries in the Early Modern Era*: Vol. 19, Article 11. Available at: <https://digitalcommons.lsu.edu/sixteenfifty/vol19/iss1/11>

# “THE STORY TOLD WELL”: Thought, Feeling, and Speech in Jane Austen’s Proposal Scenes

Francesca Saggini

Had she lived a few years on [Jane Austen] would have devised a method, clear and composed as ever, but deeper and more suggestive, for conveying not only what people say, but what they leave unsaid.

*Virginia Woolf, “Jane Austen”*

## ✱ 1. When Love Dares Speak Its Name ✱

It is a truth universally acknowledged that an unmarried woman author, about whose sentimental experience almost nothing is known, must needs be deficient in her portrayal of love. Thus runs one of the most tenacious critical truisms of English literature. Since Charlotte Brontë sneeringly accused Austen of failing in her depiction of passion (“she ruffles her reader by nothing vehement, disturbs him by nothing profound:...the Passions are perfectly unknown to her”),<sup>1</sup> there have been

<sup>1</sup> Jane Austen, “The Cancelled Chapter of *Persuasion*,” in Jane Austen, *“Persuasion” with “A Memoir of Jane Austen”* by J. E. Austen Leigh, ed. and with an introduction by Denys C. W.

numerous inquiries discussing the presence and convincing representation of love in her fiction. In particular, the marriage proposal scene—considered a customary as well as a compulsory manifestation of love—has periodically attracted critical attention.<sup>2</sup>

It may be argued that proposal scenes are crucial because each of Jane Austen's novels is assumed to be patterned on courtship and love, and the resolution of the action culminates with the marriage of hero and heroine. The desire for proper nuptials is often recognized as the main drive of the plot, and both heroine and readers are propelled by the quest for its fulfillment. Accordingly, the marriage proposal becomes the climatic moment of a teleologically built plot, the site of the lovers' mutual recognition based on reciprocal knowledge as well as of the audience's vicarious satisfaction.<sup>3</sup>

To achieve the comic resolution in the novel, the main characters must confess their feelings to each other. In a realistic love text constructed on a verisimilar reporting of character dialogue, the betrothal scene is expected to be rendered dramatically, through the minute depiction of strong emotion with recourse to rhetorical conventions and codified expressions drawn from the jargon of the sentimental novel and women's romances. This desire for emotional hypercodification became particularly evident in the latter part of the twentieth century, during which Austen adaptations (significant forms of audience-tailored hypertexts) time and again assumed the soft pink hues

Harding, 12th ed. (Harmondsworth: Penguin, 1985), 259. Letter to W. S. Williams, 12 April 1850, in Brian Southam ed., *Jane Austen: The Critical Heritage* (London: Routledge & Kegan Paul, 1968), 128. In a similar vein, another early commentator compares Austen to a "naturalist among tame animals," suggesting that "she does not study man...in his wild state before he has been domesticated. Her men and women are essentially men and women of the fireside." Robert Lynd, *Old and New Masters* (London: T. Fisher Unwin Limited, 1919), 2.

<sup>2</sup> Essays addressing the subject which have helped me to shape my argument are Mary Alice Burgan, "Feeling and Control: A Study of the Proposal Scenes in Jane Austen's Major Novels," in George Goodin ed., *The English Novel in the Nineteenth Century: Essays on the Literary Mediation of Human Values* (Urbana: University of Illinois Press, 1972), 25-51; Alice Chandler, "A Pair of Fine Eyes: Jane Austen's Treatment of Sex," *Studies in the Novel* 7 (Spring 1975): 88-103; Mildred T. Wherritt, "For Better or For Worse: Marriage Proposals in Jane Austen's Novels," *Midwest Quarterly: A Journal of Contemporary Thought* 17 (1976): 229-44; Janis Stout, "Jane Austen's Proposal Scenes and the Limitations of Language," *Studies in the Novel* 14 (Winter 1982): 316-26; Kathleen Lundeen, "A Modest Proposal? Paradise Found in Jane Austen's Betrothal Scenes," *Review of English Studies* N.S., 151 (1990): 65-75; Serena Hansen, "Rhetorical Dynamics in Jane Austen's Treatment of Marriage Proposals," *Persuasions: The Jane Austen On Line* 21 (Summer 2000), <http://www.jasna.org/persuasions/on-line/index.html>.

<sup>3</sup> For an alternative reading of Jane Austen's plots as rotating around the sororal relations, see Terry Castle's provocative review, "Sister-Sister," *London Review of Books*, 3 August 1995, 3-6.

typical of heteronormative love stories, renewing the debate concerning the author's actual competence in rendering love scenes and love talk. The average contemporary Austenite would hardly take George Knightely's "If I loved you less, I might be able to talk about it more" as the satisfactory answer either Emma Woodhouse or him/herself longs to hear.<sup>4</sup>

The prevalent critical stance from which the love discourse in Austen has been addressed is twofold: whereas the biographical explanation remains tempting for some critics, others find an aesthetic choice behind her reluctance to dramatize. Whichever the opinion, all seem to agree that Jane Austen's business is indeed with the head and not with the heart. Among the better-known of these analyses, Juliet McMaster's is one of the very few who seeks out the lost significance of the author's poetics by placing her depiction of emotional bonds within a historical framework (culturally indebted to a Platonic background) and advocating the fundamental role played by pedagogy in the relationships of her characters—the giving and receiving of knowledge being erotic in theory, though rarely in practice.<sup>5</sup> Other critics allege artistic motivations behind Austen's restraint,

<sup>4</sup> Contemporary Austen large and small screen adaptors, and her narrative prequel/sequellisers have been particularly challenged by the apparently low-key tone of her love scenes, that have been played up—sometimes to almost perverse pitches—and rewritten according to contemporary (and thus unhistorical) audience expectations on sentimental and sexual relationships. Austen devotees seem to be strangely excited by her apparently straitlaced plots as testified by a lighthearted American spoof entitled *Pride and Promiscuity*, playfully proposed as the collection of Austen's lost sex scenes. In the compilation, the characters of the novels are allowed to act out their heretofore closeted desires and favorite sexual practices, which include same- and group sex, sadomasochism, transvestism, and spanking. In the text, Jane Austen herself steps in to defend these imaginary tastier bits of ivory of hers, namely "the simple and everyday sort of diversions lovers enjoy": "You say the book is indecent. You say I am immodest. But Sir in the depiction of love, modesty is the fullness of truth; and decency frankness..." Arielle Eckstut and Dennis Ashton, *Pride and Promiscuity. The Lost Sex Scenes of Jane Austen* (Fireside: New York, 2001), respectively 10 and 8. For the contemporary harlequinization of Austen, see the valuable Linda Troost and Sayre Greendfield, eds., *Jane Austen in Hollywood* (Lexington: University Press of Kentucky, 1998), in particular the contributions by Cheryl Nixon ("Balancing the Courtship Hero: Masculine Emotional Display in Film Adaptations of Austen's Novels," 22–43), Lisa Hopkins ("Mr. Darcy's Body: Privileging the Female Gaze," 111–21) and Deborah Kaplan ("Mass Marketing Jane Austen: Men, Women and Courtship in Two Film Adaptations," 177–87).

<sup>5</sup> Juliet McMaster, "Love and Pedagogy," in Joel Weinsheimer ed., *Jane Austen Today* (Athens: University of Georgia Press, 1975), 64–91. Reprinted in Juliet McMaster, *Jane Austen the Novelist. Essays Past and Present* (Basingstoke: Macmillan–St. Martin's Press, 1996), 150–72. The conventions of didacticism are helpfully discussed in Jan Fergus, *Jane Austen and the Didactic Novel. "Northanger Abbey," "Sense and Sensibility," and "Pride and Prejudice"*



commencing with Murvin Mudrick, who explains that personal distance is Austen's way of dealing with her subjects and reality, "She would not commit herself. To events she allowed herself no public response; for...both put off self-commitment and feeling."<sup>6</sup> Mudrick elaborates this type of authorial emotional withdrawal, pleading a form of revulsion from involvement resulting from her incapacity to treat the more personally involving aspects of sexual commitment with irony.

