

## CHAPTER I

*Letters*

It's hard to imagine, immersed as we are in a boundless sea of multimedia messaging (texts, emails, calls on mobile phones and landlines, regular postal delivery and various overnight delivery services, newspapers, their digital analogues and other online news sites, broadcast television, seasons of television on DVD or Blu-Ray or streamed via the Internet, paper books and digital books that we read on handheld devices, social media from Twitter to Snapchat), the profound importance, the all-purpose utility, the sheer omnipresence for Austen and her contemporaries of the ordinary letter. Both in Austen's fiction and in her life, you get the sense that letters were often nearly everything, not least because a woman of modest means was unlikely to have independent control over her movements. Muddy roads, in the absence of a horse or carriage, could easily stop a genteel but income-constrained lady from walking even a few miles down the road to see a friend or relative, and unmarried adult women were often dispersed to relatives' establishments to live, separated from their closest female companions for long spells and sometimes even for whole lifetimes: letters offered the only way of staying close to loved ones outside the house.

In *Emma*, the impoverished Jane Fairfax, destined to earn her living as a governess, insists on walking to the post office even in the rain to see if there are any letters waiting for her. Emma's prosperous brother-in-law, John Knightley, tells the young woman that when she has lived to his age, she "will begin to think letters are never worth going through the rain for" (*E* II.16, 316), but Jane points out that once she is working as a governess, it is impossible that she will be "situated [as he is], in the midst of every dearest connection" (*E* II.16, 317). She does not expect, in other words, "that simply growing older should make me indifferent about letters": "You have every body dearest to you always at hand, I, probably, never shall again," she concludes forcefully; "and therefore till I have outlived all my affections, a post-office, I think, must always have power to draw me out, in worse weather than to-day" (*E* II.16, 317).

The letters of Austen's own that survive, out of a much larger number written in the novelist's lifetime, are not especially emotionally forthcoming. That may have less to do with Austen's temperament and relationships than with the ideas about privacy and decorum that governed her sister Cassandra's choice of which letters to keep and which to destroy after the writer's death. There are about a hundred and sixty of Austen's letters in the standard edition of her correspondence. Austen's niece Caroline speculated that Jane's letters to Cassandra (the two sisters were regularly separated in adulthood, most often when one or the other sister went for an extended stay in a married brother's household) "were, I dare say, open and confidential—My Aunt looked them over and burnt the greater part, (as she told me), 2 or 3 years before her own death—She left, or *gave* some as legacies to the Nieces—but of those that *I* have seen, several had portions cut out" (*MJA* 174).

The tone of the letters we do have is gossipy, affectionate, satirical and rarely deep, reflecting often on the practice of letter-writing itself. In one early letter to Cassandra, Austen observes: "I have now attained the true art of letter-writing, which we are always told, is to express on paper exactly what one would say to the same person by word of mouth; I have been talking to you almost as fast as I could the whole of this letter" (*JAL* 71). This language conveys both a joke about a silly piece of conventional wisdom (the true art of letter-writing surely extends further than mimicking face-to-face speech) and a deeper insight about the fact that writing a letter to someone one cares about can produce a feeling of closeness or intimacy. There is a good deal of comic throat-clearing around the question of how to write a decently long letter when you have nothing much to report, and questions of equity and reciprocity in letter-length also loom large: to her dear friend Martha Lloyd, in response to a "long Letter," which she claims was "valued as it ought" (*JAL* 216), Austen writes a lengthy response that concludes, "Now I think I may in Quantity have deserved your Letter. My ideas of Justice in Epistolary Matters are you know very strict" (*JAL* 217).

Roads were extended and improved throughout the eighteenth century in England, and river navigation acts and new canals improved the efficiency of water transport; stagecoaches made it easier not just for people but also for their letters and packages to be transported between different parts of the country, and as the British empire expanded overseas, so did incentives to find ways of allowing family members and business associates separated by great distances to correspond without untoward delays.<sup>1</sup> But though postal service became much faster, it wouldn't become cheap in

Britain until the introduction of a national penny post in 1840. In Austen's time, postage was still expensive enough that if you could get someone to carry your letter to its destination as a favor, you would very likely do so. The cost of postage, which was paid by the recipient rather than the sender, could also be avoided by using a so-called frank, allowed to members of Parliament for free postage; though it was illegal to share these, they were widely distributed to friends and relatives.

