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Jane Austen and Belles Lettres : the rhetorical influence of Hugh Blair in Jane Austen's Fiction

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ABSTRACT

JANE AUSTEN AND *BELLES LETTRES*: THE RHETORICAL INFLUENCE
OF HUGH BLAIR IN
JANE AUSTEN'S FICTION

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This dissertation explores the rhetorical influences of Hugh Blair, minister, rhetorician and member of the 18th- century Scottish Enlightenment, on the fiction of Jane Austen. Specifically, the author argues that Austen used the precepts of belletristic rhetoric as promulgated by Blair as both a narrative device integral to the plots of her novels and as a means of illuminating her fictional characters.

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JANE AUSTEN AND *BELLES LETTRES*: THE RHETORICAL INFLUENCE OF
HUGH BLAIR IN
JANE AUSTEN'S FICTION

BY

MIRIAM ELIZABETH ANTONIA WOLFF
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JMJ

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Miriam Elizabeth Antonia Wolff

Solemnity of the Sacred Heart of Jesus

June 12, 2015

DEDICATION

To Tess, my very own Cassandra

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INTRODUCTION

Jane Austen scholarship suffers neither disinterest nor dearth of willing scholars. Scores of critics and “Janeites” alike have chronicled the influences of authors of fiction on Austen’s novels—a casual perusal of scholarship reveals a veritable panoply of articles and texts that chronicle these literary inspirations. The title of *Pride and Prejudice*, for example, is a direct reference taken from a novel by Frances Burney, and in her personal correspondence, Austen commented on her affinity for the works of Samuel Richardson and Sir Walter Scott, to name but a few. In texts such as Frank Bradbrook’s *Jane Austen and Her Predecessors*, Mary Lascelles’ *Jane Austen and Her Art*, and Jocelyn Harris’ *Jane Austen’s Art of Memory*, these storied influences are well documented.

Less studied, however, are those non-fiction rhetorical sources that Austen, as daughter of a gentleman and clergyman, would have had access to and that influenced Austen’s authorship. That Austen, as a female in late eighteenth-to early nineteenth-century Britain, would not have had access to institutionalized secondary education is clear; the few years both she and her sister Cassandra were sent to a local school did not include the rigorous, classical curriculum boys would have received. Nevertheless, it is also plausible that as an enthusiastic reader, as the sister to brothers who attended Oxford, and as the daughter of a clergyman who tutored students in their home, Austen would have had access to and some familiarity with rhetorical and classical texts.¹

¹ Irene Collins suggests she may have used the same school books as the boys: “In a letter of 1813 to her brother Frank, on convoy duty in the Baltic, there is a suggestion that they had shared the same history lessons” (Collins 42).

One does not need to rely on conjecture, however, to suggest that Austen was indeed influenced by what she read. We can look directly to her fiction and to her correspondence. One author in particular, the Scot Hugh Blair, is directly referenced in Austen's fiction (*Mansfield Park*, *Northanger Abbey* and in an early work, "Catharine, or, The Bower") and serves, for the purposes of this dissertation, as a framework upon which to consider potential rhetorical influences.

Austen's references to Blair are also indirect as well. For example, as Baker notes, Austen alludes to Blair's *Lectures* when her fictional characters debate the role of clergy as in *Northanger Abbey* (Baker 172) or in *Pride and Prejudice* when Darcy demeans the pleasures of dancing with his quip: "...---- Every savage can dance" (Baker 380). This particular reference echoes Blair's *Lecture XXXVIII*, which suggested that "in the savage state...it is well known, that music, song and dance, made their principal entertainment" (*L XXXVIII* 426).

Exploring the rhetorical influences of Hugh Blair on the fiction of Jane Austen, I suggest that Austen used the precepts of belletristic rhetoric as both a device integral to the plot of her novels and as a means of illuminating her characters. Specifically, my research investigates the following:

- ❖ The direct references to the Blair texts (*Sermons*, *Lectures on Rhetoric and Belles Lettres*) as potentially critical and cultural references with which Austen's contemporary audience would have been familiar;
- ❖ The indirect references to Blair's *Lectures* and *Sermons*, which may have shaped Austen's fictional predilections and form; and
- ❖ The extent to which Austen takes Blair's concepts of rhetoric and his instructions on eloquence and taste and how much she incorporates them as devices or tropes

within her texts. In other words, while my earlier example illustrates a borrowing from Blair's texts, I examine to what degree Austen was influenced by Blair's understanding and promulgation of belletristic rhetoric, his advocacy of taste, and eloquence and whether she incorporated these criteria as character traits (both positive and negative) in the novels. Within this field, I explore four subcategories:

- ❖ Rhetoric as indicator or barometer of character
- ❖ Rhetoric as narratological tool to further plot
- ❖ Rhetoric as tool of social hierarchy
- ❖ Rhetoric as deceptive and manipulative

The purpose of this research is not to suggest that Blair's *Lectures on Rhetoric and Belles Lettres* or his *Sermons* were uniquely responsible for or critically complicit in Austen's inimitable skill for fiction. One must proceed cautiously in suggesting definitive sources and influences, and as case in point, Blair himself borrowed heavily from predecessors and contemporaries alike. However, as Jocelyn Harris has demonstrated, understanding the sources of literary inspiration Austen absorbed from the texts she read helps us to understand and interpret her fiction. Therefore, this analysis suggests that even though Austen lacked access to formal, institutional instruction in either classical or belletristic rhetoric, she nonetheless artfully used those belletristic rhetorical techniques advocated by Blair in her fiction—and her knowledge of appropriate form, language and style as well as the consequences of the misuse of rhetoric permeates and ultimately illuminates her fictional discourse.

Before examining the belletristic rhetoric of Hugh Blair, a clarification of terms is crucial. The term "rhetoric" itself is one that has been construed as both an art and a process; in

other words, it has referred to both the ends and the means of discourse. Classical rhetors have defined concepts of rhetoric to include all persuadable discourse, while others have suggested a more limited definition. Cognizant of the myriad of interpretations available under this expansive semantic term, I propose a definition for purposes of this dissertation that defines rhetoric as the oral and written discourse by which individuals (author, speaker) communicate with another (audience), and it includes the appropriate tools—style, language, figures of speech, decorum, manners—with which that communication takes place. This definition is purposefully broad; late eighteenth-/early nineteenth century belletristic rhetoric with which Austen would have been familiar addressed the formal eloquence of ceremonial and persuasive speeches, the evocative language that accompanied the epistle, the subtle semantics of the sermon, and the dictates of decorum in daily discourse.

CHAPTER 1

HUGH BLAIR AND THE RHETORIC OF *BELLES LETTRES*

Jane Austen read extensively and with great pleasure. Her praise and censure (frequently served rather acerbically)¹ of fellow practitioners of the literary craft infused her correspondence. As her brother Henry noted in his Preface, “Her reading was very extensive in history and belles lettres.”² Unfortunately, surviving correspondence does not leave us with the concrete proof of when, where or even how often she read either Blair’s *Sermons* or his *Lectures on Rhetoric and Belles Lettres*. But that she did read them can be inferred.³ She references them directly within her fictional texts and moreover, it can be presumed, anticipated that her readers also would be familiar with the popular tomes written by the Scot clergyman.

At the time when Austen was learning to put ink to paper, the popularity of several Scot rhetoricians, notably George Campbell and Hugh Blair, was in its ascendancy. The eighteenth century was marked by increased interest in reason and rationalism, a science that sought to

¹ In a letter to Cassandra written on January 24, 1809, for example, Austen writes of her “disinclination” for Hannah More’s *Caleb’s Search for A Wife* (*Letters*, 177).

² Preface to *Persuasion* and *Northanger Abbey* by Henry Austen, Dec 13, 1817.

³ Some authors have gone beyond inference. D. D. Devlin, in *Jane Austen and Education*, writes, “We can be sure that she had read Locke’s *Thoughts* and Chesterfield’s *Letters to his Son*; we know that she read Dr. Johnson (‘my dear Dr. Johnson’), Blair’s *Rhetoric* and Sherlock’s sermons, but we can be certain of very little else” (Devlin, 49). No substantiation follows. Golden and Ehninger write that Blair’s “sermons found a warm reception from such competent judges as Jane Austen and Madame de Necker” and cite P. Hume Brown’s *History of Scotland*, Vol. III, (1901 p. 365), as the source, which I have been unable to locate (Golden and Ehninger, “Extrinsic” 22). In *Eighteenth Century British and American Rhetorics and Rhetoricians*, Michael Moran writes that “among his [Blair’s] admirers were Jane Austen, David Hume, and Samuel Johnson” (Moran 22). No substantiation follows. In Elaine Bander’s “Blair’s Rhetoric and the Art of *Persuasion*” she writes that excerpts from “Blair’s *Rhetoric* also formed the greatest part of Vicesimus Knox’s *Elegant Extracts in Prose*, a one-volume anthology published in 1794... [and] [a]t least one of these versions of Blair’s *Rhetoric* must have found its way into the Rectory at Steventon” (Bander 124). In fact, she did own a copy (Appendix C, Cambridge Edition, *Juvenilia*, 352). In “Jane Austen’s Reading: The Chawton Years,” Gillian Dow and Katie Halsey write that Austen “knew . . . the sermons of Hugh Blair, Thomas Sherlock, and Edward Cooper” (Dow and Halsey).

understand the natural world and man's role within it. Parallel to this interest in the empirical sciences was also an interest in philosophy and in classical concepts including the rhetorical theories espoused by Aristotle, Cicero and Quintilian. Members of the Scottish Enlightenment would make their own mark on the tenets of traditional rhetoric, especially in their sanction and criticism of written discourse. As Don Bialostosky and Lawrence Needham argue, classical rhetoric provided the

frame of reference from which to look into language use and figures of speech.... [and because of its flexibility], it had adjusted itself all along to writing and, since the Renaissance at least, had adapted itself to print culture and vernacular reading public.... The death of classical rhetoric did not mean the death of all rhetoric. (Bialostosky and Needham 7)

Concurrent with this interest in rhetorical study and form, several significant socio-economic trends emerged. Notably, these included the exodus from rural to urban areas, expanded opportunities for education and higher literacy rates, and a growing number of individuals who considered themselves members of the developing middle class. These individuals were especially eager for instruction in *belles lettres*, literally beautiful writing or literary compositions. Advances in printing and the lower costs of publication increased the availability of books and periodicals to this growing reading population. The popularity of handbooks and guides was a manifestation of the belief that one's position could be improved through study and exertion and was evident in the increased interest for the rhetorical arts. As Linda Ferreira-Buckley and S. Michael Halloran note, "The new theory of rhetoric and belles lettres, positing a common basis for all discourse and promising guidance in discriminating among these works, had an obvious appeal to an age wishing to improve itself" (Ferreira-Buckley and Halloran, xv).

This age of enlightenment, notably manifested by members of the Scottish intellectual elite in Edinburgh,¹ prompted reinterpretations of classical theories and philosophies. One of several responses to the classical rhetorical tradition was the belletristic movement, which moved beyond the classical constraints of an exclusively oral tradition and broadened its purview to one that encompassed the analyses of written discourse as well.² As Ferreira-Buckley and Halloran observe, “To accommodate the new reading public, the focus of rhetoric shifted from one who invents – be that speaker or writer – to the one who receives – be that hearer or writer. It shifted emphasis from a generative to an analytic art” (Ferreira-Buckley and Halloran xv).

Belletristic rhetoric as envisioned by the Scots was a theoretical interpretation based on an amalgam of sources and representatives, among them Hugh Blair, George Campbell, Lord Kames, and Richard Whately. Specifically, the belletristic theory

was based on the concept that rhetoric and related polite arts, poetry, drama, art, history, biography, philology, and so on should be joined under a broad heading of rhetoric and belles lettres. Since these disciplines share a common interest in taste, style, criticism, and sublimity, they seek to instruct the student to become an effective practitioner and judge in written and oral communication. (Golden and Corbett 8)

Blair believed that a competent speaker, writer and critic needed to have a familiarity with the classic rhetoricians and frequently used quotations from his favorite rhetor, Quintilian (Golden and Corbett 12). He reasserted the primacy of Cicero’s classical premise that the

¹ At this time, Edinburgh received the moniker as “Athens of the North” as being a site of intellectual fervor (Golden and Corbett, 24).

² Golden and Corbett suggest that there were four distinct rhetorical approaches during the 18th century including the belletristic movement: those who adhered to the strictly classical framework as exemplified by John Holmes’ *The Art of Rhetoric* (1739), John Ward’s *Systems of Oratory* (1759) and John Lawson’s *Lectures Concerning Oratory* (1752). A second approach was the elocutionary movement espoused by Thomas Sheridan’s *Lectures on Elocution* (1763), John Walker’s *Elements of Elocution* (1781) and Gilbert Austin’s *Treatise on Rhetorical Delivery* (1806). The third was the belletristic approach epitomized by Gerardus Vossius’ *De Philosophia* (1658), Bernard Lami’s *L’Art de Parler* (1675), and Charles Rollin’s *De la Maniere d’Enseigner et d’Etudier les Belles Lettres* (1726-1728). The fourth approach was one characterized by a human/psychological philosophy epitomized best by John Locke’s *Essay on Human Understanding* (1689) and David Hume’s *Treatise on Human Nature* (1739) (Golden and Corbett 6-12).

rhetorician's purpose is "*docere, delectare, and movere*"—to instruct, delight and persuade—and followed the three classic genres of rhetoric as formulated by Aristotle: deliberative, forensic and epideictic. Moreover, he recognized the validity of the Aristotelian modes of proof essential to persuasion: *ethos*, the appeal to the character and authority of the speaker; *pathos*, the appeal to the emotions of the audience; and *logos*, the appeal of the logical and rational claim. The speech or written discourse itself as structured would mirror (with alterations) the five canons in classical rhetoric: the invention, disposition (or organization), style, memory and delivery. To these, Blair added his own modifications: the necessary components of an address should follow a structure that featured "interest, unity, coherence and progression" (Golden and Corbett 13).

He also merged the canons of invention and disposition:

Like other belletrists, Blair minimizes *inventio* and *dispositio* and in their places substitutes a greater concern for aesthetics, or elocution, and more importantly for the history of English studies, the ability to read critically. . . . His rejection of invention — one of the central arts of classical rhetoric — and his embrace of style as a central concern of rhetoric demonstrates his commitment to a rhetoric concerned as much with analyzing texts as with producing them. (Ferreira-Buckley 5)

Blair was one of the first practitioners of what might be labeled as modern rhetoric, presaging present-day speech theory and literary criticism. "In Blair's *Lectures on Rhetoric and Belles Lettres*," Pittock writes, "Criticism became a crucial component of the art of rhetoric, heralding a new era in literary studies" (29). His lectures covered public oratory and classical rhetoric as well as the arts of drama, poetry and novels.

Notwithstanding having a rather dogmatic speech delivery pattern, Blair became renowned as both lecturer and sermonizer.³ In fact, his future fame as a belletrist was preceded

³ James Finlayson, a colleague and contemporary of Blair, wrote Blair's delivery, "... though distinct, serious, and impressive, was not remarkably distinguished by that magic charm of voice and action which captivates the senses and imagination, and which, in the estimation of superficial hearers, constitutes the chief merit of a preacher" (qtd. in Brinton 60).

by his popularity for his sermons. As a young minister, he quickly gained recognition from his pulpit in the High Church of St. Giles, which was considered “the most fashionable pulpit in the city” (Schmitz 2). The appeal of his homilies led the Scottish scholar and cleric to publish a collection of discourses on the divine. Unlike those preachers who bellowed brimstone and exhortations on evil from the pulpit, Blair tactfully urged parishioners to seek their better natures, adhere to morals and amend their characters.

When he entered the Church of Scotland, it was controlled by ‘High Flying Churchmen,’ zealous Calvinists who opposed the theatre, cards, and dancing. . . . Blair appealed to his audience’s rationality and gentility and mingles Enlightenment values with ecclesiastical language. . . . [his] sermons contributed to the moderate position within the Kirk and, more importantly, developed his reputation as an eloquent writer. (Pittock 31)

His *Sermons* (which subsequently comprised four volumes; he was working on the fifth volume at the time of his death in 1800) became a best-seller with the “church-going, sermon-reading middle classes” (Tomkins 71) and were printed from 1777 through 1794. The reasons for their popularity were deceptively simple: they were brief,⁴ theologically sparse, and to the point. As Golden and Corbett attest, “His sermons proved popular, well organized, and lucidly written . . . because they did not unsettle the congregation with constant reminders of such Calvinistic doctrines as those on original sin, total corruption, *a priori* election, and damnation” (Golden and Corbett 24).

Pittock frames Blair’s popularity both in terms of monetary success and reputation:

Excepting *The Spectator*, Blair’s *Sermons* was in its time the most popular work in the English language, according to the 1807 *Critical Review*; the first four volumes alone earned Blair well over £2,000, a large sum for an eighteenth-century writer and an indication of the eighteenth-century reading public’s appetite for moderate religious teachings. (Pittock 31)

⁴ According to Golden, the average length of a sermon was 4600 words. Therefore, assuming that a speaker would deliver 125 words a minute, Blair’s sermons would last only thirty-seven minutes (Golden, “Minister of St. Giles” 158).

Blair's fame, abetted by the accolades received from other eminent individuals including Lord Kames, James Boswell and Samuel Johnson, was instrumental in securing a position at Edinburgh University where he was nominated as Regius Professorship of Rhetoric and Belles Lettres in 1762 and received a stipend of £70. His course in rhetoric, while borrowing from an earlier course in rhetoric taught by Adam Smith, was unique in that he used both classical texts and contemporary compositions in the vernacular as instructional examples. These lectures were exceedingly popular with students who circulated unauthorized copies of his lectures: "By 1767, Blair's lectures were so popular that an effort was made to open them to the public, an indicator that a broad social segment in Scotland believed in the 'civilizing effects of rhetorical study'" (Pittock 34).