While attention to artistic merit is here referred to (introducing such aesthetic categories as judgment, propriety, and decorum), spinsterly incapacity to render strong feeling is persistently advocated elsewhere. Following D. H. Lawrence's notorious allegation of maidenish "sharp knowledge in apartness,"<sup>7</sup> Mildred T. Wherritt reads Austen's reticence in her proposal scenes as the product of the author's limited emotional constitution. "In none of her novels does Jane Austen present a single fully developed serious proposal scene between a hero and a heroine," claims the critic, who intends to "demonstrate conclusively" that "[Austen] did not, and therefore probably could not, handle the intense emotion implied by a climactic proposal scene."<sup>8</sup> Jane Austen had no firsthand experience in matters emotional and was thus limited in her artistic possibilities, *bona pace* John Halperin, who enthusiastically questions the traditional biographical pronouncements on the novelist's life by accrediting her with a very respectable series of attachments.<sup>9</sup>

Nonetheless—and despite such ardent vindications—it is a matter of fact that whoever peruses the six novels in search of passionate avowals is constantly disappointed. In most cases, heroes and heroines may stand accused of sentimental reticence with reason: from Henry Tilney's tepid admission to being in love with Catherine Morland only because he has become aware of the girl's affection for him, to Edmund Bertram's post-Mary Crawford unex-

(Basingstoke: Macmillan, 1983).

<sup>6</sup> Murvin Mudrick, *Jane Austen. Irony as Defence and Discovery* (Princeton: Princeton University Press), 1952, in particular the chapter entitled "Irony and Convention versus Feeling."

<sup>7</sup> "A Propos of Lady Chatterly's Lover," reprinted in Harry T. Moore ed., *Sex, Literature and Censorship: Essays by D. H. Lawrence* (London: Heinemann, 1955). Both Brontë's and Lawrence's critiques are discussed in Mark Kinkad-Weekes, "This Old Maid: Jane Austen Replies to Charlotte Brontë and D. H. Lawrence," *Nineteenth-Century Fiction* 30 (December 1975): 399-419. Reprinted in Ian Littlewood ed., vol. 2 of *Jane Austen. Critical Assessments* (Mountfield: Helm Information: 1998), 405-21.

<sup>8</sup> Wherritt, "For Better or For Worse," respectively 229 and 244.

<sup>9</sup> John Halperin, "Jane Austen's Lovers," in *Jane Austen's Lovers and Other Studies in Fiction and History from Austen to le Carré* (Basingstoke: Macmillan, 1988), 7-26.

pected awakening of sentimental interest in his cousin Fanny Price, whenever the time comes to declare one's deepest emotions to one's beloved, most of Austen's characters read hardly better than sentimental wet blankets.

Thus the marriage proposal represents a textual *crux*: although it is the pivotal scene up to which the whole plot seems to build, it also represents the moment of maximum authorial restraint—as Austen has recourse to mocking generalization or tantalizing summary handling—hence resulting in audience disappointment. Yet there is plenty of sexual love and passion in Austen's fiction, if only we care to look for it. Elopements, illegitimacy, adultery, all duly get their mention in the canon (some critics go so far as to include incest in this roll-call of out-of-wedlock activities, scarcely befitting a supposedly prudish pen),<sup>10</sup> and most are well-aware of the strong current of sexual attraction that runs through the spirited exchanges between Elizabeth Bennet and her neighbor Fitzwilliam Darcy, who is captivated by the girl's liveliness, physical energy, battling mind, and fine eyes—what twenty-first-century factuality would simply call sex appeal.<sup>11</sup>

Furthermore, it may be argued that both *Pride and Prejudice* and *Persuasion* (just to mention the most widely known cases) well exemplify Austen's awareness of a sophisticated—and in eighteenth-century terms well-established in literature—semiotic system of body signs bearing a highly charged erotic meaning, that could be utilized in order to represent the subtle gradations of extra-verbal courtship, and its physical consequences. Glances exchanged, darted or averted; cheeks blushing or glowing; face blanching; inviting smiles; hands kissed or knowingly held; arms meaningfully pressed, and bodies that imperceptibly brush close—all muted signals speaking the unobtrusive, yet unmistakable language of silent love that have not passed unnoticed to Austen's large- and small-screen adaptors, always grateful to translate the intangibility of feelings and emotions into effective visual signs.<sup>12</sup>

<sup>10</sup> See Glenda Hudson, *Sibling Love and Incest in Jane Austen's Fiction* (London: Macmillan-St. Martin's Press), 1999.

<sup>11</sup> For a perceptive discussion of the language of the eyes in *Pride and Prejudice*, see Mark H. Hennelly Jr., "'Pride and Prejudice': The Eyes Have It," Janet Todd ed., *Jane Austen. New Perspectives* (New York: Holmes & Meier, 1983), 187–207.

<sup>12</sup> The best-known and most influential eighteenth-century discussions of love as a physical state are Samuel Richardson's *Rambler* essay of 1751 (directly quoted in *Northanger Abbey*) and Mr. Tyrold's injunctions on courtship in Frances Burney's *Camilla* (one of Austen's favorite novels), two texts examined in Juliet McMaster, "The Symptoms of Love," in Juliet McMaster, *Jane Austen the Novelist*, 111–32. The grammar of the sensuous body in Austen is helpfully

The comparative and interdisciplinary reading of Jane Austen's lesser-known proposals here attempted intends to unfetter them from the biographically biased and scarcely perceptive criticism of which they have been object. Discourse analysis applied to the canon of the six novels demonstrates not only a developed stylistic and thematic coherence in the treatment of the betrothal moments—episodes which are constantly reworked and refined throughout the six major novels—but also a constant awareness of the deep value of speech and silence, real and faked emotion, intensity and make-believe. As well as implying the growth of Austen's ability to portray emotion and thought, my investigation presupposes the existence of a complex aesthetic of love-speak based on a masterful use of syntax, a sophisticated awareness of the semantic value of words, and a fine distinction between rhetorical persuasion and impression-making on the one hand, and the personal/sociocultural context of persuadability and impressionability on the other.

Initially, I intend to provide a tentative taxonomy of Austen's marriage proposals, based on their outcome and mode of presentation. In particular, some of the unsuccessful betrothal scenes (*Pride and Prejudice*, *Emma*) will be discussed in order to clarify their relation with the happy ones (*Pride and Prejudice*, *Emma*, and *Mansfield Park*), for which they serve as blue-prints. Since these latter episodes have been repeatedly the object of detailed critical scrutiny, I shall only touch on them briefly, preferring to focus on the sketchy euphoric avowals of love which disappointingly round off *Northanger Abbey*, *Sense and Sensibility*, and *Mansfield Park*. A final consideration on Henry Crawford's proposal in this latter of Austen's narratives will be used to reposition generically the novels, and to explore the effects of courtship through the heroine's consciousness. Hence the aim of this essay is to retrieve "what throbs fast and full, though hidden," the awareness of which Charlotte Brontë denies in Austen, and to translate those elusive signs which spell out her understated dialogue of love.

discussed in John Wiltshire, "Sense, Sensibility and the Proofs of Affection," *Jane Austen and the Body. The Picture of Health* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1992) and Anita G. Gorman, "Blushing and Blanching: The Body as the Index of Emotion," *The Body in Illness and Health. Themes and Images in Jane Austen* (New York: Peter Lang, 1993). For a general introduction to the topic, see also Barbara Korte, *Body Language in Literature* (Toronto: Toronto University Press, 1997).

Table 1.

