

Sister-Sister or Performer and Audience: The Function of Wit in Jane Austen's Letters
and its Effect on her Sororal Relationship

"Your letter came quite as soon as I expected, and so your letters will always do, because I have made it a rule not to expect them til they come, in which I think I consult the ease of us both."

-Jane Austen, in a letter to her sister Cassandra¹

Witty retorts such as this decorate the pages of Austen's collection of letters to her sister. Whether the topic of conversation be fashion, family matters, town gossip, or simply lamentation that there is no subject to be had, the frequency with which she utilizes this kind of repartee demonstrates that Austen's compulsory method of relating her thoughts to Cassandra is through wit. Although entertaining, this inexorable reversion to wit as a means for conversation problematizes the sincerity of her correspondence: the nature of wit involves an element of performance, or an additional intention apart from simple communication, and is therefore mutually exclusive to complete candidness. The term *complete* here is paramount – Austen's letters exemplify numerous qualities of the expressly feminine, bonding attributes associated with letter writing of the era² – however because wit acts as a vehicle for Austen to express these qualities, there remains an impenetrable barrier between Austen as a performer and Cassandra as her audience.

When considering this function of her personal letters, the epistolary structure of her novels makes a sharp contrast. The letters in Austen's novels lack neither topic nor importance. They are fraught with meaning and create significant alterations in both

¹ Austen, Jane, and Faye Deirdre. *Jane Austen's Letters*. Letter #4, Page 25. Oxford: Oxford UP, 1995. Print.

² A term to be defined as "feminine sociality."

plot and characterization – they are the vehicle for many characters to either redeem or condemn themselves. Because wit is such a preeminent characteristic of Austen’s personal letters, it seems plausible that the letters in her novels would exhibit this trait as well, but this is not the case. The novels’ letters contain so much purpose because Austen depends upon them to perpetuate the story – in other words, they already contain an ulterior intention apart from simply transferring information. Therefore, the closest comparable concept between Austen’s personal letters and those of her novels is the similar *function* of wit, but not wit itself.

Before delving into her novels, however, it is important to understand how contemporary readers have come to interpret Austen’s letters. Of an author whose novels elucidate such subtle nuances of the landed gentry’s social system in the late eighteenth and early nineteenth centuries, contemporary readers might expect Jane Austen’s critical analysis of these human interactions to extend beyond the criterion of manners – specifically in terms of politics. She certainly had opinions about government,³ but when critics turn to the exchange of letters written between Austen and her sister, Cassandra,⁴ to gain context about the state of England in Austen’s time, they come up short.

³ Austen’s characterization of the title character in *Emma* portrays a bold, authoritative woman who relies little on male persuasion. That she did so in response to the Prince Regent’s request for the novel’s dedication implies her opinion about the kind of figure truly fit for governing England.

⁴ Published after the former’s death in 1817.

There exists a series of excuses to account for Austen's neglect of political reference in her personal correspondence: family matters would have taken precedence between the sisters over political ones, postage costs for lengthy letters would have been a burden to Cassandra (because the recipients paid the postage costs at the time), even that Austen was aware of the limited value women's political opinions were given at the time.⁵ Additionally, Cassandra's *interest* in politics, government, and the likes may not have been the issue – her education came primarily from female teachers and was fitted for 'appropriate' female knowledge. Lessons from Ann Cooper Cawley, the widow of the head of Oxford College, and enrollment in the all-girls boarding school made up Cassandra's education. In his article "Jane Austen Went to School," Tony Grant writes, "From their experience of school we can gather that Jane and Cassandra had learned [...] to read, take part in plays, learn some French and learn the piano... [but] these were things that were all available at home anyway."⁶ Austen's expansive intellect was rather a product of her own investigation into her father's library than a result of fine teachings. This being said, corresponding with her sister about familial, emotional, and physical matters may have been more respectful to her less educated sister than delving into topics Cassandra would find incomprehensible. But what rings truer than any of these compensative remarks is that Austen was privy to the role letters played in feminine sociality of the era. As Vivian Jones notes in her introduction to

⁵ Halperin, John. *The Life of Jane Austen*. Baltimore, MD: Johns Hopkins UP, 1996. Print.