While he did not agree to open his classes to the public, he did consider publication as a means of enlarging his audience.⁵ Ostensibly to ensure the quality of those lectures (although one might surmise a potentially lucrative source of revenue was an additional benefit as well), Blair published in 1783 the entire set of forty-seven classroom lectures as *Lectures on Rhetoric and Belles Lettres*. He describes his motivation for publication in the preface:

The publication of them [the lectures], at present, was not altogether a matter of choice. Imperfect Copies of them, in Manuscript, from notes taken by students who heard them read, were first privately handed about; and afterwards frequently exposed to public sale. When the Author saw them circulate so currently, as even to be quoted in print, and found himself threatened with surreptitious publications of them, he judged it to be high time that they should proceed from his own hand, rather than come into public view under some very defective and erroneous form. (L 1 1)

As Blair biographer Robert Morell Schmitz observed, Blair was well paid for the text, repeating the earlier financial success he had with his *Sermons*. He received £1,500 as an initial

⁵ According to Schmitz, Blair's lectures were initially delivered to the public but restricted to university students after 1760. His lectures were so popular that in 1767, an attempt was made to reopen them, with a considerable increase in recompense. Blair opted not to as "the L 100 salary offered me only on condition of its being an open class; which I absolutely rejected, as not only less profitable to myself, but ruinous to education" (Blair to Hume, 4 June, [1767]. MS. R.S.E. III, 61, qtd. in Schmitz 63).

payment which was a significant sum, especially for an academic text. The generous payment was not altruistic, however; William Strahan, London's leading publisher, had profited greatly by publishing Blair's earlier *Sermons* and anticipated a similar return on Blair's rhetorical handbook (Schmitz 94).

Yet again, Strahan hit pay-dirt. Blair was not only well paid, his tome became well read. The success of the volume surpassed expectations. As Ferreira-Buckley and Halloran observe, "The immense popularity of Hugh Blair's *Lectures on Rhetoric and Belles Lettres* was unrivaled by any language text for a full half-century" (Ferreira-Buckley and Halloran, xv).⁶ The notoriety was such that in as little as two years after the initial publication of the text, an abridged text was released that, according to its "advertisement," was intended for use in non-collegiate settings such as schools, technical institutes and home study (Ferreira-Buckley and Halloran, xxi–xxii).⁷ By 1815, Blair's *Lectures* would go through seventy editions, numerous reprintings and translations into French, Spanish, Italian and Russian (Ehninger and Golden, "Intrinsic" 12).⁸

Curiously, given its popularity and renown, the acclaim for Blair's *Lectures* was not universal. Critics suggested the *Lectures* were "a fatal lack of useful, general principles"; they were "neither original, comprehensive, nor profound"; Blair himself "mouth[ed] a sham rhetoric" and was nothing more than "a washed-out retailer of secondhand commonplaces"

⁶ Stephen Carr argues that more than twice as many versions of Blair's *Lectures on Rhetoric and Belles Lettres* were published than commonly thought. More on history of the publication of Blair's *Lectures* can be found in Carr's "The Circulation of Blair's Lectures," *Rhetoric Society Quarterly*, v. 32:4, Fall 2002.

⁷ In their study of the history of the publication of Blair's lectures in both Great Britain and the United States, they observe that an abridged version was published in Cambridge, Massachusetts, in 1802; this version expands Blair's definition of taste and "is the only instance we have observed in which an abridgement *adds* verbiage to the original" (Ferreira-Buckley and Halloran, xvii).

⁸ Carr notes that "[v]ery few works of rhetoric or belles lettres in English of this time circulated widely in translation; Kames' *Elements of Criticism*, for example, had perhaps five issues in German translation, but Campbell's *Philosophy of Rhetoric* and Priestly's *Course of Lectures on Oratory and Criticism* each appeared in a single German version, and most works seem to have never been translated. Blair, however, was published in eight languages, and was often reprinted" (Carr 82).

(Ehninger and Golden, “Intrinsic” 15).⁹ Others suggested that Blair repackaged material and borrowed heavily from others, such as Lord Shaftesbury and George Campbell. Advocates of Blair’s tome suggest that these naysayers missed the point: “Although Blair cannot be credited with inventing belletristic rhetoric, he brought its major principles together in a coherent and enormously popular synthesis that sustained its clear dominance in much of the Western world for at least a century. . .”(Ferreira-Buckley and Halloran xxxv). Ehninger and Golden describe his contributions thus:

... Blair’s *Lectures* were clearly the prototype of the belletristic school, and, taken by and large, the best available statement of its doctrines as well as the most complete and effective implementation of its basic theoretical assumptions. Mundane as they admittedly are, they are yet superior to other works in this tradition. Thus they not only had the initial advantage of expressing a pedagogically attractive approach to the teaching of rhetoric and composition, but also the added advantage of doing it better than any of their competitors in the area – the earlier of which were either abortive attempts or primarily oriented in other directions, and the latter of which were little more than inferior echoings of the *Lectures* themselves. (“Intrinsic” 18-19)

Perhaps Ehninger and Golden capture the essence of Blair’s work best: “Few books have been more generally damned by the critics, and longer read or more widely influential than Hugh Blair’s *Lectures on Rhetoric and Belles Lettres*” (“Intrinsic” 12).

In his *Lectures*, Blair introduced his concept of Belletristic rhetoric, “the new rhetoric, which championed politeness and sensibility, particularly as expressed through tasteful style” (Pittock 29). Significantly, he began by first defending rhetoric from those who have maligned it as an art or who have viewed it as a tool of treachery:

Indeed when the arts of speech and writing are mentioned, I am sensible that prejudices against them are apt to rise in the minds of many. A sort of art is immediately thought of, that is ostentatious and deceitful: the minute and trifling study of words alone; the pomp of expression; the studied fallacies of rhetoric; ornament substituted in the room of use.

⁹ Conversely, several notable contemporaries extolled Blair. Lord Kames praised Blair’s preaching, James Boswell remarked that Blair “would stop hounds by his eloquence,” and Samuel Johnson curiously opined that Blair “had only to abandon Presbyterianism to be completely admirable” (Golden, “Neoclassicism” 155-156).

We need not wonder, that, under such imputations, all study of discourse as an art, should have suffered in the opinion of men of understanding; and I am far from denying, that rhetoric and criticism have sometimes been so managed as to tend to the corruption, rather than the improvement, of good taste and true eloquence. (*L I 4*)

Blair proceeded to build on the ideas expounded by other belletristic theorists including Edmund Burke, Adam Smith, George Campbell and Lord Kames by applying his precepts to oral speeches and written compositions. As Blair explained, “The study of composition, important in itself at all times, has acquired additional importance from the taste and manners of the present age. It is an age wherein improvements, in every part of science, have been prosecuted with ardour” (*L I 6*).

Significant tenets of his theory included the belief that style should be characterized by perspicuity and vividness, and while nature endows the orator with special and unique talents, practice and instruction are needed to improve or perfect those natural traits, notably taste and eloquence. Moreover, while he subscribed to many classical tenets, he believed that the traditional focus on persuasion alone as the aim of rhetoric was constrictive.

The attraction of the study and usage of *belles lettres* was understood by Blair and his contemporaries to have a moral component. He believed that morality could be strengthened through the exercise of eloquence in speech and writing. He extolled his students that “[i]n order to be a truly eloquent or persuasive speaker, nothing is more necessary than to be a virtuous man” (*L XXXIV 381*), which echoes the dicta of classical rhetoricians such as Quintilian and St. Augustine.

His prescriptions for accomplishing this eloquence, however, contained decidedly more contemporary nuances. Blair asserted that to become an eloquent speaker one must exert effort as it is a skill that can be honed and improved. In other words, while nature could endow an

individual with talent and genius, exercise and study would improve the skill so that the individual could exercise correct taste.

These tomes, which in contemporary parlance might be construed as a self-help book for the upwardly mobile, addressed the importance of manners and morals and led their readers to trust “that an education in belletristic rhetoric would prepare them to join the cultural elite” (Ferreira-Buckley, “Hugh Blair” 25). Given that Blair believed rhetoric was in the realm of morals, it is no wonder that he wove ideas from his earlier *Sermons* into his theories on rhetoric. To better understand this moral component, an examination of Blair’s *Sermons* is beneficial. In fact, these sermons play a pivotal role in Austen’s *Mansfield Park*.

CHAPTER 2

RHETORIC OF THE PULPIT: *MANSFIELD PARK* AND BLAIR'S *SERMONS*

As noted earlier, Jane Austen directly references the works of Hugh Blair in three of her texts: the novels *Northanger Abbey* and *Mansfield Park* and the short story “Catharine, or, The Bower.” Of these three allusions, *Northanger Abbey* specifically references Blair’s *Lectures on Rhetoric and Belles Lettres*, while “Catharine, or, The Bower” and *Mansfield Park* allude to his *Sermons*. In this chapter, I will analyze the significance of this mention of Blair’s *Sermons* and their relevance to Austen’s fiction. Additionally, I will suggest that Blair’s *Lecture XXIX, On Eloquence of the Pulpit* broadens our understanding of Blair’s pastoral philosophy and aesthetic approach to crafting sermons. The two tomes are germane both to our understanding of *Mansfield Park* and help to elucidate the characters in this novel as well.

The textual reference to Blair in *Mansfield Park* occurs during the outing to Sotherton with an entourage that consists of Mr. and Mrs. Rushmore, Mrs. Norris, Henry and Mary Crawford, Maria, Julia, and Edmund Bertram, and Fanny Price. Their excursion is ostensibly a show-and-tell tour of the Rushmore estate; it affords Maria the opportunity to show off her intended’s property while still flirting with Henry. Mr. Rushmore has requested Henry Crawford’s assistance in recommending to him which “improvements” he should make, and generally, it is a welcome opportunity for all of them to get away for the day. The tour of the estate takes them to the chapel, where the morals and character of Mary Crawford are revealed in

her comments about the clergy. Her disdain for those who preach from the pulpit is overt in

Mary's reference to Blair:

One does not see much of this influence and importance in society, and how can it be acquired where they are so seldom seen themselves? How can two sermons a week, even supposing them worth hearing, supposing the preacher to have the sense to prefer Blair's to his own, do all that you speak of? Govern the conduct and fashion the manners of a large congregation for the rest of the week? One scarcely sees a clergyman out of his pulpit. (108)

As noted in the earlier chapter, Blair's *Sermons* were immensely popular. His "elegant and perspicuous discourses...found high favor among readers who had a taste for sentimental moral tractates" (Schmitz 3). Their notoriety and appeal, however, reached beyond those devout readers and those who consistently attended church services, so even someone who "scarcely read any other books on the subject of morality and religion"¹ would have been familiar with the liturgical words of Blair. Therefore, Mary's allusion to Blair's *Sermons*, notwithstanding her avowed disinterest in matters of faith, is not surprising. To the contrary: her lack of knowledge of Blair would have been more disconcerting and suspect.²

Mary Crawford's observation that a clergyman might consider delivering a sermon authored by another reflected contemporary practice; it was not uncommon for clergymen to

¹ *Public Characters*, (qtd. in Golden and Ehninger, "Extrinsic" 24).

² Gary Kelly, in "Reading Aloud in Mansfield Park", suggests that Mary Crawford's reference to Blair's *Sermons* rather than his later tome on rhetoric is an indication of "the depth of [her] ignorance" (Kelly 37). However, as I have illustrated, Blair's subsequent belletristic recognition was based on his earlier *Sermons* which were immensely popular. Moreover, Austen also references Blair's *Sermons* in her earlier juvenilia, specifically "Catharine, or, The Bower". Doody sees the reference as an indication of Austen's own belief in the ineffectiveness of Blair's *Sermons*: "That both of the Crawfords are able to refer to sermons is one of the many indications that Austen did not believe written material, whether read or heard, has much power to convert or rectify the individual" (Doody 349). I argue conversely that Austen incorporated the reference due to Blair's popularity and a source with which her reading audience would be familiar. Moreover, neither of the Crawfords address the *content* of the sermons, but both recognize them as exemplary in their *form*.

read a printed sermon in preference to writing their own each Sunday.³ As Irene Collins acknowledges,

It was . . . considered perfectly proper for a parish priest on most occasions to take his sermons from books published for the purpose. . . . A great many parsons throughout the land served their parishioners with a staple diet taken from the sermons of famous preachers such as Tillotson, Thomas Sherlock, and Samuel Clarke. Some simply read out extracts from the printed texts; others, more conscientious, would adapt them to suit particular circumstances. . . .(96-97)

Given the fact that the position of clergyman was not considered to be full time, it is surprising that crafting compelling compositions on matters of faith was not part of their weekly repertoire. Ministerial duties included baptisms, weddings, funerals, quarterly communion rites and two services on Sunday. Le Faye suggests that there was plenty of time left for original discourses on the divine (Le Faye, *The World of Her Novels* 80) if the minister would so choose.

The members of the clergy portrayed in Austen's earlier texts reflect this gentleman's life of leisure. Henry Tilney in *Northanger Abbey*, for example, spends only a few days each week at Woodston. According to Irene Collins, Jane Austen "had nothing but scorn for clergy who neglected their parishes simply because they had the opportunity to live in greater style elsewhere, an opportunity Mary Crawford hoped Edmund Bertram would follow if she married him" (Collins 32-33). This disapproval is especially evident in Austen's later works where

the effect of the Evangelical Revival was felt. . . Edmund Bertram means to reside full-time in his parish of Thornton Lacey, to Mary Crawford's annoyance; Mr. Elton, though personally conceited and spiteful, is nevertheless conscientious in his duties at Highbury; and Charles Hayter intends to be a resident and dutiful curate at Uppercross so that the old reverend Dr. Shirley can retire in peace after forty years' service there. (LeFaye, *The World of Her Novels* 81).

Henry Crawford, who belittles Edmund's convictions and dedication to his chosen profession, subscribes to the belief that "a sermon at Christmas and Easter" would be "the sum

³ Golden notes that "Anglican preachers as well as young ministers of the Scottish Presbyterian Church were eager to imitate Blair's style" (Golden, "Hugh Blair: Minister of St. Giles" 160).

total of the sacrifice” (264). Edmund, however, will become a clergyman of a completely different caliber.

Blair’s sermons were practical discourses on issues of morality and ethics, in which he “dissolved ‘one grain of the gospel’ in a ‘cooling draught of moral disquisition.’”⁴ He posed questions on moral dilemmas with which his audience would be familiar, with the intent that they could apply these moral lessons in their daily lives. As Golden notes, “The aim of the sermons was thus not primarily to give the listeners what they wanted to hear but rather to stimulate them to live a better life” (“Hugh Blair: Minister of St. Giles” 157). By adhering to or embracing moral precepts, Blair argued that the individual would improve his/her character and, subsequently, his/her opportunity for earthly happiness: “The issues of life are justly said to be out of the heart, because the state of the heart is what determines our moral character, and what forms our chief happiness or misery” (*S* 253) Blair aimed to give his audience the desire to understand that morality was a guiding principle that established the character of the individual, and by aspiring to these moral ideals, they would be able to pursue a life of meaning and promise.

Dogmatic doctrinal discourses they were not. As Schmitz allows, “To the soul-searching Scot, thumbing the pages of Calvin and the Bible, there was something very strange indeed about a minister who completely ignored matters of doctrine and only rarely mentioned the mystical nature of Christianity” (Schmitz 19). This is evident in his characterization of what was necessary to be an effective preacher; “...it is of the utmost consequence that the Speaker firmly believe both the truth and the importance of those principles which he inculcates on others...” (*L* XXIX 318).

⁴ William Law Mathieson, *The Awakening of Scotland* (Glasgow, 1910, p. 213, qtd. in Schmitz 41).

His detractors suggested that his sermons were liturgy-lite. “Among certain Scottish Calvinists, . . . the Sermons were bitter draughts in which comfort was offered to those who had no need of it, where sentiment was substituted for the word of God, and the conviction of sin smoothed over with nauseating complacency” (Schmitz 85).⁵ Blair did not take their criticisms to heart; he remained convinced that morality would lead the path to increased piety and “the peace of God, which passeth all understanding.”⁶ He also addressed these critics in *Sermon X*, “On Devotion”:

And, if ever it shall so far lift you up with self-conceit, as to make you establish your own opinions as an infallible standard for the whole Christian world, and lead you to consign to perdition, all who differ from you, either in some doctrinal tenets or in the mode of expressing them; you may rest assured that to much pride you have joined much ignorance, both of the nature of devotion, and of the Gospel of Christ. (*S* 153)

The lack of theology or even doctrine implicitly stated within Blair’s discourses stemmed from his belief that sermons from the pulpit should have both a persuasive and practical focus. As Ferreira-Buckley avers, “Blair tended to address moral rather than theological questions likely to offend his audience. His theological writings, like the rhetorical theory he was to propagate, expressed a safe middle ground” (Ferreira-Buckley, “Hugh Blair” 21). Blair expands on his philosophy by asserting that the role of the homilist “is not to illustrate some metaphysical truth, or to inform men of something which they never heard before; but it is to make them better men; it is to give them, at once, clear views, and persuasive impressions of religious truth” (*L* XXIX 317). Lengthy discourses on esoteric tenets of faith did not find favor with Blair. Brinton describes this approach: “. . .for Blair piety and morality are the two faces of true religion, and that it is its moral face that religion generally shows throughout his preaching; that is to say, the

⁵Golden writes that Blair “freely admitted to Boswell that ‘he did not believe in the eternity of punishment’” (Boswell, *Private Papers*, XVI,7, qtd. in Golden, “Hugh Blair: Minister of St. Giles” 157).

⁶Philippians 4:7, KJV.

themes that are developed most eloquently are almost always themes of morality rather than piety, and certainly rather than theology” (62).

The simplicity of his sermons belies the fact that he labored extensively on them. He assiduously corrected his rough drafts and “was reluctant to deliver or publish any discourse which had not been carefully polished” (Golden, “Hugh Blair: Minister of St. Giles” 158).⁷ Each sermon was prefaced with a passage from scripture that illuminated the proposed theme of the discourse successively elaborated in the introduction. Subsequently, the main elements of the discourse were packaged as rational arguments establishing the validity of the theme of the sermon. For example, in *Sermon VII*, “On the Disorders of the Passions” (89-104), Blair begins by citing a verse from the Old Testament: “Yet all that availeth me nothing, so long as I see Mordicai the Jew sitting at the King’s gate” (*Esther*, v. 13). Blair proceeds to recount the Biblical story of Haman, an appointed minister under King Ahasuerus who enjoyed wealth and good health. Haman ostensibly has everything, except that he notices there is one person who did not prostrate himself before him or pay him the homage Haman thought he deserved. This lack of recognition by one whom he considered to be subservient vexes him to the degree that he could not take pleasure in or savor any of the riches he possessed. From this Old Testament story, Blair extrapolates the theme of his sermon: “How unavailing is prosperity when in the midst of it, a single disappointment can destroy the relish of all its pleasures. . . How miserable is vice, when one guilty passion is capable of creating such torment!” (S 91).