Novel	Outcome		Presentation		Location		
<i>Northanger Abbey</i>						X (walk)	
<i>Sense and Sensibility</i>							X (after a walk)
<i>Pride and Prejudice</i>							
Mr. Collins		X	X		X		
Darcy I		X	X		X		
Darcy II	X			X		X (walk)	
<i>Mansfield Park</i>							
Henry Crawford		X	X		X		
Edmund	X			X	X		
<i>Emma</i>							
Mr. Elton		X		X	X		
Mr Knightley	X			X		X (walk)	
<i>Persuasion</i>	X			X		X (walk)	
Total	6	4	3	7	5	4	1

## ✱ 2. Manscapes and Miniatures: the Rules of Perspective ✱

As I have previously mentioned, proposal scenes are narrative functions which consistently recur in both Austen's major and minor works. Given that Austen appears to debate and often contest the conventional modes of love and love-making of the day (say, love at first sight or first attachments, and their literary jargon), I suggest that throughout her production she consciously wrought an original mode of expressing passion which redefined character function by departing from the eighteenth-century gendered plots of female seduction and education, and which was concurrently independent of the by-then hackneyed and derivative amatory discourse of the sentimental tradition.

Table 1 illustrates the intertextual relations connecting the proposal scenes at the macrotextual level, which portend a developing aesthetic of love-talk. In general terms it may be argued that an unsuccessful proposal is reported in the direct form, and it takes place in the first half or at the mid-point of the novel. Conversely, a successful betrothal is usually presented in intensive summary, and it is placed just before the denouement of the story.<sup>13</sup>

<sup>13</sup> Unsuccessful marriage proposals are reported in *Pride and Prejudice* (Collins and Darcy I), respectively chapters 19 and 34 (the novel has 61 chapters); *Mansfield Park* (Crawford), vol. 2, chapter 13 (the novel has 48 chapters); *Emma* (Mr. Elton), chapter 15 (the novel has 55 chapters). The successful proposals are respectively found in *Northanger Abbey* (Tilney), chapter 30

Since it may be assumed that the discourse of love is framed by more general moral discourse, we may maintain that the function of the unsuccessful proposal is to illustrate the heroine's moral standards and the character flaws she will learn to rectify. At the same time, it also dramatizes those exactly prescribed behavioral codes she is supposed to abide by, and the familial pressure and social expectations she is subjected to.

On the other hand, a successful marriage proposal completes a process of mutual understanding and reform of which it represents the result, the final—though by no means the most important—phase, whose value is established by the sincerity and profundity of the knowledge the lovers have acquired. Accordingly, rather than choosing a lengthy description in the direct form, the author prefers suggesting the perfect reciprocity of feeling achieved by the lovers, which foreshadows their capacity to share and grow together. Similarly, the emotional consequences of the happy proposal may be conveyed through the heroine's consciousness or be followed by an intimate "debriefing scene,"<sup>14</sup> where the previous vicissitudes of the lovers are recollected—and commented upon—in tranquility.

It also appears that direct presentation is preferred for those characters who use language as either shallow display or for mere self-gratification. Mr. Collins, Mr. Elton, and Henry Crawford propose to Elizabeth Bennet, Emma Woodhouse, and Fanny Price quite assured of the positive outcome of their words.<sup>15</sup> In particular, the unsuccessful proposal scenes in *Pride and Prejudice* and *Emma* introduce the linguistic forms (and moral pitfalls) of male *reflexive* and *self-reflexive* amatory discourse. In an ineffective rhetorical attempt, both Collins and Elton duly go through the standard formulae of the time-honored, well-rehearsed marriage proposal. However both Elizabeth and Emma are cognizant enough to see through their linguistic vacuum, and neither

(the novel has 31 chapters); *Sense and Sensibility* (Edward), chapter 49 (the novel counts 50 chapters); *Pride and Prejudice* (Darcy II), chapter 58; *Mansfield Park* (Edmund), volume 3, chapter 17; *Emma* (Knightly), chapter 49; and *Persuasion* (Wentworth), chapter 23 (the novel counts 24 chapters).

<sup>14</sup> Juliet McMaster, "Women in Love," *Jane Austen the Novelist*, 189.

<sup>15</sup> Emma is completely surprised by Mr. Elton's unexpected self-confidence: "Without scruple—without apology—without much apparent diffidence, Mr Elton, the lover of Harriet, was professing himself *her* lover" (chapter 15; the italics are in the text). In similar fashion, Mary urges her brother to propose to Fanny, reassuring him about the outcome of his suit: "But go on, go on. Tell me more. What are your plans? Does she know her own happiness?" "No" "What are you waiting for?" "For—for very little more than opportunity. Mary, she is not like her cousins; but I think I shall not ask in vain" (volume 2, chapter 12).

woman is persuaded. To impress somebody, and to move one to action, there must be will and desire on the addressee's side—will to comply and desire to believe, which in this case are represented by the woman's compliance to listen and be silent.

Similar idiolects, analogous syntactical forms, and a comparable use of speech and speech presentation are the covered-up clues essential to unmask Austen's insincere speechifiers and the moral vacuity behind their polished protestations. The trudging end of the Netherfield ball, described in the chapter immediately preceding Mr. Collins's proposal, gives Austen ample chance to prepare her readers for the social, personal, and moral value of talk, as shown by the following passage.

Mrs Hurts and her sister scarcely opened their mouths, except to complain of fatigue.... They repulsed every attempt of Mrs Bennet at conversation, and by so doing threw a languor over the whole party, which was very little relieved by the long speeches of Mr Collins.... Darcy said nothing at all. Mr Bennet, in equal silence, was enjoying the scene. Mr Bingley and Jane were standing together, a little detached from the rest, and talked only to each other. Elizabeth preserved as steady a silence as either Mrs Hurst or Miss Bingley; and even Lydia was too much fatigued to utter more than the occasional exclamation of "Lord, how tired I am!" accompanied by a violent yawn. (ch. 19)

The languishing atmosphere of the scene is conveyed through nine sentences of varying length, where we count four speech-act verbs ("opened their mouths," "said," "talked," to utter), two epithets for talk ("conversation," "speeches"), and two significant occurrences of the word "silence." Most terms are given a disphoric connotation by either their coupling with a negative ("nothing"), or by adjectival and adverbial juxtaposition ("scarcely," and "long"). "Darcy said nothing at all," the shortest sentence in the passage, occupies a key position. His judgmental refusal to speak is amplified by the recurrence of similar expressions in the sentences that immediately precede the above passage. Elizabeth marks his "silent contempt" as "intolerable" (ch. 18), and the narrator insists on his detached aloofness in both verbal, and physical terms: "although *often* standing within a very short distance of her, he *never* came near enough to speak" (ch. 18). Darcy's movements semiotically convey the sentiments and the attraction he refuses to acknowledge verbally.

The communication break-down at Netherfield signals the demolition of the polite façade of social conversation. Talk is no longer a communal activity and speech has become self-referential and individualistic. Furthermore while a piqued embarrassed silence reigns, and talk is unheeded or selectively addressed, character personality is skilfully conveyed by means of or lack of words. Tired out and openly annoyed by their lingering guests, the two hostesses do not care to keep up social appearances any longer, and speak out only to complain of increasing fatigue. Both wrapped up in their own thoughts, Elizabeth and Mr. Bennet refuse to help with the conversation. Only the undaunted Mr. Collins keeps up his role of egregious dunce (appropriately the sentence recounting his compliments is the longest in the passage), while Lydia's poor contribution is tellingly characterized by one of her trademark vulgar and selfish exclamations, "Lord, how tired *I am!*"<sup>16</sup>

Chapter 18 ends with a peep at Mrs. Bennet's mind, and it ironically records her satisfied belief that the conclusion of the Netherfield ball may soon usher in two of her daughters' marital happiness. The woman's expectations seem to be fulfilled at the beginning of the following chapter, where—with a brief, detached statement—the narrator informs us that the next day "Mr Collins made his declaration in form" (ch. 19). While the to-the-point tone of the sentence stands in ironical juxtaposition to the wordy clergyman's proposal, the expression "in form" must be understood in its rhetorical, social, and personal implications. Not only does it pre-announce the *formality* of Mr. Collins's address, and his pedantic respect of the rules of love-talk and behavior, but significantly it also implies his pattern of thought and scale of priorities, thus foreshadowing the nature of his and his future wife's conjugal life, "he set about it *in a very orderly manner*, with all the observances, which he supposed a regular part of the *business*."