⁶ Grant, Tony. "Jane Austen Went to School." *Jane Austen's World*. Wordpress.com, 20 Sept. 2010. Web. 24 Nov. 2012.

Austen's letters, they were a "transcript [...] not only of her individual mind, but of the demands, pleasures, and frustrations of a way of life which she shared with other women in her social position."⁷

According to Jones' analysis and the trends apparent in Austen's own collection, writing letters was a habit that shaped female society. For Austen as an author, letters would have been the vessel through which her thoughts could take shape and (because of the symbiotic relationship of letter correspondence) receive critique or review. But simply as a woman of the late eighteenth century, letter writing would have been a method for feminine relation. As Jones puts it, letters perpetuated women's "addiction" to gossip, and Austen makes no small contribution to the rumor mill. She writes to Cassandra, "Mr. Richard Harvey is going to be married; but as it is a great secret, & and only known to half the Neighbourhood, you must not mention it."⁸ Austen's feigned secrecy is assumedly for humor's sake, but it also suggests that numerous letters much like hers have already circulated, rendering the "confidentiality" of her information obsolete.

But this gossip included more than just the current happenings. Austen's novels demonstrate how class divisions sanctioned English society in the late eighteenth and early nineteenth centuries, and what this gossip also exemplifies is the ways in which women of the same or relatively similar classes considered each other economically.

⁷ Austen, Jane, and Vivien Jones. Introduction. *Selected Letters*. Oxford: Oxford UP, 2009. Print.

⁸ Letter #5, Page 8

What Austen, as an unmarried woman of no great fortune, finds acceptable or unacceptable about married life exposes the kind of economic security a woman of her class could obtain at the time through marriage. She writes, “Earle & his wife live in the most private manner imaginable at Portsmouth, without keeping a servant of any kind.–What a prodigious innate love of virtue she must have, to marry under such circumstances!”⁹ Note that class, as defined by relative location to society and possession of servants, colors Austen’s opinion of marriage – what should ideally only be a matter of love. Conversely, she includes the expected lifestyle of a woman on her own: “Miss Lodge has only 800£ of her own, & it is not supposed that her Father can give her much, therefore the good offices of the Neighborhood will be highly acceptable.”¹⁰ Much like Miss Bates in *Emma*, this Miss Lodge depends upon her neighbors’ charity to maintain a living. Imaginably, this would be a pitiable economic status for a woman, especially one who’s unmarried, and that Austen feels compelled to write to her sister about it may reveal some anxiety about her own future.

But aside from topic, even the physical sending of letters themselves required an economic awareness – Austen often writes upside down, in between lines, and scrunched into blank corners to try and minimize the amount of paper (and therefore, the cost of postage) she requires.¹¹ This exchange of letters as well – the time it took to respond, who was the original writer and who was the respondent – created a power

⁹ Letter #10, Page 18

¹⁰ Letter #14, Page 27

¹¹ Although this may seem a personal quirk relative to Jane herself, Cassandra employs the same tactics in the letters following Austen’s death.

dynamic. The receiver of each letter must reciprocate to the sender, even if there was “nothing of importance” (as Jane often said of her own letters) to say – instilling superiority in the former. Where women could not gain physical or monetary dominance over men,¹² they could at least gain some power (albeit temporarily) between themselves. In one of her earlier letters, Austen says to her sister, “I expected to have heard from you this morning, but no letter is come [...] I don’t think anybody should deserve your letters so much as I do.”¹³ Austen invokes this power struggle by scolding Cassandra for returning word to their brother, James, before responding to herself.