As Blair built the persuasive premises of his argument, he inserted scriptural passages that were short, succinct and seamlessly woven within the discourse. His style was both fluid and conversational; he seemed to “understand people” (Golden, “Hugh Blair: Minister of St.

⁷ “Dr. Johnson was once informed that Blair ‘has taken a week to compose a sermon’” (James Boswell, *Tour to the Hebrides*, ed. R. W. Chapman, p. 201, qtd. in Golden, “Hugh Blair: Minister of St. Giles” 158).

Giles” 156). Blair varied sentence structure and length and was perspicuous about word choice. Figurative and evocative language were used in the belief that they would resonate with his listeners, and he incorporated vivid metaphors and similes to complement his examples. He peppered his sermons with platitudes for good measure. In a phrase that seems to presage and address a contemporary philosophical question, namely why do bad things happen to good people, Blair professes that “[t]he distribution of the goods of fortune, indeed, may often be promiscuous, that is, disproportioned to the moral characters of men, but the allotment of real happiness is never so” (S 95). It may appear those of good character suffer more, but in fact, real happiness is completely dependent on the moral character of an individual.

His sermons exhort the listener or reader to reflect on a particular moral characteristic or a flaw in character, and he sequentially presents the reasons why an alteration in comportment or the acceptance of a moral precept is integral to the individual’s well-being. Familiarity with moral principles, he believed, fostered the growth of moral taste. His sermons summon his audience to re-evaluate their actions and beliefs and persuasively urge them to put newfound ethical truths in action in daily life. As Brinton attests, “The chief end of Blair’s own kind of pulpit eloquence [was] to influence character, unlike the eloquence of debate in popular assemblies. . .” (66). Notwithstanding this distinction, Blair’s sermons were still crafted to be persuasive. And to be so, they could not rely on logic alone.

The Scot sermonizer believed that approaching a man’s understanding was only the first step in constructing a persuasive argument. Rational arguments conveyed the underlying logic of Blair’s lessons, but these appeals were not sufficient to bring about any kind of transformation. Persuasion must be built on an additional foundation, namely by addressing emotions and sentiment.

This is precisely the theme in *Sermon X*, “On Devotion”:

For arguments may convince the understanding, when they cannot conquer the passions. Irresistible they seem in the calm hours of retreat; but, in the season of action, they often vanish into smoke. There are other and more powerful springs, which influence the great movements of the human frame. In order to operate with success on the active powers, the heart must be gained. Sentiment and affection must be brought to the aid of reason. It is not enough that men believe religion to be a wise and rational rule of conduct, unless they relish it as agreeable, and find it to carry its own reward. (*S* 135)

As Blair asserts, every sermon, therefore, should be a persuasive discourse that utilizes all available means of persuasion, including those appeals which hail from the heart: “...it is much less for the sake of information than of persuasion, that Discourse are delivered from the Pulpit; and nothing is more opposite to persuasion, than an unnecessary and tedious fullness” (*LXXIX* 320).

It is not surprising that as a practicing and popular clergyman, Blair would argue pastors perform a vital duty within the fabric of the larger social community. While Blair’s *Sermons* offer his advice and counsel on moral themes, he expands his didactic instruction on the writing of sermons and on the character of the sermonizer in his *Lectures on Rhetoric and Belles Lettres*. His words stand in sharp contrast to Mary Crawford’s indictment of men of the cloth during her visit to Sotherton. While Mary’s comments purportedly reflect her approval of Blair’s *Sermons*, she uses this allusion to denigrate clergy across the board. She begins by questioning their duty to society and their ability to influence conduct and morals, especially when they seem to shun society in general. If they have any good sense whatsoever, Mary implies, it is in choosing a popular homily, rather than spending the effort to create a unique sermon tailored to the needs of the community.

Mary’s observations at Sotherton are not only anti-clergy, they are anti-religion. As Mrs. Rushworth describes the prior use of the chapel, she mentions that the chapel “was formerly in

constant use both morning and evening. Prayers were read in it by the domestic chaplain... [b]ut the late Mr. Rushworth left it off" (101).

"“Every generation has its improvements,’ said Miss Crawford, with a smile, to Edmund” (101). At this moment, the reader knows what Miss Crawford does not: that Edmund has willingly chosen the profession of the clergy and will take orders soon. As Clara Thomson observes, “Miss Austen delights in the more subtle situation, where the talk or action of one of the characters is based on presumptions which are known to the reader and possibly by the other participants in the scene to be mistaken – the ironical situation, which may be comic or tragic in proportion to the gravity of the issue” (244-245). Miss Crawford’s catty observation speaks of modernity and the contemporary by using the word “improvements”: after all, the excursion was undertaken to provide counsel to Mr. Rushworth in his desire to improve his landscape by demolishing a stately avenue lined of oaks. Mary Crawford shows no sadness for the loss of an age or tradition of piety. Fanny who normally remains silent must disagree with Miss Crawford: “It is a pity,” cried Fanny, “that the custom should have been discontinued. It was a valuable part of former times. There is something in a chapel and chaplain so much in character with a great house, with one’s idea of what such a household should be! A whole family assembling regularly for the purpose of prayer, is fine!” (101).

Throughout the excursion, Miss Crawford continues to show her disdain of religion, its rules and obligations. She sees it as a rigid system of rules, thou shalt this and thou shalt that.

Indeed, she says as much:

The obligation of attendance, the formality, the restraint, the length of time – altogether it is a formidable thing, and what nobody likes: and if good people who used to kneel and gape in that gallery could have foreseen that the time would ever come when men and women might lie another ten minutes in bed, when they awoke with a headache, without danger of reprobation, because chapel was missed, they would have jumped with joy and

envy. Cannot you imagine with what unwilling feelings the former belles of the house of Rushworth did many time repair to this chapel? The young Miss Eleanors and Mrs. Bridgets – starched up into seeming piety, but with heads full of something different – especially if the poor chaplain were not worth looking at – and, in those days, I fancy parsons were very inferior even to what they are now. (101-102)⁸

Mary’s disdain for the clergy is personal and profound: “To Mary, every clergyman is the Mr. Collins of *Pride and Prejudice*; she thinks of ordination as a surrender of manhood”

(Trilling, “Mansfield Park” 129). She attempts to disarm Edmund with questions, assuming his decision was the option of last resort. The law, the military, she assures Edmund, all provide men with the opportunity “to distinguish themselves, and in either of the other lines distinction may be gained, but not in the church. A clergyman is nothing” (107).

Edmund has interpreted her retort for the indictment that it is and defends his chosen profession.

A clergyman cannot be high in state or fashion. He must not head mobs, or set the ton⁹ in dress. But I cannot call that situation nothing, which has the charge of all that is of the first importance to mankind, individually or collectively considered, temporally and eternally – which has the guardianship of religion and morals, and consequently of the manners which result from their influence. No one here can call the office nothing. If the man who holds it is so, it is by the neglect of his duty, by foregoing its just importance, and stepping out of his place to appear what he ought not to appear. (107)

Edmund’s words would sound familiar to those who had read Blair’s *Lectures*:

. . . the dignity and importance of [the] subjects [of the pulpit] must be acknowledged superior to any other. . . nothing has so great and universal command over the minds of men as virtue. No kind of language is so generally understood, and so powerfully felt, as the native language of worthy and virtuous feelings. . . The end of all preaching. . . is to make them better men; it is to give them at once, clear views, and persuasive impressions of religious truth. . . the preacher himself, in order to be successful, must be a good man. (L XXIX 317-18)

⁸ Even the word choice of “parson” is a disparagement; author Hannah More notes that “the clergy are spoken of under the contemptuous appellation of ‘The Parsons’” (Ed. note, *Mansfield Park* 665).

⁹ “Ton” means “the fashion” (Ed. note, *Mansfield Park* 668).

Admittedly, Mary's low opinion of members of the clergy is based on what she has witnessed in Dr. Grant, the husband of her sister, Mrs. Grant. She recognizes that while he "often preaches good sermons, and is very respectable, I see him to be an indolent, selfish bon vivant, who must have his palate consulted in everything; who will not stir a finger for the convenience of any one; and who, moreover, if the cook makes a blunder, is out of humour with his excellent wife" (130).

Mary's comments reflect her seeing only the physical humanness of clergymen – primarily, their foibles and faults. She chooses not to be challenged by their words of virtue, morality, and ethical behavior. Both Mary and Henry Crawford see "the profession of clergyman as that of mere sermonizer, of mere public speaker of a special kind" (Kelly, "Reading Aloud" 35). It is this conviction that delivering sermons is a form of public performance that entices Henry to consider entering the profession himself.

A sermon, well delivered, is more uncommon even than prayers well read. A sermon, good in itself, is no rare thing. It is more difficult to speak well than to compose well; that is, the rules and trick of composition are oftener an object of study. A thoroughly good sermon, thoroughly well delivered, is a capital gratification. I can never hear such a one without the greatest admiration and respect, and more than half a mind to take orders and preach myself. (394)

In this brief discourse on the enticement of a well-delivered sermon, Henry's observations revolve around the manner in which the sermon is delivered. This presentation has power to cause admiration and respect, similar to an evocative stage performance or public recitation. He suggests that he would be well suited for such a role in the pulpit, as it is a venue not unlike a stage. That Henry relishes the assumption of diverse roles and the enthrall of exhibitionism was already established during the ill-fated foray in theatrics at Mansfield Park; of

course, he surmises, to serve as a clergyman would be yet another role to add to his dramatic repertoire.

Lecture XXIX, “On Eloquence of the Pulpit,” clearly illustrates that this kind of superficial and capricious perspective goes against Blair’s principles for any kind of oration – most especially sermons. He asserts that two elements are necessary for a clergyman to be effective – gravity and warmth: “The serious nature of the subjects belonging to the Pulpit, requires Gravity; their importance to mankind, requires Warmth. It is far from being either easy or common to unite these characters of Eloquence” (*L XXIX* 318). Here, Blair re-emphasizes Edmund’s earlier words that a clergyman has “the charge of all that is of the first importance to mankind, individually or collectively considered, temporally and eternally” (107). Note as well that Austen and Blair share the belief (and wording) that the office of the minister has “importance to mankind” (*Mansfield Park* 107, *L XXXIX* 318).

As Henry attempts to charm Fanny, he continues to portray himself as a capable and eloquent public speaker. He is aware that Fanny is overhearing their conversation and tries to demonstrate that he, like Edmund, has a more serious and spiritual side. Fanny is not swayed, however. As eloquent as he tries to be, Henry does not achieve the true eloquence as envisioned by Blair. In fact, the more he rhapsodizes on the elements of a scintillating sermon, the more he reveals his lack of moral understanding and character:

There is something in the eloquence of the pulpit, when it is really eloquence, which is entitled to the highest praise and honour. The preacher who can touch and affect such an heterogeneous mass of hearers, on subjects limited, and long worn threadbare in all common hands; who can say anything new or striking, anything that rouses the attention without offending the taste, or wearing out the feelings of his hearers, is a man whom one could not, in his public capacity, honour enough. I should like to be such a man. (394)

His discourse appears to have been borrowed. Consider Blair's own words on the difficulties of preaching on topics that are "worn threadbare" (394) or "trite and familiar" (*L XXIX 316*):

His subjects of discourse are, in themselves, noble and important; but they are subjects trite and familiar. They have, for ages, employed so many Speakers, and so many pens; the public ear is so much accustomed to them, that it requires more than an ordinary power of genius to fix attention. Nothing within the reach of art is more difficult, than to bestow, on what is common, the grace of novelty. (*L XXIX 316*)

Consider also Henry's soliloquy on true eloquence: "There is something in the eloquence of the pulpit, when it is really eloquence, which is entitled to the highest praise and honour" (394) and Blair's "that on no subject can any man be truly eloquent, who does not . . . speak the language of his own conviction, and his own feelings. If this holds, as, in my opinion, it does in other kinds of Public Speaking, it certainly holds in the highest degree in preaching (*L XXIX 316*).

Mansfield Park has been characterized as Austen's most moral novel. Clearly, the integral role of the clergyman to society and the significance of moral foundations are underscored. It is also noteworthy that four of the main characters extemporize on the delivery of sermons, and the lack of morals in certain characters is a harbinger for their subsequent ruin. Henry and Mary Crawford expose themselves as being shallow and artificial while Fanny and Edmund showcase their devotion to divine precepts. Not unlike the concluding missives of a sermon by Blair, their choice will allow them to lead peaceful and contented lives.

Henry epitomizes all that is potentially immoral in a clergyman and is contrary to the spirit and letter of Blair's teachings. In fact, he would be the model upon which Mary could rightfully engage her pastoral disdain. He tells Edmund as he contemplates joining

the clerical ranks, “I must have a London audience. I could not preach but to the educated; to those who were capable of estimating my composition” (394-395). Henry insinuates that his discourse is much too sophisticated for country bumpkins. Only a cosmopolitan audience would comprehend his skill, his genius in true eloquence.

Blair suggests otherwise:

In a Sermon, no points or conceits should appear, no affected smartness and quaintness of expression. These derogate much from the dignity of the Pulpit; and give to a Preacher that air of foppishness, which he ought above all things, to shun. It is rather a strong expressive Style, than a sparkling one, that is to be studied. (*L XXIX 323*)

Blair is opposed to a style that is “calculated to please, and to tickle the ear” (*L XXIX 317*). He recognizes that a cleric should use a style that is welcoming and open and admits that “[t]he earnestness which a Preacher ought to feel, and the grandeur and importance of his subjects, justify, and often require warm and glowing expressions” (*L XXIX 323*). Blair counsels, however, that style should be comprised of elegant and yet convincing words, a style that “would prevent those frivolous and ostentatious harangues, which have no other aim than merely to make a parade of Speech, or amuse an audience” (*L XXIX 324*). Lynn Rigberg suggests that Henry Crawford and Edmund Bertram are oppositional models of rhetors: “The caddish Henry, as talented performer, is the sophist rhetor arguing to win. The virtuous Edmund, as clergyman-to-be, is the morally committed orator promising to maintain rhetorical ideals in his professional future” (113).

While the bulk of this analysis has centered on the profession of the clergy and how Blair’s *Lectures* and *Sermons* influence our understanding of Edmund’s role as clergyman and Henry’s true colors as a foppish impresario, I suggest that the application of Blair’s *Sermons* has relevancy for unveiling and illuminating Fanny’s character as well.

Generally, Fanny as an Austen heroine is disparaged because she lacks the spirit of an Elizabeth Bennet, the self-confidence of an Emma or even the stoicism of an Anne Elliot. She is “quiet, easily fatigued, supine, shrinking, [and a] creepmouse. . .” (Tave 158). Her critics have a point. Fanny is, indeed, passive, placid and plain. She rarely offers her opinions vocally and lacks the vivacity of Mary Crawford. But could these faults, which have irked so many readers and critics alike, be an indication of a true moral virtue?

Blair would suggest so, specifically in his *Sermon VI*, “On Gentleness.” At the outset, Blair makes the distinction between gentleness – which is morally good – and submission – which is not: “I begin with . . . distinguishing true gentleness from passive tameness of spirit, and from unlimited compliance with the manners of others” (S 76). According to Blair, to be gentle was not the same thing as being a doormat, to allow another individual to lord over another. Nor is it being so compliant to the whims of others that one forsakes one’s own principles. True, Fanny does not speak back to Mrs. Norris who “had no affection for Fanny, and no wish of procuring her pleasure at any time” (92), and who constantly reminds Fanny of her second-class status as a charity case. But on the issues of moral principles, Fanny learns to find her voice and speak up. During the visit to Sotherton, for example, her comments about the chapel escape almost involuntarily from her mouth. She is perturbed and saddened by seeing the dismal state of the chapel, and as we soon discover, the physical decay is symbolic of a larger, more serious moral decay. After Mary attacks Edmund’s choice of profession, Fanny speaks up—defending not herself but the profession and Edmund’s choice.

Blair’s description of true gentleness describes Fanny to the letter. True gentleness “[i]s affable in its address and mild in its demeanor ever ready to oblige, and willing to be obliged by others; breathing habitual kindness towards friends, courtesy to strangers, long-suffering to

enemies” (S 81). Fanny is overtly obliging to Lady Bertram, as she reads to her, satisfies her needs and is her constant companion. Indeed, as Lady Bertram admits, “I *cannot* do without her” (92). Her kindness extends beyond her superficial cousins Maria, Julia, and Tom, and she is especially long-suffering when dealing with Mrs. Norris, who is, if not an outright enemy, then at the least, an unkind and mean-spirited adversary.

Mrs. Norris’ passive-aggressiveness is met with deference and forbearance. After Fanny has been invited to dine at the Grants, Mrs. Norris assures Fanny that the invitation was meant as kindness to others, and in fact, Fanny is only the backup or “second string” to her cousins.

Nor must you be fancying, that the invitation is meant as any particular compliment to *you*; the compliment is intended to your uncle and aunt, and me. Mrs. Grant thinks it a civility due to *us* to take a little notice of you, or else it would never have come into her head and you may be very certain, that if your cousin Julia had been at home, you would not have been asked at all. (256-7)

To Blair, the gentleness that one should acquire is not the gift of being affable or merely deferential; the kindness that is a moral characteristic manifests itself in our personalities and should be evident in one’s whole person. It is ultimately revealed in discourse and action.

“Gentleness corrects whatever is offensive in our manners, and, by a constant train of humane attention, studies to alleviate the burden of common misery... It ought to form our address, to regulate our speech, and to defuse itself over our whole behavior” (S 77).