Collins's pompous expressions perfectly reveal that indeed his is a labor of the head, to which the heart provides only the obligatory surface embellishments. (In quoting from the marriage proposals I shall underline the phrases that indicate the development of the addresser's reasoning; italics will be used instead to highlight sentimental jargon.)

*Almost as soon as I entered the house, I singled you out as the companion of my future life. But before I am run away with by my feel-*

<sup>16</sup> Austen's code of solecisms, exclamations, and intensifiers is discussed in Myra Stokes, "Manner," *The Language of Jane Austen. A Study of Some Aspects of her Vocabulary* (Basingstoke: Macmillan, 1991), 17-27.



ings on this subject, perhaps it would be advisable for me to state my reasons for marrying.

The clergyman's insincere professions of love are made all the more unlikely by the realization that his plot is a carefully planned affair, conveyed through a methodically balanced, thoroughly cerebral syntax, each sentence elucidating its predecessor. The opening is aptly followed by a still rudimentary, though comically effective example of *oratio trimembris*—one of the syntactical constructions favored by Austen which recurs in several proposals to convey sketchily the nonspontaneous (and hence emotionally deficient) workings of the lover's mind—and which neatly summarizes in grossly *materialistic* terms what should be Collins's *emotional* reasons for proposing to his "fair cousin" (conceptual antiphrasis).<sup>17</sup>

<sup>17</sup> The *oratio trimembris* is used in those proposal scenes in which the narrator wants to convey syntactically a gentle mockery of her lovers. In *Sense and Sensibility* we are told that "(1) with such a confederacy against her [Marianne Dashwood]— (2) with a knowledge so intimate of his goodness [Colonel Brandon's]— (3) with a conviction of his fond attachment to herself. . . she found herself, at nineteen, (3.i) submitting to new attachments, (3.ii) entering on new duties, (3.iii.a) placed in a new home, (3.iii.b) a wife, (3.iii.c) the mistress of a family, (3.iii.d) and the patroness of a village" (ch. 50). Each component of the *oratio trimembris* connects to the others in an enlargement of the context of reference; in particular in the last instance above, it is noticeable how the threefold structure is meant to convey Marianne's euphoric acceptance of her new roles—both personal and social—thus reflecting positively on her future union with Brandon. See also a comparable use in *Mansfield Park*: "Scarcely had he [Edmund Bertram] done regretting Mary Crawford, and observing to Fanny how impossible it was that he should ever meet with such another woman, before it began to strike him (1) *whether* a very different kind of woman might not do just as well—or a great deal better; (2) *whether* Fanny herself were not growing as dear, as important to him in all her smiles, and all her ways, as Mary Crawford had ever been; (3) and *whether* it might not be a possible, an hopeful undertaking to persuade her that her warm and sisterly regard for him would be foundation enough for wedded love" (vol. 3, ch. 17; italics and underlines are mine). In this latter case, the *oratio trimembris* is employed to illustrate Edmund's growing awareness of the suitability of Fanny as lover: after a general reflection expressed in (1), he focuses on Fanny (2), and, finally, once he has reached this new consciousness, (3) we are informed of his decision to persuade the girl into marrying him (the numbers in parentheses are mine). Illuminating insights in Jane Austen's linguistic constructions are provided by the authoritative studies of Howard Babb, *Jane Austen's Novels: The Fabric of Dialogue* (Columbus: Ohio State University Press, 1962) and Norman Page, *The Language of Jane Austen* (Oxford: Blackwell, 1972). An early, yet influential discussion of her style is also offered in Mary Lascelles, *Jane Austen and Her Art* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1939, in particular chapters 3 and 4.



Table 2.

Rhetorical Opening	Surface Statements	Subsurface Personal References
My reasons for marrying are,		
	first, that I think it a right thing for every clergyman <i>in easy circumstances</i> (like myself) to set the example	(gratified by his social position and influence; <i>economic code</i> )
	secondly, that I am convinced it will <i>add</i> very greatly to my happiness;	(one-sidedness of proposal; his own happiness is the only issue; <i>economic code</i> )
	and thirdly—which perhaps I ought to have mentioned earlier, that it is the particular advice and recommendation of the very noble lady whom I	(sentimental suspense turning into comic bathos; social subsumes personal as instinctive deference to rank takes place of feeling)

My reasons for marrying are, first, that I think it a right thing for every clergyman *in easy circumstances* (like myself) to set the example of matrimony in his parish; secondly, that I am convinced it will *add* very greatly to my happiness; and thirdly—which perhaps I ought to have mentioned earlier, that it is the particular advice and recommendation of the very noble lady whom I have the honour of calling patroness.

Collins's apparent disregard for his future wife's financial situation is immediately—although unwittingly—contradicted by his following speech.

And *now nothing remains* for me but to assure you in *the most animated language of the violence of my affection*. To fortune I am perfectly indifferent, since *I am well aware* that...one thousand pounds in the 4 per cents., which will not be yours till after your mother's decease, is all that you may be entitled to.

Playful authorial irony works in such a way that although the clergyman prides himself on his oratory abilities, it is precisely these which unmask his opportunism. The facile discourses of romance and sensibility are the ridiculous linguistic filler with which he feebly pads his actual moral and emotional shallowness. As the narrator slyly points out, "the idea of Mr Collins, with all his solemn composure, being run away with by his feelings, made Elizabeth

so near laughing" (ch. 19). Furthermore, this sentimental avowal is tellingly compared to a trade, a commercial task in which the economic code dominates. (Initially the clergyman admits of having first arrived with the "design" *to select* a wife, ch. 19.) Mr. Collins's proposal is a mirror of his nature as well as of the future social and familial hierarchy which will preside over his ideal marital relationship. Elizabeth's subaltern role is clearly intimated, and so is the layout of her suitor's frame of mind, which privileges his own satisfaction at the least possible material and emotional expense. His well-fed complacency convinces him that his leave of absence must not be uselessly extended only to attend to such a trifling errand, which "no feeling of diffidence [made] distressing *to himself*."

As a ready-to-wear product seasoned with the foolishness of sentimental and romantic rhetoric, Collins's speech reminds the reader of a tape reeling off mechanically. The narrator does not need to report his swiftly following proposal to Charlotte Lucas in the same meticulous way. The clergyman does his wooing by the book (pun intended), so once heard, always heard, and the ironic hyperboles of the brief indirect report in which we are informed of his proposal are clearly intended to evoke and repropose his freshly rehearsed scene with Elizabeth.<sup>18</sup>

Such was Miss Lucas's scheme; and appearances were so favourable, that when they parted at night, she would have felt almost sure of success if he had not been to leave Hertfordshire so very soon. But here she did injustice to *the fire and independence of his character*, for it led him to escape out of Longbourn House the next morning with admirable slyness, and hasten to Lucas Lodge *to throw himself at her feet*. (ch. 22)

One cannot help smiling at this second attempt of Collins's at sentimental jargon: one brief sentence in free indirect speech is sufficient to summarize this most unceremonious affair, whose outcome is assured by the ea-

<sup>18</sup> The game of parallel proposals already mentioned as regards Darcy is renewed in this second case. After stating that Collins's "regard for [Elizabeth] was quite imaginary" (ch. 20), only six pages later the narrator chooses the very same expression to describe Charlotte's unromantic awareness of her husband-to-be's coldness: "[Mr. Collins] society was irksome, and his attachment to her must be imaginary" (ch. 22). Rather than showing a limited vocabulary on Austen's side, the repetition signals the perfect interchangeability of the two women for Collins, who does not perceive them as individual actors—"Elizabeth" and "Charlotte"—but rather as actants of the same narrative function "bride."

ger, well-maneuvered, and adroitly silent encouragement with which it has been prepared. Significantly, Charlotte is quick to realize that the best way to reach her husband-to-be's heart is by deflating his linguistic balloon. Her "civility in listening to him," remarked in ch. 21, cannot help proving the winning strategy with a man who is pleased to hear only his own voice. The second mention of "Miss Lucas was so kind as to listen to him" (ch. 22) is conclusive, and it does not fail to bring about the impatiently anticipated proposal. More a prerehearsed game—and biting treatise on the principle of accommodation—than whirlwind romance, the sooner their courtship is over and done with, the better for everybody. "[Charlotte] felt no inclination to trifle with [Collins's] happiness," comments archly the narrator, "the stupidity with which he was favoured by nature must guard his courtship from any charm that could make a woman wish for its continuance" (ch. 22).