But perhaps the most cardinal female attribute common to Austen’s correspondence with her sister is a keen awareness of appearance. Discussion of bonnets, petticoats, ribbons and the likes decorate her collection of letters, and historical records of the era (namely, portraits) affirm that she was only utilizing a prolific vehicle for female interaction – fashion. Austen dedicates entire paragraphs to discussing the importance of appearance. Even regarding pivotal life choices, she considers presentation a deciding factor. For example, she writes to Cassandra about bearing children:

Mary does not manage matters in such a way as to make me want to lay in myself. She is not tidy enough in her appearance; she has no dressing gown to sit

¹² As Austen sarcastically exemplifies in her mention of hunting as an exclusively male sport: “They say that there are a prodigious number of birds hereabouts this year, so that perhaps *I* may kill a few (Letter #4, Page 7)

¹³ Letter #12, Page 21

up in; her curtains are all too thin, and things are not in that comfort and style about her which are necessary to make such a situation an enviable one. Elizabeth was really a pretty object with her nice clean cap put on so tidily and her dress so uniformly white and orderly.¹⁴

That Austen includes such analysis as this in her letters – something she has ruminated on, not simply a comment made in the moment of observing – imputes profuse significance to the topic. The issue of whether things are or “are not in that comfort or style” becomes a point of reference around which Austen bases her opinions. And that she speaks so pivotally about the *enviable* quality – or lack thereof – in Mary’s appearance suggests that the judgments women made about actions or people were directly linked to the manner in which said actions were perceived. In other words, Jane here speaks of the appearance of childbearing as a reflection of what the experience must be like. Whether Cassandra agreed or disagreed about Austen’s views on fashion or appearance – especially in terms of how Austen presented said views in her letters – may have been a point of either great kinship or great trial.

Regarding subject, Austen’s correspondence is exemplary of feminine sociality. The “little matters” for which Austen would later be criticized then adhered to the terms of a kind of female-to-female communication system which in turn acted as a bonding mechanism. But what Austen wrote *about* is certainly not the sole entity to take away from her letters – *how* she wrote is paramount. As in her novels, Austen language in her letters to Cassandra is rich with wit, but this becomes problematic when

¹⁴ Letter #13, Page 24

considering wit's nature. Because it has humorous intent, wit extends beyond the confines of straightforward communication. There is an ulterior meaning behind a witty phrase which requires a level of understanding apart from simply listening to – or in this case, reading – the speaker's words. Because of this function, wit adapts an element of performance. In the case of her novels, Austen's wit does not pose an issue – the very act of reading puts the reader in the position of an audience member, as he/she absorbs the story put forth by the author – but when confronted with the bonding qualities of feminine culture, Austen's wit in her letters to Cassandra works in opposition to the intimacy of her sororal relationship.

Consider what Terry Castle observes regarding Austen's language in her letters:

From the start the tone is rhetorical, literary (not like a phone call at all) [...] Austen wants more than anything to make her older sister laugh. As in her novels, she uses first lines flirtatiously, like comic bait, to catch Cassandra in webs of mock-heroic invention.¹⁵

This metaphor of Austen's language as *bait* for her sister to *catch* onto is dubious. That Austen has a desired goal or ulterior motive in the way she speaks to her sister diminishes her honesty. If she retains a literary tone even in the most informal of situations, the reader of her letter inhabits the same role as the reader of her novel: the audience.

Despite the numerous aspects of Austen's correspondence which are in accordance with the feminine sociality of letter writing, her wit impedes her ability to

¹⁵ Castle, Terry. "Sister-Sister." *London Review of Books*. London, 1995. Print.

maintain unadulterated confidence with her sister or her surrounding society. She writes, "I do not want people to be very agreeable, as it saves me the trouble of liking them a great deal."¹⁶ Behind the guise of humor rests a firm separation between Austen and the said *people* – that she describes liking them as a *trouble* suggests a rift between her interacting with individuals and actually enjoying their company. The abstract term *people* signifies an *us* versus *them* dichotomy – one that appears to be impenetrable. Now, if Austen's wit only created this barrier with strangers as in the previous example, her sororal intimacy with Cassandra may not be shaken, however, Austen extends the metaphor to include her and Cassandra's exchange. At the end of a letter, she writes to her sister, "You deserve a longer letter than this; but it is my unhappy fate seldom to treat people so well as they deserve."¹⁷ The recurrence of the term *people* here creates unrest – Austen begins the sentence by addressing her sister with the familiar second person *you*, but by her succeeding diversion to the term *people* where she otherwise could have repeated the familiar pronoun, she equates Cassandra with this outside group. Thus, the *us* versus *them* dichotomy transgresses into something more like *Austen versus all others*.