Allusions to the material details of transmission often form part of letters both real and fictional: "I had sent off my Letter yesterday before Yours came, which I was sorry for," writes Austen; "but as Eliza has been so good as to get me a frank, your questions shall be answered without much further expense to you" (*JAL* 193). This sort of context will help the reader of the novels decode allusions that otherwise might pass without notice. In *Persuasion*, when Anne Elliot's sister, writing from the country, says she can make her letter as long as she likes because a neighbor has offered to carry anything she wishes to Anne in Bath (*P* II.6, 178), she is referring to the fact that since the letter isn't traveling by official channels, Anne won't have to pay extra postage, which was then charged per sheet rather than by weight. There is a good deal of joking around this sort of question in Austen's own letters: "It is throwing a Letter away to send it by a visitor, there is never convenient time for reading it—& Visitor can tell most things as well.—I had thought with delight of saving you the postage—but Money is Dirt" (*JAL* 256). Money was not really dirt: both Austen and her characters preferred to save the postage when they could.

Austen wrote with a quill pen whose nib she would periodically have dipped into an inkwell to fill; she used iron gall ink, which could easily be transported as a powder and mixed when needed.<sup>2</sup> Her niece Caroline later recalled that "every note and letter of hers, was finished off *handsomely*—There was an art *then* in folding and sealing—no adhesive envelopes made all easy—some people's letters looked always loose and untidy—but *her* paper was sure to take the right folds, and *her* sealing wax to drop in the proper place—" (*MJA* 171). Writing in those days was sometimes accommodated by way of furniture tailor-made for the purpose: there is a record of Austen's father purchasing in December 1794, probably for his daughter's nineteenth birthday and at a cost of twelve shillings, "a small Mahogany Writing Desk with 1 Long Drawer and Glass Ink Stand Compleat," which seems to be the desk that survives as a family heirloom and is now owned by the British Library (*FR* 89).

Modern editors of eighteenth-century letters will often give information about the physical nature of manuscripts as they encountered them in

libraries and archives. Not all letters are transcribed from originals in the author's own hand; they might be copies made by friends or relations or heavily edited versions, published in an earlier era, of original texts that are now lost. The technical nomenclature (seal, wafer, watermark) may be evocative, but it doesn't necessarily convey the glorious materiality of eighteenth-century letters as their original readers would have experienced them. The size, texture and overall quality of the paper would have told a recipient a good deal about what kind of a letter she was getting, as would the handwriting and the closeness with which the sheet was written. Adopting mourning dress for close family members didn't just involve wearing black clothes, it had an analog for self-presentation in writing: "I have forgotten to take a proper-edged sheet of Paper," writes Austen in a letter composed just after her uncle's death, alluding to the practice of using paper with a black border in a mourning household (*JAL* 355).

Covering a sheet of paper with writing and then turning it upside down or sideways and writing between the lines ("crossing") was also common, not just because paper was expensive but due to the high cost of postage. In this sense, writing "closely" isn't just a question of manners or decorum (respecting one's correspondent and presenting oneself formally in writing), it actually helps keep down the recipient's postage costs. A long letter might be seen as a gesture of simultaneous generosity and aggression, or at the very least carelessness, just as a letter with relatively few words on the page might not seem to give good value for money: "Your close-written letter makes me quite ashamed of my wide lines," Austen writes (*JAL* 157). In *Emma*, the voluble Miss Bates says of her niece Jane's letter – the letter that Emma resists having to hear read aloud – that she "really must, in justice to Jane, apologise for her writing so short a letter—only two pages you see—hardly two—and in general she fills the whole paper and crosses half" (*E* II.1, 168). Her elderly mother, Miss Bates adds, calls it "chequer-work," a little joke that conveys something of the heart and soul that are poured into these meticulously textured missives.

Jane Fairfax's letters are regularly shared with as many other members of the village as will stop to listen to them, and the communal nature, in this period, of a letter's audience – it is rarely written exclusively for the attention of the person whose name features as addressee – is very striking. *Pride and Prejudice* gives another instance of how much the sharing of letters would have been thought of as a default mode rather than an anomaly. Lydia's letters home from Brighton "were always long expected, and always very short" – these are the letters written to her mother and then shared with the rest of the family – "and from her correspondence with her

sister,” the narrator adds, “there was still less to be learnt—for her letters to Kitty, though rather longer, were much too full of lines under the words to be made public” (*PP* II.19, 264). This may not refer to underlining for emphasis, although Austen herself does sometimes underline for that reason in her own letters, but rather to a simple code in which the letter-writer would underline certain letters and words to pick out a “secret” message, one safeguard for privacy in a world where letters were usually shared among family members once they had been read by their initial addressee.