A further variation on the theme of the obnoxious suitor (a convention that was a long-established comic stereotype which Jane Austen may have indeed borrowed from the stage) is offered by Mr. Elton's unsuccessful proposal to Emma Woodhouse. After a family evening spent at her former governess's, Emma, the beautiful only daughter of Highbury's most influential man, happens to find herself in a carriage returning home, alone with the local clergyman, Mr. Elton, an ambitious minister she has lately befriended who entertains the sanguine hopes that his suit may be well received.

To restrain him as much as might be, by her own manners, she was immediately preparing to speak with exquisite calmness and gravity of the weather and the night; but scarcely had she begun, scarcely had they passed the sweep-gate and joined the other carriage, that she found her subject cut up—her hand seized—her attention demanded, and Mr. Elton actually making violent love to her: availing himself of the precious opportunity, declaring sentiments which must be already well-known, hoping—fearing—adoring—ready to die if she refused him; but flattering himself that his ardent attachment and unequalled love and unexampled passion could not fail of having some effect, and in short, very much resolved on being seriously accepted as soon as possible. (ch. 15)

Mr. Elton takes advantage of the physical proximity provided by the carriage ride to start pressing his suit, whose surprising velocity is given syntactical and graphical illustration through the quick succession of clauses, and the sequence of dashes, which convey the man's increasing agitation,

Table 3.

Opening	<i>Oratio Bimembris</i>		<i>Oratio Trimembris</i>	and Mr. Elton actually making violent love to her:	<i>Oratio Trimembris</i>	Subsurface	Rhetorical Aim/Persuasion	Subsurface
To restrain him as much as might be, by her own manners, she was immediately preparing to speak with exquisite calmness and gravity of the weather and the night; but	scarcely had she begun,	that she found	her subject cut up,					
	scarcely had they passed the sweep- gate and joined the other carriage,		her hand seized,		availing himself of the <i>precious</i> opportunity,	economic and sentimental code; social opportunity		
			her attention demanded,		declaring sentiments which must be already well-known,			
				but flattering himself that	<i>hoping—fearing</i> <i>—adoring—reading</i> <i>to die</i> if she refused him;	sentimental gradation;		
					his ardent <i>attachment</i> and unequalled <i>love</i> and unexampled <i>passion</i>	sentimental gradation;		
							could not fail of having some effect,	from abstract to concrete nouns; sentimental decrease
							and in short, very much resolved on being seriously accepted as soon as possible.	surfacing of reflexive amatory discourse

and the flurry of unpleasant feelings he arouses in Emma. Elton intends to take Emma by surprise (we may notice the double anaphoric recurrence of the temporal adverb "scarcely," and the high number of participles, which indicate on the one hand Elton's swift action and on the other Emma's passivity), and he hopes that the woman's astonishment may work in his favor. The emotional urgency of his proposal is conveyed through one interminable sentence of free indirect speech—to be read at one go—which contains both

the surface of his amatory discourse (the manifest narrative of the progression of his avowal, and his expectations) as well as its subsurface, namely Elton's well-planned reasons for proposing.

The proposal scene can be broken down as shown in Table 3. By reworking the linguistic and rhetorical ingredients of Collins's proposal, the narrator connects the staple amatory expressions of the love discourse in elegant sentimental gradation, at the same time exposing its mercenary duplicity. Elton intends to avail himself of the double chance he is offered by his pursuit. Not only does the relative intimacy of the drive allow him to propose, the word "opportunity" also hints at the social and economic possibilities his union with the heiress Emma would open up for him. The adjective "precious" once again connects the level of surface denotation (sentimental code) with that of subsurface connotation (economic code), and it anticipates the emotional bathos of the scene's conclusion. Here Elton's worldly interests are clearly pointed out by his significant linguistic switch from such abstract nouns as "hope," "love," and "passion," which recur in the first part of the sentence, to such a grossly materialistic term such as "effect," which brings the clergyman's rhetorical strategy to the surface and unmasks his mental schemes. Noticeable also is the final unceremonious expression "in short," which inelegantly implies Elton's profound conviction—typical of reflexive love—that any marriage proposal, even if made to such an eligible and desirable candidate, requires no waste of time, either in being made or in being accepted.

Elton's sentimental mimicry and cold-blooded premeditation are made clearer when compared with the report of his happy betrothal with Miss Augusta Hawkins of Bath, a sort of self-conceited female counterpart to him, who manages to win Elton after a whirlwind romance of less than four weeks (notice again the similarity with the quick understanding arrived at between Mr. Collins and Charlotte Lucas).

Elton's proposal is only reported in ironic summary, possibly because it may be expected to be a copy of the one made only a short while earlier to Emma.

The story which [Mr Elton] had to give Mrs Coles of the rise and progress of the affair was so glorious—the steps so quick, from the accidental rencontre, to the dinner at Mr Green's, and the party at Mrs Brown's—smiles and blushes rising in importance—with consciousness and agitation richly scattered—the lady had been so easily impressed—so sweetly disposed—had **in short**, to use

a most intelligible phrase, been so very ready to have him, that vanity and prudence were equally contented. (ch. 22; the bold type is mine)

The minister's financial and social expectations are fully satisfied by his match, which has brought him "10,000 pounds or thereabouts," so that Elton comes back to Highbury "gay and self-satisfied," with a wife reasonable enough to care little for a long-winding courtship, and who promises to be his perfect complement in self-assurance, complacency, and manipulating. As with Charlotte Lucas, male amatory discourse proves a totally useless persuasive tool with Augusta Elton. Both women have been long persuaded—even before they are proposed to in fact—they are just waiting for their chance of passing from abstract will to accomplished deed.

As we shall see later, these elegant attempts at depicting an alternative model to the male idea of reflexive love lay the foundations of Austen's mature critique. For the moment it may be argued that Mr. Collins's proposal in *Pride and Prejudice* offers a paradigmatic, though still juvenile representation of the pressures that would be inflicted by the period's exacting behavioral codes on any young lady asked in marriage. Collins's ear is trained to recognize only the monologic tones of his amatory discourse—accordingly, he believes that his insincerity and opportunism can but find an exact counterpart in Elizabeth's feelings. Thus in a pantomime of mistaken emotions, he believes that she is routinely acting her part in the drama, too. "Perhaps you have even now said as much to encourage my suit as would be consistent with the true delicacy of the female character," he deludes himself, "you must give me leave to flatter myself, my dear cousin, that your refusal of my addresses is *merely words of course*" (ch. 19; the italics are mine).<sup>19</sup>

Settled in her feelings of dislike for Mr. Collins, Elizabeth finds herself in the position of being obliged to disengage herself from the tangles of routine romantic negotiation by having recourse to a vocabulary taint-

<sup>19</sup> For an early parody of the contemporary notions of female behavior in courtship, see *Frederic and Elfrieda*: "Scarcely were [Charlotte and her Aunt] seated as usual, in the most affectionate manner in one chair, that the door opened & an aged gentleman with a sal-low face & old pink Coat, partly by intention & partly thro' weakness was at the feet of the lovely Charlotte, declaring his attachment to her & beseeching her piety in the most moving manner. Not being able to resolve to make any one miserable, she consented to become his wife; where upon the Gentleman left the room and all was quiet." Jane Austen, *Minor Works*, vol. 6 of Robert W. Chapman ed., *The Works of Jane Austen* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1987), 8.

ed by the *mere words of course* that compose the love script she is supposed to follow.