¹⁶ Letter #15, Page 29

¹⁷ Letter #15, Page 31

Of course, because Cassandra was known to the Austen family as Jane's closest confidant and the recipient of hundreds of her letters,¹⁸ this dichotomy appears tenuous. However Austen's wit – and consequential state of performance – remains throughout her letters. Therefore, the residual effect of even briefly placing Cassandra behind the barrier of her performance is a lingering inhibition in Austen's *absolute* candidness. Beginning early on in her correspondence with Cassandra and continuing for many years, Austen forgoes complete explanation of the subject she has broached and, instead of finalizing her report (whether it be a recounted conversation, explanation of events or simply a description of a new dress), she repeats the phrase "I shall leave you to guess."¹⁹ Such a phrase, especially when used repetitively, calls into question Cassandra's awareness of Austen's wit. Whether Austen neglects the conclusion of her narrative because she trusts her sister's ability to finish it herself (assumedly due to knowledge unique to their confidence in each other) or because she prefers to remain a mystery is unclear.

Indeed, Austen seems to take pride in that which is beyond Cassandra's understanding. On the topic of a new article of clothing, she writes, "I flatter myself however that you can understand very little of it, from this description – . Heaven forbid that I should ever offer such encouragements to Explanations, as to give a clear

¹⁸ "Though Austen wrote from time to time to other members of the large Austen clan [...] Cassandra was the person around whom her life revolved, and she wrote regularly to her whenever they were separated." -Castle

¹⁹ Letter #9, Page 14

one on any occasion myself.”²⁰ The words *ever* and *any* in this excerpt are telling. These superlative terms not only negate the possibility of Cassandra discovering the detailed corners of her sister’s psyche, but of *anyone* having such a privilege – thus re-implementing the *Austen versus the world* dynamic.

Even when Austen relates a secret to Cassandra, her honesty is qualified by this barrier. Upon relating a bit of confidential information, she writes, “I need scarcely beg you to keep all this to yourself, lest it should get round by Anna’s means.”²¹ Assuming the Austen sisters had as close a connection as their frequent correspondence would suggest – and according to the feminine bond associated with it – Cassandra should inherently take this promise of secrecy into account, unless otherwise noted. But the fact that Austen feels compelled to state the secrecy required from her sister upon receiving the information implies otherwise.

The relationship between performer and audience may account for this discrepancy. Austen’s frequent use of and referral to her own wit,²² in addition to its unadulterated proliferation in her novels, is perhaps the preeminent aspect of her life. Looking to the ample criticism of her family, the society around her, and even of herself found in her letters and novels alike, wit creates a lens through which she reports on the

²⁰ Letter #20, Page 42-43

²¹ Letter #52, Page 126

²² For example, “I am not surprised my dear Cassandra, that you did not find my last Letter very full of Matter, & I wish this may not have the same deficiency;--but we are doing nothing ourselves to write about, & I am therefore quite dependant upon the Communications of our friends, or my own Wit” (Letter #64, Page 162).

world. It is not a case by case occurrence, but rather a universal and pivotal aspect of her expression. When taking into account the implications of wit – specifically, its inherent transformation of the wit provider into a performer – the fact that it takes such precedence in Austen’s life creates a kind of impenetrable barrier between herself and her audience. And whether that audience be readers of her novels whom she’s never met, or her dearest relative and friend, the obstacle remains.