I must warn you, however, not to confound this gentle wisdom which is from above, with that artificial courtesy, that studied smoothness of manners, which is learned in the school of the world.... “the first study of all who would either gain the esteem, or win the hearts of others, is to learn the speech, and to adopt the manners, of candour, gentleness and humanity. But that gentleness which is the characterisk [*sic*] of a good man, has, like every other virtue its seat in the heart. And, let me add, nothing except what flows from the heart, can render even external manners truly pleasing. For no assumed behaviour can at all times hide the real character. In that unaffected civility which springs from a gentle mind, there is a charm infinitely more powerful, then in all the studied manners of the most finished courtier. (S 77-78)

Blair posits that genuine gentleness stems from what is held in the heart. True gentleness, therefore, is internal to the individual while manners that are not guided by an internal moral gauge are only an external studied artificiality. The assumed behavior of gentleness is, in short, only a veneer. Mary has a good opinion of herself and does not act with gentleness. To be sure, she knows this of herself. Responding to Fanny's appreciation of nature as they walk outdoors, she confesses, "I am something like the famous Doge at the court of Lewis XIV, and may declare that I see no wonder in this shrubbery equal to seeing myself in it" (244). There is always an ulterior motive to her kindness, as when she presents Fanny with a chain so she can wear William's pendant. When Fanny expresses her gratitude and says that she will remember Mary when wearing it, Mary's ulterior motive, namely that Fanny should reappraise her feelings toward Henry, is revealed: "You must think of somebody else too, when you wear that necklace. . . . You must think of Henry, for it was his choice in the first place. He gave it to me, and with the necklace I make over to you all the duty of remembering the original giver" (301).

Mary Crawford has elicited the praise and esteem of all the members of the Bertram family through her witty repartee, her accomplishments in music, and her elegant manners. To sustain Edmund's good opinion, however, these external attributes must be anchored on a foundation of both morals and firmness of character, neither of which she possesses. That Edmund would ultimately see through Mary's farce and relinquish the object of his affection subscribes to Blair's own prediction:

Feeble are the attractions of the fairest form, if it be suspected that nothing within, corresponds to the pleasing appearances without. Short, are the triumphs of wit, when it is supposed to be the vehicle of malice. By whatever arts you may at first attract the attention, you can hold the esteem, and secure the hearts of others, only by amiable dispositions, and the accomplishments of the mind. (159)

Shallowness and caprice mark the world of the Crawfords. It is a world where an audience must be entertained, not enlightened, and where wit and charm mask moral deficiencies. They subscribe to a faith that is centered on self. Egotism is their edict, materialism their creed. As the novel concludes, Henry and Mary have been exiled from the gates of Mansfield Park to resume their nomadic existence again. They are beyond the reach of sermons of even one so eloquent, the popular and esteemed Dr. Blair.

While this chapter has examined the reference of Blair's *Sermons* and his *Lecture XXIX*, "On Eloquence of the Pulpit," in *Mansfield Park*, a central tenet to Blair's rhetorical theory featured his promulgation of aesthetic taste. As we will examine in the next chapter, Austen shares Blair's assertion that taste has two components: delicacy, which is innate and universal; and correctness, which through study and education influences reason and refines the faculty of critical judgment. Moreover, both Blair and Austen believed that aesthetic taste was didactic; acquiring critical and aesthetic taste was morally edifying.

CHAPTER 3

THE RHETORIC OF TASTE

Hugh Blair's popular *Sermons* showcased not only his views on morality and faith but also his prolific and engaging compositional skills. Building on the acclaim he received for his clerical writing, he transitioned to the secular realm of rhetoric. Blair's *Lectures on the Rhetoric of Belles Lettres* promoted his particular brand of belletristic rhetoric and criticism which was based on the concepts of taste and eloquence. As Linda Ferreira-Buckley observes, "Blair attempted to discover that which transcends time and place to appeal to men of all ages and times. In developing his theory of taste, Blair took full account of prevailing ideas, both ancient and modern" (25). But, as we will see, he also developed an interpretation of taste that was distinctly his own, one that, with its moral and edifying properties, reflected the contemporary *zeitgeist*.

In this chapter, I will expand on Blair's promotion of the idea of taste as a fundamental tenet to his belletristic rhetoric and key to understanding his promotion of literary criticism. Moreover, as we will see, the concept of taste features prominently in Jane Austen's fiction as well. I will argue that Austen's fiction also incorporates taste as an indicator of character in the following three ways: taste as a natural and improvable aptitude, taste as revealed through aesthetics, and taste as exhibited by reading and literary discourse. Austen signals the strengths and weaknesses in her characters by referencing both their taste and, conversely, their lack of it.

Furthermore, I suggest that Austen has aligned herself to the understanding of taste as promulgated by Blair, including the conviction that taste has a moral component.

In his first lecture, Blair distinguishes his approach to belletristic rhetoric by asserting the integral role criticism and taste play in the rhetorical equation:

As rhetoric has been sometimes thought to signify nothing more than the scholastic study of words, and phrases, and tropes, so criticism has been considered as merely the art of finding faults; as the frigid application of certain technical terms, by means of which persons are taught to cavil and censure in a learned manner. But this is the criticism of pedants only. True criticism is a liberal and humane art. It is the offspring of good sense and refined taste. (*L I 6*)

Blair's distinction is relevant. In order to practice what Blair believed to be the models of exemplary oral and written rhetoric, the student of rhetoric needed to rely on certain rules that were universal in nature. By ascertaining those rules, one could prescriptively follow them and improve the discourse:

The exercise of taste and sound criticism, is in truth one of the most improving employments of the understanding. To apply the principles of good sense to composition and discourse; to examine what is beautiful, and why it is so; to employ ourselves in distinguishing accurately between the specious and the solid, between affected and natural ornament, must certainly improve us not a little in the most valuable part of all philosophy, the philosophy of human nature. (*L I 7*)

The theory of taste was not unique to Blair. Earlier philosophers and contemporary rhetoricians such as Lord Shaftesbury, Adam Smith, and George Campbell had also incorporated the concept of taste into their rhetorical theories. A significant difference, however, was in Blair's promotion of taste as a defining rubric, a principal component to both understanding and evaluating aesthetics, including art, poetry, and literature. As Franklin Court confirms, "The impact Blair had on the historical perpetuation of 'taste' and 'refinement' as the main objectives of a literary education is immeasurable" (38). Taste, according to Blair, was the skeletal structure on which eloquent rhetoric – oral and written – could be built.

Blair defined taste as “the power of receiving pleasure from the beauties of nature and art” (*L II 10*). He believed that cultivating taste was not exclusively the product of reasoning or the mind: “It is not merely through a discovery of the understanding, or a deduction of argument that the mind receives pleasure from a beautiful prospect or a fine poem” (*L II 10*). Blair suggested that while appreciation of taste is innate, reason can amplify its capabilities and refinement: “Though Taste, beyond doubt, be ultimately founded on a certain natural and instinctive sensibility to beauty, yet Reason, as I shall shew hereafter, assists Taste in many of its operations, and serves to enlarge its power” (*L II 11*).

Taste, according to Blair, was a skill that was necessary for the times. It would allow one to take part in the conversations on literature and the arts and to be able to participate in discourse on a variety of subjects: “The study of composition, important in itself at all time, has acquired additional importance from the taste and manners of the present age” (*L I 6*). And since “a sound head, so likewise a good heart, is a very material requisite to just Taste” (*L II 13*), taste was also linked to morality. In other words, learning about and cultivating taste could make an individual a better person. The ability to correctly discern the merits of prose or literature (evaluative) and to be able to utilize that taste in one’s own discourse and composition (performative) was viewed as edifying and didactic and correlated to one’s internal, moral identity.

The connection derived from theories that postulated a common source for moral and aesthetic judgments, an inner sense of rightness that estimated both conduct and discourse according to principles of proportion and balance that in one domain constituted goodness, in another beauty. By developing his students’ ability to write beautifully and to appreciate the beauties of others’ writings, Blair thus understood himself to be helping them grow as moral beings. On this point, the belletristic rhetoricians went beyond Quintilian, who held that the ideal orator should be both morally good and skilled in speaking but made no claim for the morally improving effects of eloquence. (Ferreira-Buckley and Halloran xxxvii)

Blair did not *equate* taste with morality, but he did reinforce that morality could be the consequence of the application of correct taste: “I will not go so far as to say that the improvement of taste and virtue is the same; or that they may always be expected to coexist in an equal degree.... At the same time, this cannot but be admitted, that the exercise of taste is, in its native tendency, moral and purifying” (*L I 9*). Blair believed that if one could recognize the tenets of correct taste, that individual would naturally gravitate toward that which was morally enlightening. As he wrote, “A cultivated taste increases sensibility to all the tender and humane passions, by giving them frequent exercise; while it tends to weaken the more violent and fierce emotions” (*L I 8*). Taste, therefore, would elevate (presumably toward heaven) the proclivities of the individual.

The appeal of this approach is significant. Taste, as understood by Blair, was a faculty that was dual purposed: by learning about correct taste and by exposure to those models of cultivated taste, one became not only an *arbiter*¹ but also a *practitioner* of taste. Taste itself was the result of two characteristics: delicacy, which is the “natural sensibility” of humans and considered to be innate, and correctness, which is improved through “connexion [*sic*] with the understanding” (*L II 14*). Delicacy is universal, a faculty common to all humans. By nature, therefore, all are endowed with the ability to appreciate aesthetics. As Blair expounded, study and exposure to the ideals of correct taste could improve one’s faculty for appreciating

¹ Blair does not believe that each individual or for that matter a majority of individuals can be the *ultimate* judge of what is *de facto* “correct” taste. Admittedly, he’s sliding down a slippery slope of semantics since he seems to suggest a dichotomy between civilized and uncivilized taste, aligning his own preference to those judgments he considers classically sanctioned. While Blair asserts that his judgments on taste should not be the ultimate gold standard, critics such as Franklin Court suggest his authority as final arbiter is implied: “His critical enthusiasm for canonizing certain writers and works betrayed more self-righteous personal zeal than professional discretion or exegetical skill....The classic example of his critical overzealousness was his enthusiastic and formidable defense of James Macpherson’s bogus translations of the Ossian epics” (Court 31).

aesthetics: “From these two sources then, first, the frequent exercise of Taste, and next the application of good sense and reason to the objects of Taste, Taste as a power of the mind receives its improvement” (*L II* 13). Applying thought and reason to one’s innate appreciation, Blair posits, would help an individual avoid succumbing to a taste that is temporary or merely fashionable. Ultimately, and for Blair this was not a minor point, by adhering to correct taste, an individual’s moral framework would be strengthened.

Austen’s understanding of taste mirrors that championed by Blair. Similar to Blair, she asserts that taste is an outward manifestation of an internal faculty. Moreover, she believes taste is an improvable aptitude and asserts that taste is linked to an individual’s morals and character. As Ian Watt remarks, “Jane Austen’s own standards – always present in her use of such terms as ‘reason,’ ‘civility,’ ‘respectability,’ and ‘taste’ – were, like those of her age, much more absolute; and as a novelist she presented all her characters in terms of their relation to a fixed code of values” (43). As we will examine, Austen depicts the inner lives of her characters – their motivations and morals – according to their exercise of taste.

In *Mansfield Park*, for example, one of the substantial debates on aesthetic taste centers on the maintenance and transformation of estates and landscapes in an age of “improvement.” Irene Collins holds that the concept of “improvement” had specific resonance to individuals in the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries:

Enthusiasm for improvement was after all not merely a fashion: it was a key concept of the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries, with twin roots in the agricultural and industrial revolutions on the one hand and the Enlightenment on the other. The word ‘improvement’, like ‘taste’ and ‘fitness,’ had a moral as well as an aesthetic meaning. Widespread prosperity, it was believed, would release and encourage the essential reasonableness of mankind; people would become more gracious, more considerate, more dutiful, more humane. (71)

In *Mansfield Park*, Austen signals character traits by their embrace of landscape and estate improvement schemes of dubious merit. Echoing Collins, Alistair Duckworth notes that “[t]hroughout Jane Austen’s fiction, estates function not only as the settings of action but as indexes to the character and social responsibility of their owners (39).

Henry and Mary Crawford, the newly arrived brother and sister to Mrs. Grant, epitomize the manners and morals of urbane London society. Rather than appreciate the proclivities and tastes of those who reside in rural communities, they are only too eager to renovate the neighborhood (and its inhabitants) according to the fashion of the times. As Henry has quite the reputation as a landscape connoisseur, a “capital improver” (284), he is approached by Mr. Rushworth, fiancé to Maria Bertram, to help with his plan for Sotherton: “I never saw a place that wanted so much improvement in my life; and it is so forlorn, that I do not know what can be done with it” (62). Rushworth reveals that he has just returned from visiting the estate of a friend (Compton) and Repton² has completely altered it. Accordingly, Rushworth now believes that Repton can transform Sotherton as well. Notably, the desired design goes well beyond improving curb appeal to a complete repositioning of the grounds:

Now, at Sotherton, we have a good seven hundred [acres], without reckoning the water meadows; so that I think, if so much could be done at Compton, we need not despair. There have been two or three fine old trees cut down that grew too near the house, and it opens the prospect amazingly, which makes me think that Repton, or any body of that sort, would certainly have the avenue at Sotherton down; the avenue that leads from the west front to the top of the hill.... (65)

His projected plan is alternately praised or censured, depending on the fictional character. Fanny Price is moved to lament the loss of the fallen avenue by reciting Cowper’s verse, “Ye fallen avenues, once more I mourn your fate unmerited” (66). With this passage and the

² Humphrey Repton (1752-1818) was “the most famous landscape artist of the time, who designed well over two hundred gardens” (Ed. note, *Mansfield Park* 652).

subsequent description of the estate of Sotherton as removed from the church (96), Austen is signaling that the tastes of the Crawfords and Mr. Rushworth are not based on a respect for tradition or even morals. Alistair Duckworth observes that

in the context of the anti-improvement literature of the time and of the political prose that frequently makes use of metaphors drawn from the practice of estate improvements, Jane Austen's motif takes on serious meaning. In her view, radical improvements of the kind Repton made were not improvements at all but 'innovations' or 'alterations' of a destructive nature. (47)

Austen suggests that those who were deficient in taste or whose taste was doubtful at best display a desire for novelty at all costs. Neither Rushworth nor Henry Crawford understands the value inherent in tradition, that of securing and administering a property for future generations. Because they are only focused on the present, the past and future are irrelevant. They do not see their duty to the community around them, the alms-houses and the cottages that are a "disgrace" (96). They are not aware that their morals are impugned by their desired distance from the sound of church bells (96): "This, then, is why improvements of the kind the Crawfords favor are distrusted in *Mansfield Park*: they signal a radical attitude to a cultural heritage; they take no account of society as an organic structure; they effect, and indeed seem to favor, a widening of the gap between church and house, religion and the landed order" (Duckworth 54). Fanny alone understands that the avenues of trees at Sotherton are part of the inheritance of the estate; they are a testament of a legacy reaching back centuries to the time of Elizabeth (66), and under the administration of more moral and tasteful owners, they would have been protected for the future.

Austen also uses the debate about Sotherton to subtly indict Mrs. Norris. Without hesitation, Mrs. Norris breathlessly voices her unreserved support of improvements in general:

Such a place as Sotherton Court deserves everything that *taste and money* can do. You have space to work upon there, and grounds that will well reward you. For my own part,

if I had anything within the fiftieth part of the size of Sotherton, *I should be always planting and improving*, for naturally I am excessively fond of it. (63, emphasis added)

Austen impugns Mrs. Norris' aesthetics; Mrs. Norris equates taste with money and suggests that had she the landscape, she would always be improving them as well. This is made clear as Mrs. Norris continues speaking of improvements and reminisces that she and her late husband had improved the parsonage gardens and spent a great deal of money on an apricot tree. Mr. Grant wastes no time (or sense of propriety) in telling her that she had been cheated; the fruit is "so little worth the trouble of gathering," potatoes have as much flavor as those Moor Park apricots and, regrettably, their taste is "insipid" (64). Mrs. Norris' ability to discern and to judge according to aesthetically correct *non-monetary* standards of taste is beyond being doubtful; it is non-existent. In her embrace of questionable and fashionable improvements, Mrs. Norris does not satisfy Blair's ideal of one who exhibits correct taste: "A man of correct taste is one who is never imposed on by counterfeit beauties" (*L II* 14).

That the impetus for Henry's enthusiasm for improvements is based on superficial aesthetic taste is once again revealed in the discussion with Edmund on how he would renovate the parsonage at Thornton Lacey, the site of Edmund's intended living. His advice, unsolicited as it is, comes after he is lost on a ride and happens upon the grounds. Predictably, the renovation as he envisions it will be extensive and dramatic. Henry would eliminate the farm-yard and change the layout of the house to have a new entrance and "approach" (281). He would disguise the blacksmith's shop and remove vestiges of agricultural activity to the back of the house (281). His ultimate goal is to transform it from being a parsonage into a "place" (283):

From being the mere gentleman's residence, it becomes, by *judicious improvement*, the residence of a man of *education, taste, modern manners, good connections*. All this may be stamped on it; and that house receive such an air as to make its owner be set down as the great land-holder of the parish, by every creature travelling the road; especially as

there is no real squire's house to dispute the point – a circumstance, between ourselves, to enhance the value of such a situation in point of privilege and independence beyond all calculation. (283-4, emphasis added)

Edmund recognizes that improvements can be made, but they are minor in comparison to Henry's grand plans. Notably, Henry's sales pitch focuses on external perceptions and appearances. According to Henry, Edmund will derive his worth, not by being a pastor to his "flock," but by being perceived to be "the great land-holder of the parish" (284). The house will appear to be the home of one who is educated, tasteful and with good connections, since being a "mere gentleman" is not enough (283-4).

Edmund, however, will not succumb to Henry's taste. He will be satisfied "with rather less ornament and beauty" (282). Edmund, unlike Henry, believes that a pastor's house must reflect the pastor's position in the community and that position is as a moral and ethical guide, a contributing member to society. Wanting to cover Edmund's home in ostentation and wealth is emblematic of Henry's perception of the role of the clergy. Rather than understanding that the proper role of a pastor is to show men moral guidance, Henry suggests showmanship; instead of recognizing a clergyman's role as pastor within a larger community, he suggests a Potemkin-like façade that proclaims wealth and importance. Since Henry believes that delivering sermons is not unlike performing on a stage, he has designed a "theatre" of ornamentation and opulence. That this illustrates the paucity of Henry's taste is manifest. As Collins remarks, "A show of wealth alone (for instance by building a house which merely proclaimed its owners to be the biggest landowners in the area) was vulgar" (71). Henry has chosen to subscribe to the taste of the age with a zeal for discarding deeply rooted tradition. According to Austen, his "improvements" are egregious indeed.