"Upon my word, sir," cried Elizabeth, "your hope is rather an extraordinary one after my declaration. I do assure you that I am not one of those young ladies (if such young ladies there are) who are so daring as to risk their happiness on the chance of being asked a second time."

And again:

"You must give me leave to judge for myself, and pay me the compliment of believing what I say. . . . If what I have hitherto said can appear to you in the form of encouragement, I know not how to express my refusal in such a way as may convince you of its being one." (ch. 19)

Her protestations on the sincerity of her expostulations fail to have any effect and her steadfast refusals are interpreted as a preestablished part acted to perfection, dictated by the consideration that in male reflexive love a bashful "no" may only imply a grateful "yes." When the mention of Lady Catherine de Bourgh fails to awake in Elizabeth a proper sense of respect for the honor she has received, Mr. Collins refers to parental authority in order to press better his suit.

Mr Collins received and returned [Mrs Bennet's] felicitations with equal pleasure. . . . since the refusal which his cousin had steadfastly given him would naturally flow from the bashful modesty and the genuine delicacy of her character. . . . "But depend upon it, Mr Collins," [Mrs Bennet] added, "that Lizzy shall be brought to reason. I will speak to her about it myself." (ch. 20)

Mr. Bennet's comic refusal to enforce an affirmative reply from Elizabeth ("An unhappy alternative is before you Elizabeth. . . . Your mother will see you never again if you do *not* marry Mr Collins, I will never see you again if you *do*," ch. 20; the italics are in the text) is repropounded and dramatized in *Mansfield Park*, in which a considerable part of the second volume is devoted to the description of Henry Crawford's suit, and the familial debate surrounding his unexpected rejection.

Fanny Price, adopted into the family of Sir Thomas Bertram, finds herself completely alone in having to withstand the multiple pressures inflicted on her. In a joint attack, her dearly loved uncle accuses her of ungrateful stubbornness, while Henry's collusive sister Mary begins to address her as "her dear sister."

Fanny was by this time crying so bitterly, that angry as he was, he would not press that article farther. Her heart was almost broke by such a picture of what she appeared to him; by such accusation, so heavy, so multiple, so rising in dreadful gradation! Self-willed, obstinate, selfish, and ungrateful. He thought her all this. She had deceived of expectations; she had lost his good opinion. What was to become of her? (vol. 3, ch. 1)

Fanny's anguished final question draws attention to the third, heretofore sidestepped, interpersonal function of the marriage proposal. Since the contemporary female condition implied woman's near-total dependence on the male (be it father, husband, or brother), her rejection of a suitor—both eligible, or even marginally so—implied her possible avulsion from her familial context, upon which she must continue to depend economically if refusing her suitor. The "pure and disinterested desire [to find] an establishment" proclaimed by Charlotte Lucas as her justification for marrying (ch. 22) was very often eagerly shared by the bride-to-be's family, anxious to unburden themselves of a member who was seen as an obnoxious financial strain. Fanny's doubts are thus expedient to dramatize woman's contextual vulnerability, and the economic and familial implications behind the force of persuadability. Yet again proposal scenes illustrate the strong inter- and intratextual thematic connections existing in the Austen canon, the later elaborations addressing more complex issues and proving more critically challenging than her earlier ones.

### ✱ 3. The Silence of a Feeling Heart ✱

With Collins's archetypal proposal, Austen moves beyond the criticism of the moral deficiency of sensibility with which she experimented with in her juvenilia, and it introduces a sophisticated revision of love discourse. The first step of this reconsideration is achieved through restoring amatory words their



lost *semantic content*. Austen's tales are moral, didactic, and religious (as of spiritual development), light comedies of manners and sketches of domestic life, narratives of self-improvement as well as pointed social analyses—but they are also *love* stories, and profoundly so. When faced by a hollow amatory language, and by those hackneyed signifiers that have lost their profound, substantial signifying content through constant linguistic overuse, Austen leaves words to her unworthy lovers and their linguistic toils, and opts for silence. Her narrator unfailingly plays up scenes of garrulous infatuation like Lydia Bennett's, of dear calculation like Mr. Elton's, of tender self-love, as with Mr. Collins—raptures and transports are detailed with ironic detachment, but scenes of emotion both sincere and reasonable—as unpalatable as this oxymoron may sound to our new-romantic ears—are played down to unobtrusive, often muted, yet poignant bits of ivory.<sup>20</sup>

Austen undermines contemporary amatory discourse and returns passion and words their lost wholeness and import (both semantic and moral) by turning to silence. She shelters her more artistically accomplished, rational lovers from the uninhibited spilling out of high-pitched emotion and trite hyperboles, she lops and crops successfully, she elides, glosses over, overdistances—protects them, excluding the reader, and thus manages to leave both their speech and feelings intact, pristine. Austen challenges the overstrained *realism of form* she had met in dozens narratives of love and sentiment, and she devises a *new form* for old stories whose topic she translates in a famous passage, appropriately, as “the other less interesting mode of attachment.”<sup>21</sup> We are never going to be privy to what Emma answers Knightly, “What did she say?—Just what she ought, of course. A lady always does” (ch. 49). Elsewhere she refuses the presumption “to give the feelings of a young woman on receiving the assurance of...that affec-

<sup>20</sup> See the three-membered parody of contemporary romantic fiction in *Sanditon*: “The novels which I approve are such as display Human Nature with Grandeur—such as show her in the Sublimities of intense Feeling—such as exhibit the progress of strong Passion from the first Germ of incipient Susceptibility to the utmost Energies of Reason half-dethroned—where we see the strong spark of Woman's Captivations elicit such Fire in the Soul of Man as leads him...to hazard all, dare all, achieve all, to obtain her” (Austen, *Minor Works*, 403; all the emphases are mine).

<sup>21</sup> “If gratitude and esteem are good foundation for affection, Elizabeth's change of sentiment will be neither improbable nor faulty. But if otherwise—if the regard springing from such sources is unreasonable, or unnatural, in comparison of what is so often described as arising from a first interview with its object, and even before two words have been exchanged—nothing can be said in her defence, except that she had given somewhat of a trial to the latter method in her partiality for Wickham, and that its ill success might, perhaps, authorise her to seek the other less interesting mode of attachment” (*Pride and Prejudice*, ch. 46).

tion," quietly retreating from Fanny Price's joyful drama of sentiments, "there was happiness elsewhere that no description can reach" (*Mansfield Park*, vol. 3, ch. 17).<sup>22</sup> As a result before they open up their hearts, Austen's later lovers consistently rely on, and expect to receive, extraverbal inducement and encouragement, "[Mr. Knightley] stopped in earnestness to look the question, and the expression of his eyes overpowered her. . . . 'You are silent,' he cried, with great animation; 'absolutely silent! At present I ask no more'" (*Emma*, ch. 49). And again, Captain Wentworth begs Anne Elliot to answer his epistolary entreats just with "a word, a look." Accordingly, in their following meeting he chooses to "say nothing—only looked." Neither of the lovers may mistake this eye sign, that no language can distort or taint, and that is decisive in persuading the now resolute Anne to mime her encouragement, amid a city crowd of "sauntering politicians, bustling house-keepers, flirting girls" unheeding of them in its noise. "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" (*Persuasion*, ch. 23).<sup>23</sup>