In order to trace the origin of her wit, a fundamental aspect of it comes into focus: irony. Austen’s prolific use of irony in her novels potentially takes root in her regular correspondence, as antithesis and litotes pepper the pages of her letters to Cassandra. She uses phrases such as “I hope you had not a disagreeable evening” in order to express her optimism for Cassandra’s welfare.²³ When relating the singular negative quality in an otherwise positive letter from her sister, she writes, “it gives me nothing to be sorry for but Mary’s cold.”²⁴ Perhaps the most comparable instance of Austen’s use of antithesis in her personal narrative to her novels is when she says of a new acquaintance, “I will not pretend in one meeting to *dislike* him [...] but I can honestly assure her that I saw nothing in him to admire.”²⁵ In context, and when compared to instances of flagrant wit, these moments of antithesis appear to express genuine feelings. For example, it hardly seems logical to interpret Austen’s wish that

²³ Letter #52, Page 128

²⁴ Letter #52, Page 127

²⁵ Letter #53, Page 129

her sister is in good health as ironic. However, the duplicitous quality of wit begins to intrude when Austen remarks on the dearth of information in her letters, and this function of antithesis as a vehicle for authenticity is reversed.

Austen insistently mentions her awareness that her letters are subjectless. The critics²⁶ who disparage Austen for her neglect of historical, political comment or otherwise, seem to graze over the multitudinous moments within her letters in which Austen criticizes herself for the very same issue. She herself utilizes the term “little matters,” and consistently longs for richer substance to her correspondence. But the frequency with which she raises this topic²⁷ subjugates the readers’ certainty of her candor. The redundant manner with which Austen reminds her sister that she has “nothing to say” suggests an invitation for Cassandra to oppose her. Had Austen truly no subject for her letters, they would cease to exist, and certainly Cassandra would have no reason to respond in any way. But that the sisters’ correspondence was so prolific and verbose implies the antithesis of Jane’s proposal. Therefore, Austen creates an opposing dichotomy from the one previously elucidated – her seemingly genuine insistence of meaninglessness in her letters is not self-discrediting, but rather a prompt for her sister to rebut, and thus constantly confirm the merit of their continued correspondence.

²⁶ Such as R. W. Chapman and H.W. Garrod

²⁷ It creates either the opening or closing of nearly every letter Austen sends her sister.

Consider some examples of Austen's proclaimed lack of subject: she writes, "I am just in the hateful predicament of being obliged to write what I know will somehow or other be of no use."²⁸ This diction of *obligation* attempts to dissolve Austen of the blame of writing without purpose. Not only does she attest to having *no use*, but she describes it as something inflicted upon her, as if being coerced. Other times, Austen seems resigned to her inability to communicate importance, saying, "Where shall I begin? Which of all my important nothings shall I tell you first?"²⁹ Now, her information is not only prolific – the word *all* implying her need only to choose among many bits of information – but unwaveringly under her possession – "*my* important nothings." This stark contrast between the penance-like task of the previous example calls into question Austen's candidness. Is it truly a struggle to write with no subject, or is it a commonplace task for her? Even in the best of situations, Austen's satisfaction with her letters never seems concrete: she writes, "There, I flatter myself I have constructed you a Smartish Letter, considering my want of Materials."³⁰ That Austen must include the qualifying *-ish* suffix of *smart* and attest that she is *flattering* herself heighten her already abundant efforts to undermine her letters' significance. Even the capitalization of *Matters* suggests they are a factor so significant to Austen that she must personify them – making the "importance" she neglects much grander than it truly is.

²⁸ Letter #61, Page 153

²⁹ Letter #52, Page 125

³⁰ Letter #50, Page 121

And how can Cassandra possibly respond to this unfathomable insecurity in her sister? Austen appears to have structured her self-disparagement with a desired effect: confirmation. It is unlikely that, if Austen was truly as uncomfortable and insecure with her dearth of subject as her self-criticism suggests, she would bring it up and harp upon it with every available opportunity as she does. Therefore, concluding rather that Austen has an ulterior motive to her refrain-like self-affronts, the question of her candidness with Cassandra comes back into question. Albeit not maliciously, Austen does appear to be manipulating her sister through this desired reaction. Much like her repeated phrase "I shall leave you to guess," Austen's less than complete honesty reflects the broader relationship between the two women – not as sisters, but as performer and audience.