In his *Lectures*, Blair also acknowledged the fluid nature of taste and the temptation to succumb to questionable or fashionable taste. He counseled his students and readers to be discriminating “to prevent our being carried away by that torrent of false and frivolous taste, which never fails, when it is prevalent, to sweep along with the raw and the ignorant” (*L I 6*). Henry Crawford is Austen’s example of one such individual who believes ostentation is not only fashionable, it is the *standard* of correct taste. Henry epitomizes someone who, according to Blair, relies on an arbitrary and fluctuating standard:

[N]o principle of the human mind is, in its operations, more fluctuating and capricious than Taste. Its variations have been so great and frequent, as to create a suspicion with some, of it being merely arbitrary; grounded on no foundation, ascertainable by no standard, but wholly dependent on changing fancy.... (*L I 15*)

However, Blair believed that correct taste, “[f]ounded on an internal sense of beauty...is capable of being guided and enlightened by reason” (*L I 7*). A personal preference, for example, is not sufficient to guide taste; it must be shaped by reason and by exposure to aesthetic ideals found in nature. Taste, as envisioned by Blair, was a faculty in flux; as individuals used their critical judgment skills shaped by reason and cultivation, their ability to perceive aesthetic taste was likewise refined. Therefore, “instinctive sensibility” was vital but not exclusive; cultivation through reason and study enlarged the ability to understand correct taste. In essence, this is why Blair advocates literary criticism and criticism in general to such a degree as a means of enhancing evaluative skills to appreciate and ascertain correct taste.

Austen reinforces the dichotomy between those who have relied on questionable methods for ascertaining their sense of taste and those who have, following Blair, used reason and study to judiciously evaluate correct taste. She does so by describing another landscape that epitomizes “correct” aesthetic taste. Naturally, it is the example of Pemberley in *Pride and Prejudice*.

It was a large, handsome stone building, standing well on rising ground, and backed by a ridge of high woody hills; and in front, a stream of some *natural* importance was swelled into greater, *but without any artificial appearance*. Its *banks were neither formal nor falsely adorned*. Elizabeth was delighted. She had never seen a place for which *nature had done more*, or where *natural beauty had been so little counteracted by an awkward taste*. (271, emphasis added)

As Austen repeatedly emphasizes in the text, Pemberley is impressive since it works with nature rather than against it. The natural beauty of the grounds has not been “counteracted by an awkward taste” (271). Unlike the proposed renovation of the grounds at Sotherton, Pemberley does not have “artifice,” (271) or “false adorn[ments]” (271). Notwithstanding Elizabeth’s astonished³ impression of the landscape and grounds, Austen emphasizes the link to character by taking Elizabeth on a tour of the interior of the estate. Here, among his art and furniture, the aesthetic tastes of the owner, Mr. Darcy, are revealed:

As they passed into other rooms these objects were taking different positions; but from every window there were beauties to be seen. The rooms were lofty and handsome, and their furniture suitable to the fortune of their proprietor, but Elizabeth saw, with admiration of his taste that it was neither gaudy nor uselessly fine; with less of splendour, and more real elegance, than the furniture of Rosings. (272)⁴

Taste, in the example of Pemberley, tells us much about the owner. Touring Mr. Darcy’s estate and grounds discloses facets of his character that Elizabeth was too prejudiced to observe before. His rooms are elegant and tasteful; they lack pretense or the ostentation of Lady Catherine de Bourgh’s Rosings, which are furnished to impress. Elizabeth discovers, echoing Duckworth, that “excellent aesthetic taste denotes an excellence of moral character” (Duckworth

³ I use “astonished” in accordance with Blair’s own definition as being astonished “at what is vast or great” (*LX* 105). In the next chapter, I will discuss Miss Bingley’s inappropriate choice of the word in the phrase, “I am all astonishment” (30).

⁴ Not surprisingly, I surmise that Blair would share Austen’s appreciation of the elegance of the rooms. After all, one speculates that his support of elegantly turned phrases and an abhorrence of excessive ornamentation in style would apply to interior décor as well.

124). Mr. Rushworth and Henry Crawford are clearly not on par with Mr. Darcy, aesthetically or morally.

Austen tells us more about the taste of the age – and her own opinions on taste – with her contemporary references to art critic, pastor, and trendsetter William Gilpin. In his “Biographical Notice of the Author,” Henry Austen wrote that his sister Jane was “enamored of Gilpin on the Picturesque at a very early age” (Baker 5). According to William Galperin, Gilpin viewed “picturesque beauty as an intermediate or extended category of taste” (46). In her texts, Austen incorporates Gilpin’s theory on the picturesque as a barometer of aesthetic principles and taste. Interestingly, she appears to poke fun at Gilpin’s assertion that beauty is found in rocky crags, crumbled ruins, and twisted trees.

In *Sense and Sensibility*, the vivacious and sentimental Marianne Dashwood has romantic sensitivities and zeal toward life, love, and nature. Edward Ferrars, to whom the more sensible sister Elinor has taken a liking, tells Marianne he does not have her keen affinity for the picturesque, suggesting that his preference is for an aesthetic that unites “beauty with utility” (112). Recognizing the fashionable popularity of Gilpin’s treatise, Marianne acknowledges that admiration of the picturesque has become trite and overused: “Every body pretends to feel and tries to describe with the taste and elegance of him who first defined what picturesque beauty was” (112-3). Marianne appears to imply that it is only those who have the natural taste, an innate appreciation (or “delicacy” to borrow Blair’s term) for aesthetic beauty, who can really recognize the appeal of the picturesque. Contrary to Blair’s counsel, she does not seek to refine her taste through reason or study, so her sense of propriety and taste is based solely on sentiments and sensations. Because she relies on emotions alone, she believes that Edward, with

his pragmatic understanding of utility, is devoid of taste. Edward, however, defends his understanding of aesthetics to her:

I am convinced . . . that you really feel all the delight in a fine prospect which you profess to feel. But, in return, your sister must allow me to feel no more than I profess. I like a fine prospect, but not on picturesque principles. I do not like crooked, twisted, blasted trees. I admire them much more if they are tall, straight and flourishing. I do not like ruined, tattered cottages. I am not fond of nettles, or thistles, or heath blossoms. I have more pleasure in a snug farm-house than a watch-tower — and a troop of tidy, happy villagers please me better than the finest banditti⁵ in the world. (113)

Clearly, Edward is taking aim at the sentimentalized depictions of the picturesque in Gilpin's assorted tour books and sketches, which feature abandoned castles and ruins throughout Europe. While decidedly romantic and evocative, these representations of the idealized landscape leave much to be desired for the rational and pragmatic Edward.

Reversing the gender roles, Catherine Morland in *Northanger Abbey* similarly undergoes an initiation into the picturesque, this time under the tutelage of Henry Tilney.

... a lecture on the picturesque immediately followed, in which his instructions were so clear that she soon began to see beauty in everything admired by him, and her attention was so earnest that he became perfectly satisfied of her having a great deal of natural taste. He talked of foregrounds, distances, and second distances — side-screens and perspectives — lights and shades; and Catherine was so hopeful a scholar that when they gained the top of Beechen Cliff, she voluntarily rejected the whole city of Bath as unworthy to make part of a landscape. (112-3)

Catherine Morland is naïve and unlearned. What little sense of aesthetic taste she has absorbed in her young life has been the result of the gothic novels she has read. Still, she is impressionable and, admittedly, a quick learner. Henry is giving Catherine her first concrete lesson in aesthetic taste, which will influence and enhance her appreciation of language and literature.

⁵ From "Essay One" of Gilpin's *Three Essays on Picturesque Subjects* (1792); "Picturesque aesthetics valued bandits and peasants, outlaws and the lower orders in paintings...as objects safely framed within a reassuring hegemonic view" (Ed. note, *Sense and Sensibility*, 460-461).

In *Pride and Prejudice*, Elizabeth Bennet obliquely references Gilpin when she tells Caroline Bingley that she would prefer not to join them as they walk the grounds: “No, no; stay where you are. You are charmingly grouped, and appear to uncommon advantage. The picturesque would be spoiled by admitting a fourth. Good-bye” (58). The allusion references Gilpin’s observations on the number of cattle in a properly picturesque pastoral scene.⁶ This particular quip establishes that Elizabeth, notwithstanding her protestation earlier in the novel that she was not a “great reader” (41), is, in fact, a well-rounded reader who is *au courant*. As an added benefit, it also allows Elizabeth to innocently compare the arrogant Miss Bingley to livestock. Advantage Miss Bennet.

While Blair does not write about the picturesque per se, he does evoke a pastoral scene as an example of natural beauty, which recalls the landscapes described by Gilpin. In *Lecture V*, Blair addresses beauty as a pleasure or component of taste by describing the emotions that arise when one is presented with natural beauty that is sublime: “Perhaps the most complete assemblage of beautiful objects that can any where be found, is presented by a rich natural landscape, where there is a sufficient variety of objects: fields in verdure, scattered trees and flowers, running water and animals grazing” (*L V* 48).⁷

An appreciation of nature – rather than a desire to alter it – is a characteristic that Austen suggests is integral to an individual of correct taste. Accordingly, taste is not just an outward approbation; it is an innate characteristic that manifests itself in the ability to recognize beauty and aesthetics external to oneself. Again, this is in accord with Blair’s definition of taste as

⁶ Gilpin’s *Observations*, Vol. 2, p.259 (Ed. note, *Pride and Prejudice* 482).

⁷ One surmises Blair is referring to the “correct” number of animals grazing. The description continues with “arches over a river” and “smoke rising from cottages in the midst of trees” and there are no hapless hooligans or “banditti” in sight. Edward Ferrars would have been pleased with the description (*L V* 48). Incidentally, the description of Robert Martin’s farm in *Emma* evokes a similar scene, “with all its appendages of prosperity and beauty, its rich pastures, its spreading flocks, orchard in blossom and light column of smoke ascending” (391).

comprised of both correctness and delicacy. So, for example, in *Mansfield Park*, Fanny Price can appreciate the stars and the sublime beauty of nature while Mary Crawford can only marvel at herself “in nature” (244, emphasis added): “She had none of Fanny’s *delicacy of taste, of mind, of feeling*; she saw nature, inanimate nature, with little observation; her attention was all for men and women, her talents for the light and lively” (94). Reflecting Blair’s counsel, Fanny uses both faculties — reason and emotion—in her approbation of taste. Consider Fanny’s words as she rapturously describes the night sky to Edmund:

Here’s harmony! . . . here’s repose! Here’s what may leave all painting and all music behind, and what poetry only can attempt to describe! . . . When I look out on such a night as this, I feel as if there could be neither wickedness nor sorrow in the world; and there certainly would be less of both if the sublimity of Nature were more attended to, and people were carried more out of themselves by contemplating such a scene.⁸ (132)

Edmund shares Fanny’s reverence for nature. He seems to allude to Mary Crawford when he tells Fanny that those who have not been instructed in taste for the natural world are somehow deprived: “. . . they are much to be pitied who have not been taught to feel, in some degree, as you do; who have not, at least, been given a taste for Nature in early life. They lose a great deal” (132).

Fanny reminds Edmund that in fact it was due to his tutelage, his “encourage[ment of] her taste” (25, 132) that her ability to appreciate the beauty of nature, influenced by her intellect, was refined. Fanny has therefore satisfied the necessary criteria according to Blair and is consequently exercising correct aesthetic taste. She is clearly using her innate sensibility, a delicacy that is given to all humans; additionally, her “correct” taste has been honed by the instruction of Edmund, who by “correct[ing] her judgment” (25) has sharpened her reason.

⁸ Blair similarly ranks the imitative arts in a hierarchy: “Poetry . . . is superior to the imitative powers of Painting and Music . . .”; “Discourse and Writing [are] above all other imitative arts” (*L V* 53).

Austen likewise emphasizes the link between aesthetic taste and education in *Sense and Sensibility*. Marianne Dashwood criticizes Edward Ferrars for what she perceives to be his absence of aesthetic taste. Elinor, however, defends his innate abilities (delicacy) while recognizing the lack of instruction that could have improved his taste:

He does not draw himself, indeed, but he has great pleasure in seeing the performances of other people, and I assure you he is *by no means deficient in natural taste, though he has not had opportunities of improving it*. Had he ever been in the way of learning, I think he would have drawn very well. He distrusts his own judgment in such matters so much, that he is always unwilling to give his opinion on any picture; *but he has an innate propriety and simplicity of taste, which in general direct him perfectly right*. (22, emphasis added)

Marianne does not believe that Edward has the capacity for appreciating drawing since he lacked “rapturous delight” in his “approbation” of works of art (22). She will say the same about Colonel Brandon who, Marianne believes, “has neither genius, taste, nor spirit” (61) and therefore cannot appreciate her musical talents. According to Joseph Wiesenfarth, “Marianne emphasizes sensibility in taste in a way that is not sanctioned by the standard reference on the subject in Jane Austen’s day” (171). This interpretation is in opposition to the guidance extolled by belletrists such as Hugh Blair. As Blair writes:

But although Taste can be ultimately founded on sensibility, it must not be considered as instinctive sensibility alone. Reason and good sense, as I before hinted, have so extensive an influence on all the operations and decisions of Taste, that a thorough good taste may well be considered as a power compounded of natural sensibility to beauty, to improved understanding. (*L II* 12-13)

Lynn Rigberg suggests that in *Sense and Sensibility*, “[h]ow characters deal, generally, with matters of judgment is often suggested through their declarations of taste. This correlation adds credence to the argument for educating taste as a means of enlightening reason so it may dominate the emotions in determining moral conduct” (68). Alas, Marianne relies on emotion rather than reason as the arbiter for taste. As the novel progresses, it becomes clear that

Marianne's sensitivities and comments are more an indication of her own questionable taste rather than an indictment of the tastes of Colonel Brandon and Edward Ferrars.

Aesthetic taste, according to Austen and Blair, can also be revealed through the appreciation of music. While Blair asserts the primacy of oral and written discourse, he does recognize the aesthetic properties of music: "The Pleasures of Melody and Harmony belong also to Taste. There is no agreeable sensation we receive, either from Beauty or Sublimity, but what is capable of being heightened by the power of musical sound" (*L V* 51). In Austen's novels, individuals appear to either exhibit musical taste or converse at great length about it; rarely will characters do both. Mary Crawford in *Mansfield Park* is one of the few.

Mary is witty, cosmopolitan and representative of London society. She epitomizes socially sanctioned manners and accomplishment with her quick conversation and musical talent. While her aesthetic taste in landscape design is dubious, Austen's narrator tells us that she excelled as a musician:

The harp arrived, and rather added to her beauty, wit, and good-humour; for she played with the greatest obligingness, *with an expression and taste which were peculiarly becoming*, and there was something clever to be said at the close of every air. Edmund was at the Parsonage every day, to be indulged with his favourite instrument: one morning secured an invitation for the next; for the lady could not be unwilling to have a listener, and every thing was soon in a fair train. (76, emphasis added)

Mary Crawford beguiles Edmund with her musical talent. Her audience, including Fanny, is captivated by her elegant form and enchanted by her melodic skill. It appears that while she may practice compositions, she does not practice humility. Promoting herself, she informs Edmund that she embodies musical excellence as she has both "natural taste" and ability (69). Austen signals, however, that while her musicality may be aesthetically pleasing, it is not edifying. In her zeal to transport the harp so she can exhibit her musical prowess, she selfishly

thinks only of herself rather than the farmers who, during the late harvest of hay, have a more serious and justifiable claim to the wagons: “To want a horse and cart in the country. . . . Guess my surprise, when I found that I had been asking the most unreasonable, most impossible thing in the world; had offended all the farmers, all the labourers, all the hay in the parish!” (68). She has talent, not morally sanctioned taste.

Promoting one’s musical talents — even without actually acquiring one — is not unique to Mary Crawford. In *Pride and Prejudice*, Lady Catherine de Bourgh, Darcy Fitzwilliam’s aunt and the proprietress of the infamous estate of Rosings, suggests that had she been taught to play an instrument, her abilities would have been unsurpassable: “There are few people in England, I suppose, who have more true enjoyment of music than myself, or a better natural taste. If I had ever learnt, I should have been a great proficient” (194). Unlike Blair’s dictum that natural taste alone is not sufficient to be considered “correct” taste, Lady Catherine is convinced of her exceptional musical skill even without the additional refinement of, well, learning how to play music. In effect, Lady Catherine has the best of both worlds. Unlike Elizabeth Bennet who admits she does not practice as much as she should (197) and whose accomplishments are therefore suspect in the eyes (and ears) of Lady Catherine, the distinguished owner of Rosings does not have to prove her ostensible talent by demonstration. In fact, she simply *cannot* verify her smug supposition. Elizabeth’s observations to Mr. Darcy that practice is vital to the refinement of a skill is not only germane to Darcy; Elizabeth also subtly refutes Lady Catherine’s pedantic pronouncement of probable proficiency.

Practice alone, however, does not provide one with an elevated taste or faculty for music. In the same novel, Elizabeth’s sister Mary plays, practices and performs. But it is to no avail. As Austen writes, Mary Bennet has “neither genius nor taste” (27) in music; she does, however,

have a “pedantic air and conceited manner” (27), thereby revealing that she does not have that innate appreciation or ability to recognize delicacy and correct taste.

Another character who shares both Lady Catherine’s self-confidence and lack of musicality is Mrs. Elton in the novel *Emma*. Augusta Hawkins, as she was before Mr. Elton noticed her charming enticements (read £20,000⁹), is the daughter of a successful man in trade. Her crude manners and magnified sense of self-worth appear to be the result of her lack of familiarity with the tastes and manners of the genteel class. As a member of the *nouveau riche*, she is a newcomer to the elevated echelons of society. Her coarseness in comportment betrays her.

Of course, Mrs. Elton thinks she has taste and a superior appreciation of music:

I am doatingly fond of music – passionately fond; – and my friends say I am not entirely devoid of taste....I assure you it has been the greatest satisfaction, comfort, and delight to me, to hear what a musical society I am got into. I absolutely cannot do without music. It is a necessary of life to me; and having always been used to a very musical society, both at Maple Grove and in Bath, it would have been a most serious sacrifice. (297-8)

Mrs. Elton approaches Emma with the novel idea of starting a musical club so they can have regular meetings that will serve as an “inducement” for her to practice her musical talent; married women, she fears, “are but too apt to give up music” (299). Emma is nonplussed. The proposition to form a club suggests that they have a close relationship and that they are “bosom friends” (301), which Emma cannot abide. Emma, on the other hand, is honest in self-appraising her aesthetic skills, aware that, unlike Jane Fairfax, she is not a “mistress of music” (233): “She played and sang; ...but steadiness had always been wanting; and in nothing had she approached the degree of excellence which she would have been glad to command.... She was not much deceived as to her own skill either as an artist or a musician...” (46). According to her self-

⁹ According to the text, Mr. Elton ostensibly marries Augusta with an income of £20,000 (70, 147), but, after they are married, it is revealed that she has only £10,000, “or thereabouts” (195).

diagnoses, Mrs. Elton's sense of taste is so highly evolved that it allows her to be the arbiter of other individual's tastes. Accordingly, she believes she is justified in her criticisms by pointing out the "shabby" lack of lace at Emma's wedding (528) and by making derogatory comparisons between Bath and Maple Grove and Highbury (298). Not unlike Mrs. Norris in *Mansfield Park*, Mrs. Elton's concept of taste is as an accoutrement that comes with money. While Austen and Blair categorize taste as both innate and learned, Augusta Elton sees taste as an acquisition commensurate with one's station in life.