Both gender and social class can be thought of as having pronounced effects on the style of a letter and the forms it might take, though the generalizations Austen’s characters make about how people write letters are usually more humorous than apt. In *Northanger Abbey*, when Henry Tilney claims (it is a form of flirtation) “that the usual style of letter-writing among women is faultless, except in three particulars” (*NA* I.3, 20), Catherine falls for the conversational lure. She asks what those particulars are, and is told by Henry: “A general deficiency of subject, a total inattention to stops, and a very frequent ignorance of grammar.” Women are supposed to write longer and fuller but also more trivial letters than men because their male counterparts are living busier lives in the world and accordingly have less time and inclination to write copiously, but when Mary Crawford asserts, in *Mansfield Park*, that brothers’ letters are overly laconic, the often reticent Fanny Price registers a strong dissent: when brothers are “at a distance from all their family,” she insists, “they can write long letters” (*MP* I.6, 70). Fanny’s own brother William is a midshipman serving overseas in the Navy, so that the two siblings’ correspondence has served for many years as their sole means of retaining intimacy, just as it did for Austen herself and the two brothers of hers who went into the navy. In *Emma*, farmer Robert Martin proposes marriage to Harriet Smith by letter; Emma doesn’t want Harriet to marry Robert Martin (she is sure Harriet can do better), but she is taken aback when Harriet shows her the letter. It is such a very good letter – manly, open, honest, plainspoken – that she disingenuously suggests to Harriet that his sisters must have helped him write it (*E* I.7, 53).

We need not think about Austen’s time as being at great historical distance from our own in order to understand the ways that a letter may sometimes have greater communicative power than speech. Many of us find that we are able to be more honest, to reveal vulnerabilities and share our most private concerns, more easily in writing than in face-to-face conversation, with a safety net coming into being when physical presence

is taken altogether out of the question. The conclusion of *Persuasion* provides a lovely instance of writing allowing a person to speak more directly and openly even than speech itself. Captain Wentworth proposes to Anne Elliot by way of a letter written desperately, passionately while in her immediate physical presence and during a conversation she is having with another man about differences in how men and women experience love and the passage of time. (I will have more to say about this scene in Chapter 3, “Revision.”)

Of course, we also sometimes inappropriately fall back on writing rather than speech because we are afraid of how the other person will respond to what we wish to convey, and Austen is extremely sensitive to the nuances of such tensions. Edmund Bertram, quite unsure as to whether or not Mary Crawford will accept his proposal of marriage, writes in a letter to Fanny Price that in preference either to visiting Mary in London where she is now staying (her frivolous surroundings there don’t favor serious Edmund’s solemn suit) or to waiting to propose in person when she comes back to the country in the summer,

I believe I shall write to her. I have nearly determined on explaining myself by letter. To be at an early certainty is a material object. My present state is miserably irksome. Considering every thing, I think a letter will be decidedly the best method of explanation. I shall be able to write much that I could not say, and shall be giving her time for reflection before she resolves on her answer, and I am less afraid of the result of reflection than of an immediate hasty impulse; I think I am. (*MP* III.13, 490)

But Austen has been sly in creating this letter. We discern strong elements of indecision and even of rationalization in Edmund’s words; each assertion, even as it is expressed, exposes itself as wishful thinking and opens up a keen awareness for the reader of the possibility that the opposite is true. When Edmund says, after another swathe of agonizing oscillation back and forth, “I think I shall certainly write” (*MP* III.13, 491), we can hear the oxymoron in the wording (the uncertainty of “think” unsuccessfully countered by the false sureness of “certainty”) even more strongly than we did in that opening (“nearly determined”).

Here is another, more elaborate scene in which Austen explores the relationship between convention and feeling in letter-writing. Look at the progression that takes place in this passage from *Mansfield Park*:

Every body at all addicted to letter writing, without having much to say, which will include a large proportion of the female world at least, must feel with Lady Bertram, that she was out of luck in having such a capital piece of

Mansfield news, as the certainty of the Grants going to Bath, occur at a time when she could make no advantage of it, and will admit that it must have been very mortifying to her to see it fall to the share of her thankless son, and treated as concisely as possible at the end of a long letter, instead of having it to spread over the largest part of a page of her own.—For though Lady Bertram rather shone in the epistolary line, having early in her marriage, from the want of other employment, and the circumstance of Sir Thomas's being in Parliament, got into the way of making and keeping correspondents, and formed for herself a very creditable, common-place, amplifying style, so that a very little matter was enough for her; she could not do entirely without any; she must have something to write about, even to her niece, and being so soon to lose all the benefit of Dr. Grant's gouty symptoms and Mrs. Grant's morning calls, it was very hard upon her to be deprived of one of the last epistolary uses she could put them to. (*MP* III.13, 493)