Whether or not Cassandra is aware, Austen seems to have an acute awareness of her state of performance, and likewise, the existence of her audience. She compels Cassandra to reciprocate and confirm her validity as a letter writer (and perhaps, through extension, as a writer in general), however, she takes care to ensure that her audience consistently returns as well. Were Austen without reader, her letters would be nothing but her own thoughts taken down on paper. She depends upon the steadfastness of her sister as an audience in order for her letters to function, and she rarely neglects to provide her with flattery and sensitivity. "You are very amiable & very clever to write such long Letters" she says to Cassandra, "every page of yours has

more lines than this, & every line more words than the average of mine. I am quite ashamed – but you have certainly more little events than we have.”³¹ She employs a language of surplus – words such as *more*, and *every* work to depict a grandiose picture of her sister’s work. And Austen certifies her assertion with modifiers, saying Cassandra *certainly* has more to speak of, and that she is not just a bit ashamed, but *quite*. These are no uncalculated terms. Austen speech creates a very clear depiction of Cassandra’s superiority over herself – as if by flattery she can guarantee a response from her sister. However, this flattery comes alongside a power struggle. Austen cannot praise her sister too convincingly, else she might lose her audience:

I can return the compliment by thanking you for the unexpected pleasure of your Letter yesterday, & as I like unexpected pleasure, it made me very happy; And indeed, You need not apologise for your Letter in any respect, for it is all very fine, but not *too* fine I hope to be written again, or something like it.³²

Austen frequently commends and undermines both her own talents and those of her sister. But these seeming contradictions are not erratic – what Austen exemplifies by statements such as above is the fine balance between compliment and critique that sustains the successful letter writing exchange.

As mentioned earlier, there exists a give and take between the writer and the respondent, which places obligation in the receiver of every letter. What Austen exemplifies here is that this interchange of power forms a trust between the writer and reader of the letter. Cassandra’s regular affirmative sentiments towards Jane’s reports

³¹ Letter #53, Page 131

³² Letter #71, Page 182

provide reason for Jane to continue writing, and Jane's gratefulness and approval of her sister's responses continue this cycle. When this trust is broken, Austen does not fail to mention her frustration. Early on in their correspondence, Austen writes to Cassandra, "You have written I am sure, tho' I have received no letter from you since your leaving London; --the Post, & not yourself must have been unpunctual."³³ Austen places no explicit blame on her sister, however – in accordance with the underlying antithesis Austen has previously employed – the superlatives *sure* and *must* overemphasize Cassandra's innocence, and in turn act as an implied scolding.

These concepts of personal relation and feminine bonding through exchanges of trust, and exclusion dictated by the relationship between performer and audience remain at odds with each other across the expanse of Austen's correspondence with her sister. But when considering her novels, this contention does not necessarily apply. The author clearly places great merit in the exchange of letters. That the great majority of her works adopt an epistolary structure suggests not only the ability of letters to deliver information, but their pertinence to the formation of a narrative. Most prominently, letters acts as plot devices: Colonel Brandon rides swiftly into the distance with no explanation whatsoever upon reading a letter, Elizabeth Bennett learns that her sister Lydia has illicitly eloped with Mr. Wickham, and Emma discovers that Mr. Elton was in love with *her* all the while she was trying to match him with Harriet, each by means of a

³³ Letter #24, Page 52

letter. They are Austen's vehicle to create reaction amongst her characters by simply recounting the original action – the novelistic equivalent of the theatre's offstage action. And for an author whose primary concern is the social exchange *created* by events rather than the events themselves³⁴, this attribute of letters comes as quite a convenience. But perhaps most significantly, letters provide the possibility for redemption. Frequently, characters that have (or supposedly have) done wrong are able to explain and possibly ameliorate their transgressions through the use of letters. Darcy does so in *Pride and Prejudice*, as he explains to Elizabeth exactly what Wickham has wrongly accused him of, and Frederick Wentworth reveals to Anne the sentiments he has previously been elusive about in *Persuasion*, thus instigating the novel's happy ending. In most cases, these redemptive letters cause a drastic change in the character's point of view who is reading them. For example, were it not for Darcy's letter to Elizabeth, she might still only think him a prideful, haughty man at the close of the novel.