As Austen's novels illustrate, taste in music is but one of the criteria upon which a woman is judged to be accomplished. In *Pride and Prejudice*, for example, it is also the topic of an important conversation in which Miss Bingley attempts to distinguish women such as herself from the "lesser" Bennets:

...[N]o one can be really esteemed accomplished who does not greatly surpass what is usually met with. A woman must have a thorough knowledge of music, singing, drawing, dancing, and the modern languages, to deserve the word; and besides all this, she must possess a certain something in her air and manner of walking, the tone of her voice, her address and expressions, or the word will be but half-deserved. (43)

These words, coming as they do after Elizabeth has confessed to enjoying reading while having little musical talent, appear to have the demeaning effect Miss Bingley intended. Austen, however, signals her belief of what constitutes true accomplishment with Darcy's ready quip: "All this she must possess," added Darcy, "and to all this she must yet add something more substantial, in the improvement of her mind by extensive reading" (43).

Isobel Grundy writes that for both Austen and her fictional characters, "books and life are not divided; books are a vital part of life" (207). In each of her novels, as Mary Lascelles articulated in *Jane Austen and her Art*, Austen portrays taste in reading as measurable and

qualitative features for each of her characters (47). Even the admission from a coarse and questionably illiterate John Thorpe that he does not read novels (*Northanger Abbey* 43) conveys to the fictional characters and audience alike the negative traits in his personality. Frank Bradbrook observes:

The reader of Jane Austen's novels is constantly reminded of the world of books, especially in the early burlesques, and in *Northanger Abbey*, which are directly concerned with extravagant behavior resulting from a false taste in reading. Characters are revealed in their reactions to the world of fiction as much as in their conduct and manners. For Jane Austen believed that mistaken behavior, immorality, and lack of intelligence, as exemplified in reading, are connected with each other. (138)

In his advocacy for literary criticism, Blair also stressed the importance of reading and the importance of familiarizing oneself with estimable models of written discourse: "Precisely in the same manner, with respect to the beauty of composition and discourse, attention to the most approved models, study of the best authors, comparisons of lower and higher degrees of the same beauties operate toward the refinement of Taste" (*L II* 12). As the author of a 44-volume compilation on the British poets, it is not surprising that Blair ranked poetry in the top tier of discursive arts and pointed to poetry as examples of superior models. However, Blair also recognized the importance of the emerging genre of fiction and its potential to play a significant social role.

In *Lecture XXXVII*, Blair addressed the categories of philosophical, dialogic, epistolary and fictitious history composition. Contrary to those who maligned the genre of fiction, Blair recognized both its appeal and potential impact:

For any kind of Writing, how trifling soever in appearance, that obtains a general currency, and especially that early pre-occupies the imagination of the youth of both sexes, must demand particular attention. Its influence is likely to be considerable, both on the morals and taste of a nation. (*L XXXVII* 421)

Blair even goes so far as to suggest that it is not in the nature of the genre of fiction, but rather the faulty execution of it, that can “expose [fiction] to any contempt” (421). He acknowledges novels have been more effective than instruction and recognizes their role as “vehicles of knowledge” (421). He tempers his sanction, however, in discussing more contemporary authors (although he praises both Richardson and Fielding) and opines that some trivial and lesser works of fiction might lead their readers to “dissipation and idleness” (424).

Austen herself addresses the question of the impact of fiction on readers in the novel *Northanger Abbey*, which investigates that influence on one particularly young reader, Catherine Morland. Catherine is impressionable and naïve and shows very little promise in becoming accomplished; she was “often inattentive,” “occasionally stupid,” and “shirked her lessons” (6) at every possibility. Her exposure to (and retention of) classical literature was minimal, although she did read sonnets (8). Her most significant forays into literature were the gothic novels she and her new friend, Isabella Thorpe, read together. Kelly suggests that for Austen, “education is not the acquisition of information nor a matter of native talent but the cultivation of the mind, and reading books, like reading people and situations, . . . is something one must cultivate and improve, in oneself and others, whatever one’s natural ‘temper’ may be” (“Reading Aloud” 29-30). Again, Austen echoes Blair’s own edict that the age calls for the cultivation and improvement of taste – in this case, literary taste – in order to participate in discourse:

In an age when works of genius and literature are so frequently the subjects of discourse, when every one erects himself into a judge, and when we can hardly mingle in polite society without bearing some share in such discussions; studies of this kind . . . thereby enabling us to support a proper rank in social life. (*L I 7*)

Notably, while parodying certain customary features of the gothic novel, Austen willingly defends the novel as a genre and art: “[A novel is] some work in which the greatest

powers of the mind are displayed, in which the most thorough knowledge of human nature, the happiest delineation of its varieties, the liveliest effusions of wit and humor are conveyed to the world in the best chosen language” (31). Contrary to the naysayers and those readers who out of shame conceal their love for novels, Austen adds that fiction is recommended by “genius, wit and taste” (31).

Blair echoes Austen’s support for the novel with his similarly worded defense: “They [fictitious histories] furnish one of the best channels for conveying instruction, for painting human life and manners, for showing the errors into which we are betrayed by our passions, for rendering virtue amiable and vice odious” (*L XXXVII* 421). Clearly, Blair applies a more didactic and edifying mission to fiction in his justification; however, he does see the merit of novels unlike those who malign them as subversive to tastes or morals.

Catherine’s faults as a reader are to a larger degree the consequence of her inability to think and read critically rather than her specific choice of reading. Catherine has not acquired those evaluative skills necessary to understand context; instead of using reason or intellect, she relies on imagination and emotion. Catherine reads for pleasure by seeking out texts that are “all story and no reflection” (7) and is adverse to “real solemn history” (109). This is in contrast to Eleanor Tilney, who admits that her range of reading is broad and that she enjoys history (110). As Mooneyham observes, Catherine’s “mistakes stem from two misjudgments – too much confidence in the honesty of others and in the honesty of what she reads. The first stage of her linguistic education is social.... The second stage is literary; she learns that books are no measure of the real world” (5). Due to her limited exposure to the world, she is susceptible to misinterpreting the fiction she reads as representative of real life. Because of her keen

imagination, Catherine cannot distinguish between the world of the novel and the world within which she lives.

The reading audience and Catherine alike are convinced of John Thorpe's lack of literary taste when he announces that he has things to do other than read novels: "Novels are all so full of nonsense and stuff; there has not been a tolerably decent one come out since *Tom Jones*, except *The Monk*; I read that t'other day; but as for all the others, they are the stupidest things in creation" (43). Notwithstanding his astonishment that Mrs. Radcliffe is the author of *Udolpho*, John Thorpe has committed a larger *faux pas*; his positive appraisal of both *Tom Jones* and *The Monk* serve to re-enforce that his morality is suspect. Grundy suggests that this is precisely Austen's aim: "As with characters, so with books: judgment, both moral and intellectual, is an important part of the response she solicits" (191).

When Catherine apprises Henry of her suspicions regarding his father, he tells her to what degree she has let gothic fiction subvert reason and knowledge: "What have you been judging from? Remember the country and the age in which we live. Remember that we are English, that we are Christians. Consult your own understanding, your own sense of the probable, your own observation of what is passing around you" (203). Since Henry has been teaching Catherine about aesthetic taste and language and her disposition was marked by "teachableness" (179), she heeds his words. Not unlike a gothic novel, Catherine, the hapless heroine, awakens from the spell.

When Catherine returns home and mopes around the house, her pragmatic mother assumes that she is finding it difficult to readjust to reduced opulence. She tells Catherine that an essay in *The Mirror* will help her readjust: "There is a very clever essay in one of the books upstairs upon much such a subject, about young girls that have been spoilt for home by great

acquaintance...” (250). As the reader knows, this is not the source of Catherine’s anxiety or restlessness, but it does parallel another story from Austen’s juvenilia. In “Catharine, or, The Bower,” Catharine’s aunt frustratingly expounds on the edifying literature she had bought for Catharine and specifically references Blair’s *Sermons*:

Such Impudence, I never witnessed before in such a Girl! And this is the reward for all the cares I have taken in your Education; for all my troubles and Anxieties; and Heaven knows how many they have been! All I wished for, was to breed you up virtuously; I never wanted you to play upon the Harpsichord, or draw better than any one else; but I had hoped to see you respectable and good; to see you able and willing to give an example of Modesty and Virtue to the Young people hereabouts. I bought you Blair’s *Sermons*, and *Coelebs in Search of a Wife*, I gave you the key to my own Library, and borrowed a great many good books of my Neighbors for you, all to this purpose. (287)¹⁰

Unlike the reference to Blair’s *Sermons* in *Mansfield Park*, Catharine’s aunt focuses on content rather than form. Blair’s *Sermons* and Hannah More’s *Coelebs* serve as instructive models for exemplary behavior. Catharine’s aunt implies that an individual’s morality can be shaped by what she reads; Austen, in a similar vein, points to what an individual reads as illustrative of character.

It is not known whether Catherine Morland reads the suggested essay in *The Mirror* or not, but we do know that she has an epiphany: “The visions of romance were over. Catherine was completely awakened” (204). Just as she will learn how to be discriminating with her friendships after the deceit of the Thorpes, Catherine will be more discriminating in her reading. She will discover that as “charming as were all of Mrs. Radcliffe’s works, and charming even as were the works of all her imitators, it was not in them perhaps that human nature, at least in the

¹⁰ “It is significant that two very successful novels of the years preceding *Mansfield Park*’s composition, Hannah More’s *Coelebs in Search of a Wife* (1809) and Mary Brunton’s *Self-Control* (1810), are both strongly Evangelical in feeling. Austen had certainly read the second and almost certainly the first (Ed. Introduction, *Mansfield Park*, li). The original reference to Seccar’s *Explanation of the Catechism* was crossed out and *Coelebs* was inserted (Ed. note, *Juvenilia* 287). Doody speculates, “Presumably Austen deleted the reference to Thomas Secker’s *Explanation of the Catechism* as uncomfortably close to a sacred text” (“Jane Austen’s Reading” 349).

midland counties of England, was to be looked for” (205). She will cease to see the world through the filter of gothic romance and instead cultivate correct taste in books and aesthetics. Ultimately, *Northanger Abbey*, as Rigberg asserts, reinforces the aesthetic and moral features of taste inherent in belletristic rhetoric: “Highlighting the education of taste, *Northanger Abbey* ultimately defends nineteenth-century rhetorical philosophy’s belief that rhetoric and belles lettres are important tools for learning to perceive accurately life’s aesthetic and moral persuasions, the principle relating aesthetic training with moral receptivity” (42).

In *Sense and Sensibility*, Austen juxtaposes two central characters as a way of illuminating each of their aesthetic and moral persuasions. That Marianne espouses sensibility is apparent in her musicality and choice of reading. She is an avid reader of poetry, plays the pianoforte, and is accomplished in singing. Because she believes her tastes to be so enlightened, she is exasperated when she hears Edward Ferrars read aloud. According to her enlightened opinion, as she tells her mother, Edward has done Cowper an injustice:

- Oh! Mama, how spiritless, how tame was Edward’s manner in reading to us last night! To hear those beautiful lines which have frequently almost driven me wild, pronounced with such impenetrable coldness, such dreadful indifference!
- He would certainly have done more justice to simple and elegant prose. I thought so at the time; but you *would* give him Cowper.
- Nay, Mama, if he is not to be animated by Cowper! – but we must allow for difference of taste. Elinor has not my feelings, and therefore she may overlook it, and be happy with him. But it would have broken my heart had I loved him, to hear him read with so little sensibility! (20)

Marilyn Butler suggests that Marianne “equates lack of ‘taste’ with lack of response, an inability to enter subjectively into the emotions of a writer...” (185). Marianne faults Edward because she equates *how* a text is read to *engaging with* the text, and his passiveness is emblematic of his lack of aesthetic appreciation. Elinor, however, understands taste as Blair himself sanctioned: a natural appreciation guided by intellect and refinement. Elinor is more

reasoned and therefore perspicuous in her assessment of Edward's sense of taste: "I have seen a great deal of him, have studied his sentiments and heard his opinion on subjects of literature and taste; and upon the whole, I venture to pronounce that his mind is well-informed, his enjoyment of books exceedingly great... and his taste delicate and pure" (23).

The other men with whom Marianne engages at Barton Park fail in the taste quotient as well. She begrudgingly acknowledges Colonel Brandon's polite recognition of her musical skills while condemning everyone else: "He paid her only the compliment of attention; and she felt a respect for him on the occasion, which the others had reasonably forfeited by *their shameless want of taste*" (42, emphasis added). Marianne's sensibility is so strong that she resolutely decrees that "I could not be happy with a man whose taste did not in every point coincide with my own. He must enter into all my feelings; the same books, the same music must charm us both" (20). Happily for Marianne, Willoughby enters the picture and does just that.

After Willoughby comes to Marianne's assistance after her fall, he visits the recuperating invalid. Within a short period of time, they reveal their ostensibly similar tastes:

... Her favourite authors were brought forward and dwelt upon with so rapturous a delight that any young man . . . must have been insensible indeed not to become an immediate convert to the excellence of such works, however disregarded before. The same books, the same passages were idolized by each – or, if any difference appeared, any objection arose, it lasted no longer than till the force of her arguments and the brightness of her eyes could be displayed. He acquiesced in all her decisions, caught all her enthusiasm; and long before his visit concluded, they conversed with the freedom of a long-established acquaintance. (56)

Marianne is taken in by Willoughby as much as he appears to be taken in by Marianne. Austen suggests that Willoughby's tastes might have been different but that he was *converted* by her in that he *acquiesced* in all her decisions and made his own preferences amenable to hers. For

a woman of such sensibility, it is indisputable to Marianne that they *must* develop an attachment by sharing the same tastes in books and poetry.

Marianne will learn to her chagrin, after Willoughby leaves her for the wealthy Miss Grey, that she relied exclusively on feelings and on *perceived* parallels in taste. She will recognize that if one is guided by aesthetics alone – if one has not acquired a correct taste that is guided by intellect and cultivated by study, according to Blair’s dictum – then one is susceptible to error and misjudgment. A lack of discernment, an overt antagonism to decorum, does not make one a romantic free-spirit; it forces an individual to make morally suspect choices that ultimately impact one’s reputation and station in life.

Due to her reliance on sensibility and feelings, Marianne has also miscalculated the depth of her sister’s emotions. Elinor does indeed have feelings; she just does not flaunt them and wear them on her sleeves. Elinor by nature is much more circumspect. She is guided by internal morality and enlightened by reason and, therefore, follows the precepts of Blair. Unlike Marianne who appears to chafe under the restraints of rules and propriety, Elinor understands that social norms are not as much limiting as they are self-defining. The responsibility to oneself as a moral being, Elinor realizes, is also reflected in our duties to others. Marianne’s fault, then, is not in feeling or sensibility per se, but rather in her selfishness, in her *focus* on self to the exclusion of those around her. Later Marianne confesses to Elinor just how selfish she had been: “You, who had seen all the fretful selfishness of my latter days; ... I cannot express my own abhorrence of myself. Whenever I looked towards the past, I saw some duty neglected, or some failing indulged” (392). At the conclusion of the novel, Marianne remarks that she will “enter on a serious course of study” so she can gain the “great deal of instruction” she is lacking (388-9). Appropriately enough, this course of study will entail substantial reading.

Earlier, in the analysis on *Northanger Abbey*, we discussed Catherine Morland's perception of the world as shaded by gothic fiction. In *Pride and Prejudice*, Austen incorporates two characters who not only read but *emulate* the content of their literary texts.

Mary Bennet is quite unlike her sisters. Jane is beautiful and graceful; Elizabeth is witty and engaging. Lydia and Kitty are flirtatious and vacuous, and Mary, well... Mary is the audible version of a female conduct book. Her father's praise, "[f]or you are a young lady of deep reflection, I know, and read great books and make extracts" (7), is immediately refuted with the acknowledgement that she has nothing "sensible" to say (7). Her discourse is taken verbatim from the conduct books and didactic tomes she reads. Mary also quotes directly from Blair's *Lectures*.

Early in the novel, the Bennet family discusses Mr. Darcy's performance at the ball where he was introduced to them. Due to his disdain for dancing and general air of incivility, they are convinced of his conceit and pride. Mary, not one to miss a teachable moment, pedantically proffers: "Vanity and Pride are different things, though the words are often used synonymously. A person may be proud without being vain. Pride relates more to our opinion of ourselves; vanity to what we would have others think of us" (21). In *Lecture X, on Style – Perspicuity and Precision*, Blair cites words that are frequently used within the wrong contexts. One such pairing is the concept of pride and vanity. "Pride," Blair tells us, "makes us esteem ourselves; Vanity, makes us desire the esteem of others" (*L X* 106).¹¹

¹¹ Laura Vorachek suggests that Mary's quote regarding vanity and pride is taken from Fordyce: "Have you no ingenuous pride?" he asks. "Are you so very vain, (pride and vanity are different things) so very ignorant, after all the admonitions you have received as still to construe flattery into approbation, and smiles into attachment?" (qtd in Vorachek 133). As indicated above, I believe the reference is much closer to Blair than Fordyce. I agree with Vorachek, however, that Austen "evaluates" and "occasionally invert[s] Fordyce's 'pronouncements'" (136).

While Mary draws her discourse from female conduct literature, Mr. Collins is delighted to read them aloud. As a guest to the Bennet household, Mr. Collins is invited to read aloud and a novel is given to him. He recoils at seeing the text, “begging pardon, protested that he never read novels” (76), and selects Fordyce’s *Sermons* instead. His selection signals that his focus is not on their entertainment but rather on their “improvement.” His act displays hubris and lack of decorum. The household is justly affronted.