The term “common-place” here doesn't mean ordinary; it refers to the rhetorical technique of “commonplacing” – offering a moral platitude or apothegm of some kind that is then “amplified” or developed in a formulaic manner. This is why “a very little matter was enough for her”: writing in this mode is less about transmitting information or feelings than about rehearsing platitudes and recapitulating various forms of conventional wisdom, pious or otherwise. Austen's irony here is affectionate rather than ruthless, I would say, with the humor coming gently rather than savagely at Lady Bertram's expense.

The irony turns darker, though, in the sentences that follow. “There was a rich amends, however, preparing for her,” the narrator comments, with Lady Bertram's “hour of good luck” coming when there is “some very alarming intelligence” to “communicate” (*MP* III.13, 493). The oldest Bertram son, Tom, has fallen very ill at his friends' house, but even such a high-quality piece of news goes through the sausage-making machine of Lady Bertram's amplifying style, and Austen has fun producing a long passage of pastiche or parody of a style that is superficial, formal, virtually without feeling. “Fanny's feelings on the occasion were indeed considerably more warm and genuine than her aunt's style of writing,” the narrator continues (*MP* III.13, 495), but in the meantime Lady Bertram continues to pass on her other son's accounts of Tom's illness to Fanny

in the same diffuse style, and the same medley of trusts, hopes, and fears, all following and producing each other at hap-hazard. It was a sort of playing at being frightened. The sufferings which Lady Bertram did not see, had little power over her fancy; and she wrote very comfortably about agitation and anxiety, and poor invalids, till Tom was actually conveyed to Mansfield, and her own eyes had beheld his altered appearance. Then, a letter which she had



been previously preparing for Fanny, was finished in a different style, in the language of real feeling and alarm; then, she wrote as she might have spoken. “He is just come, my dear Fanny, and is taken up stairs; and I am so shocked to see him, that I do not know what to do. I am sure he has been very ill. Poor Tom, I am quite grieved for him, and very much frightened, and so is Sir Thomas; and how glad I should be, if you were here to comfort me.” (*MP* III.13, 495)

It takes the sharp shock of Tom’s actual appearance to let real feeling break through the shell of Lady Bertram’s manner.

Letters may also reveal things that their authors don’t intend. A good example of this can be found in Mr. Collins’ letters in *Pride and Prejudice*, where Austen allows the letter-writer to condemn himself in his own words for comic effect. Mr. Bennet’s heartless amusement at Mr. Collins’ expense models the reader’s own distaste: “There is a mixture of servility and self-importance in his letter,” he comments to Elizabeth, “which promises well” (*PP* I.13, 71). Another correspondent seen to reveal her true self in her letters is Lucy Steele in *Sense and Sensibility*. Lucy’s letters also let Austen show us the potential for a letter that purports to be written to one person to be really designed to reach a different reader’s eyes. News has broken of Lucy’s secret longtime engagement to Edward Ferrars, with whom Elinor Dashwood is in love, and Lucy writes a distinctly passive-aggressive letter to Elinor in which she exults over her in the guise of thanking her for standing by Lucy in the wake of the unpopular revelation. Lucy is also angling, though, for assistance (financial or otherwise) from Elinor’s host, Mrs. Jennings, and when Elinor finishes reading the letter, “she performed what she concluded to be its writer’s real design, by placing it in the hands of Mrs. Jennings, who read it aloud with many comments of satisfaction or praise” (*SS* III.2, 315).

This scene also demonstrates the ways in which individual readers’ responses to a given letter tell us a great deal about them. Mrs. Jennings’ noncritical and approving comments on Lucy’s manipulative letter reveal a significant disparity of taste and judgment between Elinor and herself, with Elinor’s own greater awareness of the letter’s falseness and hidden agendas strongly framing the letter for the reader. The shameless or brazen quality of Lucy’s letter-writing voice may come through most clearly in the brief and explicit letter she sends Edward at the end of the novel, after she has married his brother instead. It is full of sentimental clichés (“I scorn to accept a hand while the heart was another’s”) and relies on a slangy shorthand (“Sincerely wish you happy in your choice”) that is in marked contrast to the finer decorum of the Dashwood sisters’ epistolary manner



(SS III.13, 413). Edward comments wryly to Elinor that “this is the only letter I ever received from her, of which the substance made me any amends for the defect of the style” (SS III.13, 414).