Indeed, Austen's use of letters as a means of confession tends to bring about a positive reaction in the readers because said confession alters their view of the writer for the better. But this redemptive quality assumes one pivotal detail: that the letter's writer speaks genuinely and candidly. When the letter contains deception, this dynamic alters significantly. Consider when, in *Sense and Sensibility*, the letter Willoughby writes to Marianne returning her coveted lock of hair and denouncing his feelings for her

³⁴ When compared to other genres of literature (i.e. mystery or adventure), features of Austen's novels such as free indirect discourse reveal that the story is not heavily plot based, but rather on analysis of the social interaction and emotional effects resulting from minimal plot points.

proves to be disingenuous by the close of the novel. Because Elinor keeps his *true* confession³⁵ confidential, Marianne's opinion of Willoughby remains as it was upon his slighting of her, and consequentially creates a means for her to marry Colonel Brandon.

But how does this kind of reversion from candidness compare to the wit of Austen's letters? Although not for humorous effect, Willoughby employs many of the same techniques as Austen herself – namely, antithesis. He says, "I am much concerned to find there was any thing in my behavior last night that did not meet your approbation [...] I am quite at a loss to discover in what point I could be so unfortunate as to offend you."³⁶ Just as in Austen's letters to Cassandra, the superlatives Willoughby uses here overemphasize his innocence. Words such as *any*, *quite*, and *so* build up such a persona of guiltlessness on Willoughby's part as to characterize him as perfection. But of course, once the reader discovers the many moral crimes he has committed, these words become antithetical to his true conduct.

Although Willoughby does exhibit similar qualities in this letter as in Austen's personal letters, the grammatical similarity does not dictate a correlation of intent between character and author. Austen's wit – and subsequent element of performance – is what separates her from her reader, but Willoughby's letter only functions grammatically in this same manner; it does not encapsulate the equivalent meaning. Taking into account the social implications of feminine sociality in Austen's

³⁵ In which he speaks with Elinor in person and admits to lying in his letter.

³⁶ Austen, Jane, and Laura Engel. *Sense and Sensibility*. New York: Barnes & Noble Classics, 2004. Print.

correspondence with her sister and the humorous rationale behind her incomplete candidness, that Austen's wit and Willoughby's insincerity correlate is coincidental.

What is more significant to note from Willoughby's letter is that it reflects Austen's predetermination of him as the story's antagonist. As previously delineated, letters in Austen's novels often serve to redeem or condemn the characters writing them. In Willoughby's case, that his duplicitous letter remains the last correspondence he has with Marianne eliminates his opportunity to gain forgiveness. The letter serves a fundamental purpose to the novel – it contains anything but *Little Matters*.

Therefore, when returning to this extended rumination on the function of Austen's personal letters, the exceedingly purposeful quality of the letters in her novels draws great contrast. Austen's pervading wit, although problematic to the sororal intimacy of her correspondence with Cassandra, attempts amends her personal letters' "subjectlessness" – whether it be legitimate or simply a fabricated term to further Austen's performance – through humor. It is logical that the letters in her novels, because they can be manipulated according to Austen's own satisfaction, do not need to solve the complication she consistently combats in her own letters of being entertaining. Austen may sacrifice complete candidness with her sister in utilizing her wit as a performance; however, by doing so she remains recognizable even to contemporary readers of her novels, who have come to understand her writing as a witty, ironic representation of life as she saw it.

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