Irene Collins notes that Jane Austen “could not stand interfering parsons, especially when they presumed to prescribe proper conduct for young ladies” (101). After three pages of “monotonous solemnity,” Lydia interrupts his reading and this time it is Mr. Collins who is offended. He is not too slighted to lecture them, however: “I have often observed how little young ladies are interested by books of a serious stamp, though written solely for their benefit. It amazes me, I confess; for, certainly, there can be nothing so advantageous to them as instruction” (77). According to Penelope Fritzer, Austen caricatures the character of Mr. Collins more than she mocks the genre itself: “Mr. Collins is a parody of courtesy book behaviour because he has no innate sense of good manners: he doesn’t know how to use what he has learned because he has no judgment. It is not the courtesy books that Austen is parodying but the character who is too dull to use them properly” (70). That he is shallow and does not apply the same didactic rubric to himself is evident later in the novel. Instead of reading a substantial text, “one of the largest folios in the collection,” for example, he eagerly excuses himself to amble about in the garden: “Mr. Collins, being in fact much better fitted for a walker than a reader, was extremely pleased to close his large book and go” (80). Instead of following Blair’s exhortation to engage with texts and read critically to acquire more judicious and correct tastes (*L II 12*), Mr. Collins simply rejects anything from a circulating library as being beneath him. He suggests that the girls

are not taking advantage of the moral instructions written for their behalf while he himself exhibits a complete disdain for decorum.

Miss Bingley is another character in *Pride and Prejudice* who acts as if she has great taste in reading but is instead woefully illiterate. In her earlier inventory of the attributes of accomplished women, it is not surprising that reading or conversing on the literary arts were not among the listed qualities. After Darcy's assertion that reading is vital to being called "accomplished," she feigns interest in Darcy's book and picks up her own:

Miss Bingley's attention was quite as much engaged in watching Mr. Darcy's progress through *his* book, as in reading her own; and she was perpetually either making some inquiry or looking at his page. . . . At length, quite exhausted by the attempt to be amused by her own book, which she had only chosen because it was the second volume, of his, she gave a great yawn and said, "How pleasant it is to spend an evening in this way! I declare after all there is no enjoyment like reading! How much sooner one tires of any thing than of a book! – When I have a house of my own, I shall be miserable if I have not an excellent library" (60).

Revealingly, if all the other clues about Miss Bingley's pretense weren't enough, the narrator subsequently adds that Miss Bingley "threw aside her book" (60).

Miss Bingley praises the outward manifestations of accomplishments -- "thorough knowledge of music, singing, drawing, dancing, and the modern languages" (43) -- without looking at the significance of internal traits. She throws the book aside because she cannot engage with its content; she lacks the ability to interact with the literature on an intellectual level. Miss Bingley's comments about the library are indicative of her view that books are ornamental and a library is a symbol of status and wealth. When she praises Mr. Darcy for his library, it is illustrative that she focuses on *acquisition* rather than the significance of building a repository of knowledge:

-What a delightful library you have at Pemberley, Mr. Darcy!
- It ought to be good, he replied, it has been the work of many generations.

- And then you have added so much to it yourself, you are always buying books.
- I cannot comprehend the neglect of a family library in such days as these.
- Neglect! I am sure you neglect nothing that can add to the beauties of that noble place.... (41)

Mr. Darcy sees the value inherent in building, and reading, a library of distinction. His comment that the library is the work of many generations reveals that he sees himself as a steward who holds Pemberley in trust. That he continues to add to his collection is significant as well. Mr. Darcy is cognizant of his responsibility to future generations; he “sees the culture represented by books as an important public and social responsibility” (Scott 23). Mr. Darcy is procuring and reading books, but unlike Mr. Rushworth or Henry Crawford, he is not idly designing “improvements” as an ostentatious display of his wealth.

That Austen sees the establishment and use of libraries as an important indicator of one’s literary tastes is re-enforced with Mr. Bingley’s own comments. Mr. Bingley’s apology to Elizabeth Bennet, admitting that he has regrettably few books in his collection, highlights that he understands he is deficient in his responsibilities: “...I wish my collection were larger for your benefit and my own credit, but I am an idle fellow, and thought I have not many, I have more than I ever looked into” (41). Mr. Bingley is a likeable fellow, good-natured and kind, but he is not a paradigm of literary taste as is Mr. Darcy.

Mr. Bennet is censured as well. While Mr. Bennet spends hours in his library, he is not motivated by intellectual curiosity. His library is not the “family library” of Mr. Darcy, one that has been the work of many generations. Mr. Bennet’s library is merely a refuge *from* his family: “In his library he had been always sure of leisure and tranquility; and though prepared, as he told Elizabeth, to meet with folly and conceit in every other room of the house, he was used to be[ing] free from them there...” (80). He absconds from his social responsibilities to his family

by physically removing himself from their presence. Undoubtedly, he believes this is sufficient to inure himself from their problems and concerns. The fact that he does not take his familial responsibilities seriously is evident in his disregard of Elizabeth's plea to check Lydia's behavior before she will be "beyond the reach of amendment" (256). Mr. Bennet's sardonic wit is a cover for his inability to fulfill any part of a patriarchal role within his family. Perhaps, one surmises, Mr. Bennet himself could have benefitted from reading the *Sermons* of both Fordyce and Blair.

Taste in reading is not featured as prominently in *Emma* as in *Pride and Prejudice*. Ironically, the individual whose character is revealed the most through his reading is also the one who has no dialogue and, therefore, nothing to say. Of special note, his reading obliquely references Blair's own *Lectures*. Mr. Robert Martin is a successful, enterprising and responsible tenant farmer on Mr. Knightley's estate of Donwell Abbey. He is also, in Emma's estimation, "awkward and abrupt" (33) and a man of very little aesthetic or literary taste. Earlier, Harriet Smith, who is attracted to him, apprised Emma of Mr. Martin's extensive reading:

...I believe he has read a good deal....He reads the Agricultural Reports, and some other books that lay in one of the window seats – but he reads all *them* to himself. But sometimes of an evening, before we went to cards, he would read something aloud out of the *Elegant Extracts*,¹² very entertaining. And I know he has read the *Vicar of Wakefield*. (28)

The following day, Emma inquires whether Mr. Martin had procured the novel Harriet had recommended and, upon learning that he has not, criticizes him as too involved in business to read novels: "What has he to do with books? And I have no doubt that he will thrive, and be a very rich man in time; and his being illiterate and course need not disturb *us*" (33).

¹² Jane Austen owned a copy of Vicesimus Knox's *Elegant Extracts: or useful and entertaining Passages in Prose Selected for the Improvement of Scholars* (Appendix C, Cambridge Edition of Austen's *Juvenilia*, 352); Elaine Bander remarks that *Elegant Extracts* "consisted largely of excerpts from Blair's lectures" (124); Michaelson observes that *Elegant Extracts* "was prefaced by a chapter from Blair's lectures" (195).

Considering that Emma is herself a poor reader, this indictment is hypocritical. In fact, one could argue that with her “lists of ...books” (37), which remain unread, she is by far the one who is illiterate. Creating these lists reminds her that on a visceral level she knows that she should read these tomes, but she lacks the self-discipline to do so.

Knightley elaborates on Emma’s lack of literary consistency to Mrs. Weston:

Emma has been meaning to read more ever since she was twelve years old. I have seen a great many lists of her drawing-up at various times of books she meant to read regularly through – and very good lists they were – very well chosen, and very neatly arranged – sometimes alphabetically, and sometimes by some other rule. ...But I have done with expecting any course of steady reading from Emma. She will never submit to any thing requiring industry and patience, and a subjection of the fancy to the understanding. (37)

It is the height of hypocrisy that Emma criticizes Robert Martin because, notwithstanding the physical and mental labor of administering a sizable farm, he still takes the time to read in the evenings. Significantly, his texts are not just farm reports; Robert Martin reads texts that are edifying and instructional. Robert Martin, with his zeal for learning and improvement through literary models and instruction, epitomizes the type of student for whom Blair wrote his lectures. He is, Austen implies, acquiring that taste that sets him apart from less literate individuals. Surprisingly, at this point, until Emma has her epiphany, one of those individuals is Emma herself.

Reading and the cultivation of literary taste are featured prominently in *Mansfield Park*, as we learn in the opening pages when Edmund Bertram has taken his impoverished cousin Fanny Price on as protégée and is playing a pivotal role in her education: “...he recommended the books which charmed her leisure hours, he encouraged her taste, and corrected her judgment; he made reading useful by talking to her of what she read, and heightened its attraction by judicious praise” (25).

In essence, Edmund's approach and sanction of literary criticism comes straight from the pages of Blair's *Lectures*: he encourages her natural (delicacy) taste; he cultivates correct taste through reason (by correcting her judgment), engages with and analyzes texts (criticism), and through his recommendations, selects appropriate and exemplary models of literary texts. Later in the novel, the reader notes to what degree Fanny has internalized his instruction by Edmund's apt observation on the variety of books strewn on her table:

You... will be taking a trip into China, I suppose. How does Lord Macartney go on? . . . And here are Crabbe's *Tales*, and the *Idler*, at hand to relieve you, if you tire of your great book. I admire you little establishment exceedingly; and as soon as I am gone, you will empty your head of all this nonsense of acting, and sit comfortably down to your table. (183)

That Edmund would classify the play they are rehearsing as "nonsense" is also revealing; notwithstanding his indictment, he will still participate in the theatrical production. This particular scene also reveals that Fanny, who no longer is under the tutelage of Edmund, has taken on the responsibility of cultivating her taste on her own. Unlike Emma, she has the self-discipline to read and to engage with edifying texts. Even though she has been banished to the old, cold schoolroom, Fanny delights in advancing her knowledge and opportunities to enlighten her intellect.

Interestingly, the Bertram sisters do not undergo a similarly in-depth education. They will learn geography and history by rote but will engage only superficially with reading. Their father will later see the errors in their education, one that focused on facts rather than the cultivation of taste and, most importantly, morals: "They had been instructed theoretically in their religion, but never required to bring it into daily practice" (536).

In the same way, Mary Crawford exhibits no literary taste: “She had none of Fanny’s delicacy of taste, of mind of feeling; she saw nature, inanimate nature, with little observation; her attention was all for men and women, her talents for the light and lively” (94). Miss Crawford does not have the capacity for introspection, depth of feeling, or an appreciation of her natural surroundings. While gifted in music and quick in conversation, she does not exhibit a natural taste for the literary arts. Appropriately, the only text she reads is her script in the ill-fated theatrical play.

When Fanny tells Sir Thomas that she cannot marry Henry Crawford, Sir Thomas is incredulous. He cannot believe that Fanny would not see the merits of this union, even after he attempts to cajole her through guilt and pressure. Fanny’s response, other than the flow of tears, is to reinforce their differences: “...I am so perfectly convinced that I could never make him happy, and that I should be miserable myself” (369). Sir Thomas does not see the significance of this rationale. Henry has not been educated; he has not learned, in accordance with Blair, that delicacy of feeling is necessary to the acquisition of taste. Henry’s tastes are sensual; he enjoys the thrill of the chase. He wants to be amused, to be occupied by a flirtatious game so as not to feel or be so idle. Fanny cannot share with Sir Thomas the behavior she witnessed when Henry was flirting with both of Sir Thomas’s daughters, so she cannot level the more significant charge that they do not share the same principles (read morals) (366). While Fanny will have to suffer Sir Thomas’s displeasure and censure, she does not give in. In fact, unlike the theatre episode in which she is unwillingly coaxed to participate against her better judgment, Fanny is resolute in her conviction that she will not be enticed or forced to marry Henry Crawford.

Edmund will make a similar mistake in ascertaining Fanny’s tastes, this time by referencing Fanny’s earlier response to Henry’s reading:

She seemed determined to be interested by nothing else. *But taste was too strong in her.* She could not abstract her mind five minutes; she was forced to listen; his reading was capital, and her pleasure in good reading extreme...but in Mr. Crawford's reading there was a variety of excellence beyond what she had ever met with...he could always alight at will on the best scene, or the best speeches of each; and whether it were dignity, or pride, or tenderness, or remorse or whatever were to be expressed, he could do it with equal beauty. It was truly dramatic. (389-90, emphasis added)

Edmund will take note of Fanny's perceptible pleasure during Henry's performance and will, like his father, attempt to make her see the value of the union. Again, Fanny feebly asserts that the temperaments between her and Henry Crawford are too different, an allegation that Edmund attempts to refute:

You are mistaken, Fanny. The dissimilarity is not so strong. You are quite enough alike. You *have* taste in common. You both have warm hearts and benevolent feelings; and, Fanny who that heard him read, and saw you listen to Shakespeare the other night, will think you unfitted as companions? You forget yourself: there is a decided difference in your tempers, I allow. He is lively, you are serious; but so much the better; his spirits will support yours. (403)

Edmund is woefully misinformed. He believes that Fanny's receptiveness to the reading was a response to *Henry* when in fact, it was her natural taste responding to the aesthetics of the presentation. Because of both her innate and cultivated taste, she recognizes the artfulness of the performance; in rhetorical terms, it was exemplary oratory but utterly lacking in ethos. Fanny responded to Henry's reading on an aesthetic level: she could appreciate the *performance*. Henry does not read, he reads *aloud*. There is a distinction between reading aloud as performative and reading for edification. Henry's reading is clearly the former.

This point is re-enforced when Henry admits that one does not need to read Shakespeare to know Shakespeare. He even confesses that he had not read Shakespeare since he was fifteen (390): "But Shakespeare one gets acquainted with without knowing how. It is part of an Englishman's constitution. His thoughts and beauties are so spread abroad that one touches them

everywhere; one is intimate with him by instinct” (390-1). Henry’s words are the height of superficiality with his implication that if one is English, one appreciates Shakespeare as if through osmosis. His remarks are callous and arrogant.

With his assertion that Fanny and Henry have taste in common, Edmund has clearly forgotten their previous conversations, including the discourse about improvements to Sotherton in which Fanny recited the lines from Cowper about the felling of the trees. Edmund willingly misreads Fanny as it will enable him to pursue Mary – even though their tastes are likewise so very dissimilar.

Another example in which reading serves as a harbinger for the cultivation of taste is when Fanny, exiled to Portsmouth, joins a circulating library:

She became a subscriber – amazed at being anything in *propria persona*, amazed at her own doings in every way; to be a renter, a chuser [*sic*] of books! And to be having any one’s improvement in view in her choice! But so it was. Susan had read nothing, and Fanny longed to give her a share in her own first pleasures and inspire a taste for the biography and poetry which she delighted in herself. (461)

Because she has cultivated the improvement of her aesthetic and literary tastes, Fanny can now teach those same skills and be a mentor to her own protégée. As the passage of free indirect discourse conveys to the reader, Fanny is delighted to be able to select the books she wanted to read for herself. In *propria persona*. As a subscriber to knowledge, Fanny has found *identification*. Her love of poetry, literature and history reflects Blair’s observation that “[t]he elevated sentiments and high examples which poetry, eloquence and history are often bringing under our view, naturally tend to nourish in our minds public spirit...and the admiration of what is truly illustrious and great” (*L I* 8-9). Fanny has come into her own, not by returning to the circle of family, but by subscribing to the books that will reveal to her what is “truly illustrious and great” (*L I* 9).

Her excitement is palatable; she is not only a seeker of knowledge, she is also an instructor as she is eager to share her understanding and insights to her sister. Fortunately, Susan appears to be as receptive to cultivating taste as Fanny once was: “Fanny’s explanations and remarks were a most important addition to every essay, or every chapter of history” (485).

Edmund will come to recognize that it is Fanny, and not Mary, who is best matched with him in temperament and taste. As he contemplates the nature of Fanny’s character, he discovers that there were

...no doubts of her deserving, *no fears of opposition of taste*, no need of drawing new hopes of happiness from *dissimilarity of temper*. Her *mind, disposition, opinions, and habits wanted no half-concealment, no self-deception on the present, no reliance on future improvement*. Even in the midst of his late infatuation, he had acknowledged Fanny’s mental superiority. (544-5)

The student has surpassed the teacher.

Analogous to *Mansfield Park*, literary taste in *Persuasion* is instrumental not only to the narrative but also in its revelation of character. Uniquely, the fictional characters’ taste in fiction reveals not only their personality but also their emotional state. The narrative opens with the lineage of Sir Walter Elliot, and Austen apprises us of his literary taste:

Sir Walter Elliot, of Kellynch-hall, in Somersetshire, was a man who, for his own amusement, never took up any book but the *Baronetage*; there he found occupation for an idle hour, and consolation in a distressed one; there his faculties were roused into admiration and respect, by contemplating the limited remnant of the earlier patents. . . . and there, if every other leaf were powerless, he could read his own history with an interest which never failed.” (3)¹³

Sir Walter’s self-absorption is robust. His only interest in literary texts is in re-reading the story of his life. As Wiesenfarth observes, “The *Baronetage* is truly their ‘book of books’: it is the bible of their lives. In it they find that heredity gives privilege” (146). Since he is so

¹³ Gillian Dow and Katie Halsey note that there were several copies of the *Baronetage* and the *Peerage* in the Knight Collection; one copy of the *Baronetage* similar to the volume in *Persuasion* has been annotated to include the births of Edward (Austen) Knight’s children (21).

shallow, a man preoccupied with rank and appearances, the book re-enforces his own sense of identity. He also only sees those around him as a component of this familial legacy. His view of his middle daughter, Anne, for example, is in relation with this book: “[H]e had never indulged much hope, he had now none, of ever reading her name in any other page of his favourite work” (6). He also sees his oldest daughter, Elizabeth, in the same light but holds out hope for her eventually increasing her rank through marriage: “All equality of alliance must rest with Elizabeth” (6); “Elizabeth would, one day or other, marry suitably” (6).