Another example of the ways that letter-writing can be used instrumentally to draw out and develop observations about character comes in a well-known scene near the opening of *Pride and Prejudice*. Elizabeth Bennet is staying at Netherfield Park while her sister is ill, and she and the other members of the party spend the evening together in the drawing room pursuing their own separate activities. Mr. Darcy is writing a letter to his sister, and Miss Bingley, who wishes he would pay more attention to her, is “watching the progress of his letter, and repeatedly calling off his attention by messages to his sister” (PP I.10, 51). Elizabeth watches their interactions with amusement (the third-person narrative voice here is strongly colored by Elizabeth’s perspective and point of view): “The perpetual commendations of the lady either on his hand-writing, or on the evenness of his lines, or on the length of his letter, with the perfect unconcern with which her praises were received, formed a curious dialogue, and was exactly in unison with her opinion of each” (PP I.10, 51).

Now that they are talking about letters, their host, Mr. Bingley, makes this assertion about his own style of writing. His sister has claimed that he “writes in the most careless way imaginable. He leaves out half his words, and blots the rest” (PP I.10, 52), but he puts a different spin on the matter: “My ideas flow so rapidly that I have not time to express them,” he says, “—by which means my letters sometimes convey no ideas at all to my correspondents” (PP I.10, 52). Elizabeth claims to find Bingley’s humility disarming, but Darcy offers a counter-suggestion that the appearance of humility can often conceal an indirect boast: “you are really proud of your defects in writing,” he tells his friend, “because you consider them as proceeding from a rapidity of thought and carelessness of execution, which if not estimable, you think at least highly interesting” (PP I.10, 53). He goes on to suggest that Bingley overrates the “power of doing any thing with quickness,” citing as evidence his friend’s own comment that if he ever decides to leave Netherfield he will be gone in five minutes, which Darcy says is not the “sort of panegyric, of compliment” that Bingley intends. Darcy adds, moreover, that he is not convinced Bingley would leave so quickly if a friend asked him to stay, and the yielding quality (based on trust and affection) that they all discern in Bingley will become an important plot point when we learn of Bingley’s abrupt departure from Netherfield and, later on, of the part Darcy played in convincing his friend to go. All this characterization of the differences between the two

friends, up to and including the foreshadowing of events to come, is occasioned by the initial scene of letter-writing.

Letters are not just crude instruments of character; there are other ways in which they transmit meanings to a perceptive reader that may not have been fully legible even to the letter-writer him- or herself. A series of letters can become an especially powerful lens for understanding a person's feelings as they may have changed over time. When Elizabeth revisits the question of what effect disappointment in the wake of Bingley's abrupt departure has had on her sister, she rereads the letters Jane has written her over the past months:

They contained no actual complaint, nor was there any revival of past occurrences, or any communication of present suffering. But in all, and in almost every line of each, there was a want of that cheerfulness which had been used to characterize her style, and which, proceeding from the serenity of a mind at ease with itself, and kindly disposed towards every one, had been scarcely ever clouded. Elizabeth noticed every sentence conveying the idea of uneasiness, with an attention which it had hardly received on the first perusal. (*PP* II.II, 210)

This is an example of how what is not said in a letter may be as significant as the words that do appear on the page.

Here is another example that shows how it may be a formal or superficial aspect of the letter, not its substance as such, that serves as the primary agent of meaning. *Emma's* Mr. Woodhouse is unable to keep to the point, and the modern reader might easily dismiss his comment in this instance as an irrelevancy, but when Mr. Woodhouse says of Frank Churchill's letter to his father and stepmother that "it was an exceeding good, pretty letter, and gave Mr. and Mrs. Weston a great deal of pleasure. I remember it was written from Weymouth, and dated Sept. 28<sup>th</sup>—and began, 'My dear Madam,' but I forget how it went on; and it was signed 'F.C. Weston Churchill.'—I remember that perfectly" (*E* I.II, 103), he is not merely rambling. His daughter Isabella, though she is not a creature of intellectual sharpness, responds, "How very pleasing and proper of him!"—which is to say that the gesture of signing himself with his birth father's name as well as the name of his wealthier adoptive family itself may be the most signal piece of intelligence transmitted, a meaningful gesture of goodwill.

Another important way in which letters transmit meaning concerns not only what they say and don't say but the very fact of correspondence, which in certain circumstances itself becomes an important piece of information. This is partly a question of manners—decorum strongly held in this period