<sup>22</sup> The narrator's low-key and perfunctory summary of Edmund's proposal to Fanny may be also partly seen as gentle mockery of his newly discovered conjugal love for his cousin. Juliet McMaster argues that the slow growth of Edmund Betram's love for Fanny is clearly portrayed in the novel so that "the reader is constantly informed of how his love for Mary and his love for Fanny grow *together*. . . . The more Edmund's ardour kindles for Mary, the more fervent become his feelings for Fanny" (*Jane Austen the Novelist*, 142; italics in the text). On the contrary, I interpret this particularly condensed presentation of a successful marriage proposal as totally respondent to a well-defined aesthetic project. My contention seems to be supported by the similarity the episode bears with the description of Marianne Dashwood's sentimental revolution in favor of Colonel Brandon. In *Sense and Sensibility* we are informed (yet again in ironic summary) that Marianne "was born to overcome an affection formed so late in life as seventeen, and with no sentiment superior to strong esteem and lively friendship, voluntarily to give her hand to another!" (ch. 50). The mocking juxtapositions used by the narrator in *Mansfield Park* seem to take up directly the above passage: "I purposely abstain from dates on this occasion, that every one may be at liberty to fix their own, aware that the cure of *unconquerable* passions, and the transfer of *unchanging* attachments, must *vary* much as to time in different people" (vol. 3, ch. 17; mine the italics). Since it is difficult to sweep by the sexual tension built up throughout the novel between Edmund and Mary Crawford, I believe that narratorial restraint is Austen's way of protecting Fanny's love, and all at once a component of her critique of the gendered roles implicit in the contemporary didactic novel tradition.

<sup>23</sup> See Virginia Woolf's comment on Austen's "moments of vision": "But, from triviality, from commonplace, their words become suddenly full of meaning, and the moment for both [a dull young man and a weakly young woman] one of the most memorable in their lives. It fills itself; it shines; it glows; it hangs before us, deep, trembling, serene for a second; next the housemaid passes, and this drop, in which all the happiness of life has collected, gently subsides again to become part of the ebb and flow of ordinary existence" ("Jane Austen," 151).

Anne's body responds to and foretells her firm resolution: her movements—which once were as wavering as her tenacity had been under the pressure of Lady Russell's force of persuasion—have now become as unfaltering as her mind. The lovers' slow side-by-side walk is the emblem of their newly found communion and predicts their happy match, in accordance with a device already experimented in *Pride and Prejudice* and *Emma* in which the intimate stroll of the betrothed around the garden symbolizes their forthcoming blissful union.<sup>24</sup>

Austen's attempt to "form sentences that can mirror grammatically the complexity of feeling"<sup>25</sup> is further exemplified by a short paragraph in *Mansfield Park*, in which Fanny's reaction to Crawford's unexpected marriage proposal is so reported:

- (1) She was feeling, thinking, trembling, about everything; (2) — agitated, happy, miserable, infinitely obliged, absolutely angry. (3) It was all beyond belief! He was inexcusable, incomprehensible!—
- (4) But such were his habits, that he could do nothing without a mixture of evil. (5) He had previously made her the happiest of human being, and now he had insulted—she knew not what to say—how to class or how to regard it. (6) She would not have him be serious, and yet what could excuse the use of such words and

<sup>24</sup> In particular, the unity of the lovers is syntactically represented by various figures of *geminatio* and by parallel constructions, which are used to reconcile their past separation with their present coming together (I indicate them typographically): "they exchanged again those feelings and those promises...which had been followed by so many, many years of division and estrangement. There they returned again into the past,...more tender, *more tried*, more fixed in a knowledge of each other's character, *truth* and attachment...they could indulge in those retrospections and acknowledgements;...and of yesterday and today there could scarcely be an end" (ch. 23). In her analysis of Austen proposal scenes, Kathleen Lundeen points out an interesting similarity between the episode in *Pride and Prejudice* and Joseph Addison's *Spectator* comments on Book IV of Milton's *Paradise Lost*, in which the unfallen Adam and Eve visit the newly created earth. She contends that "though [Elizabeth and Darcy] preserve the propriety of the parlour when outdoors, they relate to each other with more ease in the natural setting. In the pastoral tradition this natural landscape serves as a refuge for the lovers. It is, indeed, an Eden of the heart." As to the proposal scene in *Persuasion*, Lundeen notices that "the scene in which Captain Wentworth and Anne Elliot are reunited as lovers more closely resembles *Paradise Lost* itself" rather than Addison's comment on it, claiming that "had Adam and Eve been given a second chance, their reunion might have been described" with the same expressions used by Austen for her lovers. ("A Modest Proposal?" 70-74).

<sup>25</sup> Burgan, "Feeling and Control," 37.

offers, if they meant but to trifle? (vol. II, ch. 13; the numbers in parentheses are mine)

As is often the case with Austen betrothal scenes, which we have noticed, are built around close formal and thematic similarities, the situation is a complex revision of a similar episode in *Pride and Prejudice*. Elizabeth's discovery of Darcy's agency in convincing Wickham to marry her sister Lydia, with whom he has eloped, is directly conducive to her opening with the gentleman, whose generous aid has induced her to correct her early misjudgment. Thus Elizabeth's gratitude speedily prompts Darcy's second proposal, which this time is not only accepted, but also obliquely encouraged by the girl.

"Mr Darcy...I can no longer help thanking you for your unexampled kindness to my poor sister. Ever since I have known it, I have been most anxious to acknowledge to you how grateful I feel...."

"If you *will* thank me," he replied, "let it be for yourself alone.... But your *family* owe me nothing. Much as I respect them, I believe I thought only of *you*." (ch. 58; the italics are in the text)

Similar is the situation of Fanny Price, whose brother William has been promoted to lieutenant through the agency of Admiral Crawford, Henry's uncle. The dashing young man believes that his good deed will prove the finishing touch in securing him the love of mousy Fanny, whom he hopes may consider this tempting coupling of kindness with an extraordinary establishment as an irresistible lure.

Patent is the moral illustrated by the episode, which stands in conceptual juxtaposition to the one in *Pride and Prejudice*. While Darcy acts out of the disinterested wish to serve Elizabeth, and thus does not boast of his exploit with the Bennets, preferring to keep his actions secret, Crawford instead hastens to break the good news to Fanny. Thus we may argue that whereas in *Pride and Prejudice* the woman's gratitude does not turn into a form of emotional blackmail which aims at affecting her persuadability, conversely this is clearly the gist of the scheme devised by Crawford, who intends to use William's welfare as the emotional lever which should move Fanny to accept him. In a carefully orchestrated maneuver, the marriage proposal in effect follows immediately on the reports of William's promotion, which are supposedly conducive and essential to manipulating Fanny's emotional pliability.

Table 4.

Fanny	Feelings/sensations	Categories of performance
She was    about every thing;	feeling,	HEART (feels)
	thinking,	HEAD (thinks)
	trembling	BODY (does/acts)

The passage from *Mansfield Park* reported above records Fanny's mixed reaction to Henry's double news through the girl's consciousness. Four very short sentences in beautifully complex free indirect speech summarize, in order, Fanny's fluttering spirits, her assessment of the circumstances she finds herself in, her moral disapprobation of Henry, her final resolution, and they anticipate the predictably unsuccessful (because morally invalid) outcome of Henry's scheme.

The concise opening sentence ("She was feeling, thinking, trembling about everything") can be broken down as shown in Table 4. As the minimum sentence complexity signals the workings of a mind well in control, the wave of emotional pressure cascading on Fanny is contained and withstood by the concise parataxis, which connects in a chain of full semantic import HEART, HEAD, and BODY—the three inextricably intertwined channels that invest Fanny's evaluation. Since Austen wants to suggest grammatically as well as lexically a reaction which is conceived as measured, though passionate, fluttering, and yet unrelenting, the syntactical balancing of the clauses indicates Fanny's rational containment of Henry's emotional pressure. The syntax conveys the sense of injustice transmitted by both her judgment and the rush of emotions she is feeling—the two juxtaposing codes simultaneously inscribing on the semiotic litmus paper of her body.

The remaining part of the sentence (indicated as 2 in the above quotation)—a whirlwind of free-floating adjectives lacking verbal connection—indicates the maelstrom of contrasting emotions Fanny is swept up by. It represents a state of suspension during which the girl does not *act* but simply *feels*, engulfed in a tumult of sensations, "agitated, happy, miserable, infinitely obliged, absolutely angry." Fanny's loyalty to her brother, and her happiness for his promotion clash with the sense of strong injustice she feels she is victim of. The carefully selected adjectives communicate her fluctuation between the dimensions of personal unfairness/interpersonal exhilaration, as body, head, and heart all concur to reflect the inner state of her mind, her contrasting feelings, and her continual process of moral assessment and judgment.

Table 5.

Adjectival forms	Categories of performance	Pragmatic relation
agitated,	BODY	personal
happy,	HEART	interpersonal
miserable,	HEART	personal
infinitely obliged,	HEAD	interpersonal
absolutely angry.	HEART	personal

While the flux between personal reaction and interpersonal consideration remains constant throughout the clause (Mary Crawford had already preannounced this would be Fanny's reaction, suggesting her brother exploit "the *gentleness* and *gratitude* of her disposition," vol. II, ch. 12; the italics are mine),<sup>26</sup> we may notice the prevalence of the performative category HEART. This respects the general description of Fanny as an unassumed heroine of feeling, a perceptive sensitive girl whose spontaneous response to the splendor of nature, the stars, the beauty of outdoor life are positively described as manifestations of an instinctive sensibility and a rich, originally Romantic inner life. Furthermore, the double occurrence of the couplet HEART—PERSONAL ("miserable, . . . absolutely angry") already hints at the unhappy result of Henry's proposal. Fanny will choose to stay true to her sense of hurt pride, and despite the double moral pressure applied by both her family and Henry, she will defend her resolution, she will resist and remain true to herself.

It is hardly surprising then that her chain of thoughts brings Henry in next (indicated as 3 in the above quotation). Significantly his name is not explicitly mentioned, but her reflections on the man's actions are concisely recalled by two negative adjectives, "it was all beyond belief! He was *inexcusable*, *incomprehensible*!" By this stage of her mental elaboration, Fanny has started to focus on her suitor in terms of the qualities he is deficient in. In a construction that takes up Fanny's exact same categories of assessment (see Table 4), now we are informed that Crawford's words and actions cannot be excused (SAY/DO), nor can his real feelings (FEEL) be understood.

The following sentence coincides with her final rejection of Henry. By now Fanny's process of appraisal has become complete—she has made up her mind on both Henry and the actual import of the service he has done

<sup>26</sup> The same terms will be used in one of Fanny's unceremonious letters to Mary Crawford, in which she assures the siblings "of her being neither imposed on, nor gratified by Mr Crawford's attentions" (vol. II, ch. 13).

for William: "But such were his habits, that he could do nothing without a mixture of evil." Crawford's damnation is grammatically conveyed by one brief sentence—significantly the central one in the passage here under scrutiny—which ends with the word "evil." As the initial adversative foretells Fanny's capacity to withstand Henry's lures, and the pressure she is aware she is to be subject to, we are assured of the strength of her will and the steadfast decision of setting herself against contemporary codes and expectations. Furthermore it is notable that this realization is reported in the sentence which is the only statement of the passage. Fanny may hesitate (sentence 4), question herself (sentence 5), express doubts (sentence 1), and be agitated by gushes of emotion (sentence 2), but whenever she pronounces her final judgment on Crawford her moral certitude is unshakable and she has no hesitancy (sentence 5). Henry is "evil" (the linguistic hub of the passage), a term with strong moral and sentimental connotations which will be also significantly used by Edmund also to stigmatize Mary Crawford's light comment on Maria Bertram's adultery.

[Mary Crawford] spoke of you with high praise and warm affection; yet even here, there was alloy, a dash of evil—.... I do not consider her as meaning to wound my feelings. The evil lies yet deeper; in her total ignorance, unsuspectingness of there being such feelings, in a perversion of mind which made it natural to her to treat the subject as she did. (vol. 3; ch. 16)

The two final sentences neither add nor detract anything from Fanny's newly acquired vision. The use of the adjective "serious" (in an earlier occurrence used by Edmund in a context of religious import, and a little later employed by Fanny herself, who charges Crawford of being "so little open to serious impressions," vol. II, ch. 13) completes her evaluation of her suitor by linking up with and overstating the semantic import of the previous "evil." The gentleman's moral inadequacy has by now become clear, and his lack of principles makes possible only one answer. Fanny can but turn down Crawford's proposal.

Once Fanny has made up her mind, she steadfastly defends her position, although she must face the pitfalls of male reflexive love. Henry Crawford's unexceptionable social status makes a refusal utterly unlikely unless the lady were prepossessed in favor of someone else. Accordingly, the passage just scrutinized, with its insistence on terms taken from the fields of CONDUCT and MORALITY, also foreshadows the grounds and development of Fanny's



defense. Fanny is aware that if she wants to reject Crawford without revealing her serious attachment to her cousin Edmund, she must harp on her suitor's moral deficiencies, so that her disapprobation may be understood.

Fanny Price's final answer—a conflicted, painful, though firm "No" which reinstates woman's right of choice—completes Austen's revision of contemporary amatory discourse. Steadfast in her defense of her first and only attachment for Edmund, her negative answer resounds above the similar hackneyed professions tirelessly uttered by the heroines of sensibility, typically unfaltering—preferably beyond reason—in the defense of their first love, and thus deflates tenacious male self-reflexivity.

I hope that by now we have gained evidence to reply to the charge of passionlessness of which Charlotte Brontë accused Austen. In Jane Austen's novels there is indeed plenty of love, romance, even sex, desire, pent-up emotions, and palpitation, heartsickness, pining, and tender wooing. To all this her speechless lovers bear silent, though exquisite, testimony, and a woman's bashful "No" paradoxically attests to it.

#### ✱ 4. A Closing Note (Of Very Few Words Indeed) ✱

Austen's supreme word-wrighting, intending with this term her unparalleled ability to represent the multiple signification of both speech and silence,<sup>27</sup> brings to mind the watercolor portrait of the author painted by her sister Cassandra in 1804.<sup>28</sup> This famous image reproduces the novelist sitting down, as she turns her back on the viewer, her face shaded by a fashionably sheltering bonnet, only a glimpse of her profile visible. With this pose—playfully

<sup>27</sup> I coin this term through a process of linguistic formation that parallels the one recently used by Jane Moody in the context of women theater studies. According to the critic, nineteenth-century female playmaking should be returned the original, etymological sense that the term "playwrighting" had in Medieval context: "wrighting" . . . took the form of making goods, perhaps from materials made or prepared by others, which would then be sold, assembled, or incorporated into larger objects, the identity of their craftsmen silently disappearing, without written trace, into history." See Jane Moody, "Illusions of Authorship," in Tracy C. Davis and Ellen Donkin, eds., *Women and Playwriting in Nineteenth-Century Britain* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1999), 101–2. In my argument, the term *word-wrighting* hopes to convey a sense of the original textual/material nature of the author's work as well its later commercial circulation.

<sup>28</sup> The well-known watercolor is reproduced, among the others, in the fittingly entitled work by David Cecil, *Portrait of Jane Austen* (Harmondsworth: Penguin, 1978), 112.



contrary to ordinary ideas of portrait sitting—she denies the viewer permission to look at the front part of her body and her face. In just the same way as physical posture teasingly turns into *imposture*, so does authorial verbal reticence tantalizingly disappoint audience expectations, simultaneously calling for a high degree of skilful reader response and pathetic involvement. Thus—both in silence and speech, by facing or backing away from her public—Jane Austen's *expression* remains immutably clear.