Elizabeth resembles her father in her literary tastes as she has few and cannot be bothered to read. She has no scruples about lying about reading edifying literature: “Oh! You may as well take back that tiresome book she would lend me, and pretend I have read it through. I really cannot be plaguing myself for ever with all these new poems and states of the nation that come out” (233). Earlier, she too used to read the *Baronetage* with pleasure but, increasingly, found it tedious and uncomfortable:

Then might she again take up the book of books with as much enjoyment as in her early youth, but now she liked it not. Always to be presented with the date of her own birth and see no marriage follow but that of a youngest sister made the book an evil; and more than once, when her father had left it open on the table near her, had she closed it, with averted eyes, and pushed it away. (7)

In contrast to her older sister, Elizabeth, Anne was already at the age of nineteen “an extremely pretty girl, with gentleness, modesty, *taste*, and feeling” (28, emphasis added). She also reads extensively and has a well-rounded familiarity with literary texts. Later, she will counsel the lovelorn Captain Benwick on including

... a larger allowance of prose in his daily study; and on being requested to particularize, mentioned such works of our best moralists, such collections of the finest letters, such memoirs of characters of worth and suffering, as occurred to her at the moment to rouse and fortify the mind by the highest precepts, and the strongest examples of moral and religious endurances. (108-9)

Clearly, her recommendations emphasize her extensive familiarity and versatility with literary texts. Anne also reads the Navy lists, which record the battles and promotions of the Navy. Her interest in the Navy goes beyond an interest in contemporary and political affairs, however; she seeks to establish the whereabouts of her former intended, Captain Wentworth. The juxtaposition of her father's identity in the catalogue of the *Baronetage* and her former intended's identity in the Navy lists is significant. By implication, Captain Wentworth is establishing his identity through heroic activity while her father is relying on titles and ancestry for his. Earlier, Captain Wentworth's interest in Anne was deemed a "very degrading alliance" (28), but now his rank, status and economic situation is improving while Sir Walter Elliot has squandered his legacy through neglect and waste. Seen through the paradigm of duty, Wentworth can be proud of his role in fulfilling his service to his country, while Sir Walter has abnegated his duty to his family and community (and by implication with his hereditary rank, to the country as a whole). Sir Walter Elliot of Kellynch Hall in Somersetshire may have inherited his title, but Captain Wentworth has earned his.

Taste in reading is also integral to the narrative plot of *Persuasion*. Anne will come to the assistance of Captain Benwick, who after the death of his fiancée Fanny Harville, has turned to reams of evocative romantic poetry to mitigate his grief. The problem with Benwick is not that he loves romantic poetry; the problem with Benwick is that he *only* loves romantic poetry. Laura Mooneyham observes that "...his readings of Byron and Scott, his intimate knowledge of 'all the tenderest songs of one poet, and all the impassioned description of hopeless agony of the other' keeps him in a state of emotional stagnation" (152). By submersing himself in morose and depressing verse, this sailor is figuratively drowning and cannot come up for air. It is more important for him to nurse his injured sense of self and withdraw from society than communicate

with those around him. In this, Benwick is shirking from his moral duty. Anne's conversation calls him out so to speak and, while having empathy for the pain that he feels, reminds him that he will get over this; that he "will rally again, and be happy with another" (105); and that he should be patient for "what time does in every case of affliction" (116). Poignantly, while Anne consoles the bereaved Captain Benwick, she realizes there are some losses one simply cannot get over, even after the passage of eight years.

Appropriately, Benwick and Louisa Musgrove are united through their falls — his into despondency and grief, hers while willfully throwing herself off the Cobb. As she recuperates, their ties are strengthened through poetry. Austen suggests that they will learn from each other's unique tastes:

He would gain cheerfulness, and she would learn to be an enthusiast for Scott and Lord Byron; nay that was probably learnt already; of course they had fallen in love over poetry. The idea of Louis a Musgrove turned into a person of literary taste, and sentimental reflection was amusing, but she had no doubt of its being so. (181-2)

At the conclusion of *Persuasion*, Austen appears to qualify her earlier defense of fiction in *Northanger Abbey*. Anne and Captain Benwick are discussing the constancy and ardor of male and female emotions within a relationship. To strengthen his argument that men are more constant, Captain Benwick relies on perceived cultural norms as those promoted in literature. Anne, however, does not sanction literature as representative of the female voice: "Yes, yes, if you please, no reference to examples in books. Men have had every advantage of us in telling their own story. Education has been theirs in so much higher a degree; the pen has been in their hands. I will not allow books to prove anything" (255). Austen seemingly differentiates between the fiction which was written by women such as Mrs. Radcliffe and the tomes written by men *for* women, such as Fordyce's *Sermons*. It is a wistful acknowledgment that females lacked access

to education and the means by which they could amplify their exposure to the public sphere.

However, the fictional Anne will ultimately choose a partner who will take her away from the sitting room and parlor to foreign ports and naval ships. Austen herself has also subtly defended her right to add her own female voice to the canon. As Mooneyham observes, “At the end of the novel Anne has thrown in her lot with this fluid segment of society whose record is found in the lists of accomplishment and deeds rather than in the book of inheritance and heritage” (158).

These are the books that Anne will allow to speak for her.

Austen’s understanding and use of taste in each of her novels is commensurate with that promoted and advocated by Hugh Blair. Given the popularity of his *Lectures* and Austen’s direct and indirect references to Blair, this should not be surprising. Consider what Mary Wollstonecraft wrote in 1787 in a letter to her sister about Blair’s *Lectures*: “I am now reading some philosophical lectures, and philosophical sermons — for my own improvement. I lately met with Blair’s lectures on genius taste &c &c — and found them an intellectual feast” (qtd in Pittock 39). Austen shared Blair’s concept of aesthetic taste as nurtured by nature, guided by reason, improved by imitative study and, subsequently, morally enlightening. As Austen qualifies, however, the acquisition and refinement of taste is up to the individual; it is not contingent on opportunities for education or social strata.¹⁴ Robert Martin, by exposing himself to models of correct discourse and his consistent reading, is clearly set forth as an example of a man who is dedicated to acquiring taste. Harriet Smith, on the other hand, may have been exposed to more genteel manners and may have gleaned an enhanced appreciation of aesthetics,

¹⁴ To re-emphasize, Blair’s *Lectures* were designed to assist those individuals who might professionally engage in composition or public speaking or those who wanted to improve their taste in writing, discourse and literary criticism (*L I 5*). While this ostensibly could include anyone regardless of rank and class (and given their universal popularity, it appealed to individuals across the board), Blair does make a pejorative statement regarding those individuals of “low stations and occupations” who join debate societies (*L XXXIV 387*). Therefore, I draw the distinction between Blair and Austen’s favorable treatment of Robert Martin, who is clearly taking Blair’s *Lectures* to heart.

but her tastes remain frivolous and flighty. Appropriately, she cannot even “read” a charade. Mary Bennet diligently attempts to acquire taste, but as Austen alludes, she is looking in all the wrong places. By focusing solely on conduct books and didactic texts, Mary becomes that much more pedantic and rigid and less familiar with correct taste. Elizabeth Bennet exhibited good taste in her reading and improves her discernment and judgment by her growing knowledge of self. Fanny Price, whose taste was encouraged by Edmund but refined by her own intellectual curiosity, teaches her sister Susan in the same thoughtful and edifying manner.

Throughout Austen’s novels, many of those characters who did not exhibit correct taste are also not interested in acquiring it. Henry and Mary Crawford have embraced the “taste of the age,” the belief that “everything is to be got with money” (69) in lieu of ethical improvement. Kitty and Lydia Bennet exhibit no taste whatsoever (the word “taste” is not even textually associated with them). Their tastes, if they have any, are of the corporal kind. Without the edifying properties of correct taste, Wickham, Sir Walter Elliot, Willoughby, Lucy Steele, Augusta Elton — to name but a few — all remain tethered to the baser versions of themselves.

Eloquence in conversation was a primary aim of belletristic rhetoric and, like taste, was an external manifestation of the character of an individual. Blair devoted a significant number of his lectures to the cultivation of eloquence and advocated for purity, precision, and perspicuity in language and style. As we will examine in the next chapter, Austen incorporated Blair’s understanding of eloquence in her fiction in two ways: first, as a narratological tool to further the plot of the novel and, second, as a barometer of the character of her fictional personages. As I will suggest, Austen aligns herself conclusively with Blair’s promulgation of these key features of belletristic rhetoric. Significantly, while it appears that Austen challenges Blair’s assertion

that virtue is a necessary component of true eloquence, I suggest that she is, in fact, squarely in agreement with Blair.

CHAPTER 4

THE RHETORIC OF ELOQUENCE, STYLE AND CONVERSATION

In the last chapter, I examined Blair's promulgation of taste as a defining characteristic of belletristic rhetoric and the degree to which Austen's fiction incorporated that understanding of aesthetic taste in her fiction. In this chapter, we will further examine Blair's influence by observing his focus on eloquence and style. I contend that Austen incorporates these same terms in accordance with belletristic rhetoric and shares Blair's advocacy regarding simplicity, perspicuity and preciseness in language. Additionally, I argue, that belletristic rhetoric is seminal to *Northanger Abbey* as it is the means by which Catherine Morland learns critical thinking and discernment and, ultimately, recognizes correct taste and genuine eloquence. Moreover, Austen's alliance with Blair's interpretation of eloquence is also key to Anne Elliot's maturity and identity in *Persuasion*.

Blair devotes ten of his lectures to eloquence, thereby highlighting his perception that it is essential in both oral and written discourse. Blair casts his definition of eloquence by focusing on its desired effects:

To be truly eloquent, is to speak to the purpose. For the best definition, which, I think, can be given of Eloquence, is, the Art of Speaking in such a manner as to attain the end for which we speak. Whenever a man speaks or writes, he is supposed, as a rational being, to have some end in view; either to inform, or to amuse, or to persuade, or, in some way or other, to act upon his fellow-creatures. He who speaks, or writes, in such a manner as to adapt his words most effectually to that end, is the most eloquent man. (*L XXV* 264)

Blair re-emphasizes his conception of rhetoric in classical rhetorical terms; however, he recognizes that the aims of rhetoric go beyond mere persuasion. Analogous to his belief that taste had a moral component and that the refinement of taste can be morally edifying, Blair sees virtue as the defining characteristic of eloquence: “What stands highest in the order of means [for improvement in eloquence], is personal character and disposition. In order to be a truly eloquent or persuasive speaker, nothing is more necessary than to be a virtuous man” (*L XXXIV* 381). In this framework, Blair prioritizes ethos over logos and pathos, and contrary to traditional rhetoric where ethos was based on the character of the orator as presented through discourse, Blair conceives of ethos (based on pre-existing virtue) as a precondition to the discourse.¹

In order to persuade effectively, Blair posits, “the most essential requisites are solid argument, clear method, a character of probity appearing in the Speaker, joined with such graces of Style and utterance, as shall draw attention to what he says” (*L XXV* 265). Accordingly, as Blair writes, ethos is not established as a result of eloquent rhetoric but is a necessary element that, joined with eloquence and solid argument, is vital to achieving the discourse’s ultimate aim – whether to instruct, to please, to persuade, or to motivate to action:

Viewed as the Art of Persuasion, it requires, in its lowest state, soundness of understanding, and considerable acquaintance with human nature; and, in its higher degrees, it requires, moreover, strong sensibility of mind, a warm and lively imagination, joined with correctness of judgment, and an extensive command of the power of Language; to which must be added, the graces of Pronunciation and Delivery. (*L XXV* 267)²

¹ In another significant departure, Blair omitted the *loci*, the topics that were designed in classical rhetoric to shape arguments in his belletristic paradigm: “What is truly solid and persuasive must be drawn ‘ex visceribus causae’ (from the very bowels of the case), from a thorough knowledge of the subject and profound meditation on it. They who would direct students of Oratory to any other sources of Argumentation only delude them; and by attempting to render Rhetoric too perfect an art, they render it, in truth, a trifling and childish study” (*L XXXII* 357).

² This passage appears to echo the phrasing of Miss Bingley’s description of an accomplished woman in *Pride and Prejudice*: “...she must possess a certain something in her air and manner of walking, the tone of her voice, her address and expressions, or the word will be but half-deserved.... to which must be added ... extensive reading (43).

True eloquence, then, is the “art of placing truth in the most advantageous light for conviction and persuasion” (*L XXIX* 317). How one effectively used language to convey that aim was the focus of eloquence and what Blair designated as style.

In Blair’s system of belletristic rhetoric, style and content both are morally illuminating and didactic. He understands language to be different from style; language was the means by which style was articulated, style itself was the product or content conveyed (*L X* 99). As he elaborates, “[S]tyle has always some reference to an author’s manner of thinking. It is a picture of the ideas which arise in his mind, and of the manner in which they arise there; and hence, when we are examining an author’s composition, it is, in many cases, extremely difficult to separate the Style from the sentiment” (*L X* 99). He believes that language is the foundation for eloquence (*L VI* 54) and that oral discourse has the ability of elevating the speaker’s thoughts: “... it is to the intercourse and transmission of thought, by means of speech, that we are chiefly indebted for the improvement of thought itself” (*L I* 3). The importance of style, therefore, is in its ability to reflect the virtues inherent within the discourse, and eloquence is a manifestation of that style.

Among the faults in style to which Blair devotes several lectures are lack of perspicuity, precision, and purity. He also stresses that true eloquence is attainable only by incorporating personal virtue and distinguishes it from the notion that it is merely an ornamental casing for language. He critiques those who subscribe to eloquence as “an ostentatious and deceitful art, the study of words and of plausibility only, calculated to please, and to tickle the ear” (*L XXIX* 317).³

³ Similar to the letters in which Austen denigrates writers such as Mary Brunton (*Letters* 244) and Hannah More (*Letters* 177), Blair also does not mince words when criticizing other writers: Of Lord Shaftsbury, he writes, “...having once laid hold of some metaphor or allusion that pleased him, he knows not how to part with it.” “...he was a professed admirer of Simplicity; is always extolling it in the antients [*sic*], and censoring the moderns for want of it; though he departs from it himself as far as any one modern whatever” (*L XIX* 212).

Blair believes that a writer and an orator could incorporate style effectively without cloaking it in layers of formality or disguise: “For all that can possibly be required of Language, is, to convey our ideas clearly to the minds of others, and, at the same time, in such a dress, as by pleasing and interesting them, shall most effectively strengthen the impressions we seek to make” (L X 99). According to Blair, as Linda Ferreira-Buckley notes, “[a] writer’s style reveals his character – his morals, his heart, his mind – because style is intimately connected to thought. A faulty style, then, is a matter of serious concern” (27).

That Austen shared Blair’s philosophy on the didactic aspects of taste, style and eloquence is evident in her treatment of Catherine Morland in *Northanger Abbey*. In this novel, the heroine undergoes repeated instruction in the tenets of belletristic rhetoric. Arguably, acquiring eloquence and learning to discern, judge and use language appropriately are two of the principal themes in *Northanger Abbey*. In effect, Catherine’s maturity and growth as an individual who learns discrimination – aesthetically, in the picturesque and in novels, and rhetorically, in conversation with others – comes only after she has been instructed by Henry Tilney in the principles of belletristic rhetoric.

Catherine Morland is an ingénue who has seen little of the world beyond her home in Fullerton. Her knowledge of society and culture is based on limited personal observations and narrow exposure to edifying literature. Because she is naïve, she takes language at face value and does not engage with it – or literature – critically.

Catherine meets Henry Tilney, who graciously assists her and Mrs. Allen at a dance in the Lower Rooms at Bath and introduces himself to them. Catherine is impressed with his

address,⁴ his talk “with fluency and spirit” and “pleasantry in his manner” (17). They speak naturally on various topics until Henry realizes that he has not been following the standard script for conversation in Bath:

I have hitherto been very remiss, madam, in the proper attentions of a partner here; I have not yet asked you how long you have been in Bath; whether you were ever here before; whether you have been at the Upper Rooms, the theatre, and the concert; and how you like the place altogether. (17-18)

Henry reinforces the superficiality of the dialogue as he remarks after finishing the litany of questions, “Now I must give one smirk, and then we may be rational again” (18). As Catherine discovers, Henry is a serious student in the rhetorical and language arts of Johnson and Blair and has given her the first lesson in recognizing polite, decorous rhetoric, which is disassociated with warmth and honesty.

In contrast to Henry Tilney, the language of the Thorpes, Catherine’s new acquaintances, is hyperbolic and vacuous. Isabella, who is older than Catherine, appears to be wise in the ways of the world and introduces Catherine to gothic romances. In conversation, Isabella exaggerates and jumps from topic to topic:

I have an [*sic*] hundred things to say to you. In the first place, I was so afraid that it would rain this morning, just as I wanted to set off; it looked very showery, and that would have thrown me into agonies! Do you know, I saw the prettiest hat you can imagine, in a shopwindow in Milsom Street just now – very like yours, only with coquelicot ribbons instead of green; I quite longed for it. But, my dearest Catherine, what have you been doing with yourself all morning? – Have you gone on with Udolpho? (32)

Since her questions are rhetorical, she does not wait for answers but breathlessly continues. Her conversation with Catherine resembles a torrential stream of consciousness. Her discourse is more of a soliloquy than a dialogue, but at least she is not as brash and tasteless as her brother. John Thorpe’s discourse is comprised of boasts and falsehoods. He inflates his

⁴ In this example, “address” refers to his manners, comportment, manner of speech and outward appearance (Ed. note, *Northanger Abbey* 305).

abilities and sense of worth and interprets the individuals and things around him in terms of money. When Catherine meets him, Thorpe shows off his new carriage and his prowess at bargaining for it: “Curricule-hung you see; seat, trunk, sword-case, splashing-board, lamps, silver moulding, all you see complete...He asked fifty guineas; I closed with him directly; threw down the money, and the carriage was mine....I might have sold it for ten guineas more the next day...” (41). As Jeffrey Herrle observes, “We get a sense that Thorpe almost speaks like the animals with which he so enjoys spending his time – he yelps, squeals, and whinnies wildly when he is excited, and barks and snorts at strangers” (239-40).

With his cursing and coarse language, Austen signals John Thorpe’s lack of integrity and character. In Austen’s novels, Page observes, “...language – including colloquial speech – takes on a heightened significance as an index of human values” (170). Even an ingénue as naïve as Catherine perceives that through his language Thorpe’s character is suspect:

She knew not how to reconcile two such very different accounts of the same thing; for she had not been brought up to understand the propensities of a rattle, not to know to how many idle assertions and impudent falsehoods the excess of vanity will lead. Her own family were plain matter-of-fact people, who seldom aimed at wit of any kind; her father, at the utmost being contented with a pun, and her mother with a proverb; they were not in the habit of telling lies to increase their importance, or of asserting at one moment what they would contradict the next. (62)

Because she cannot believe his pronouncements and boasts, Catherine finds John Thorpe’s ethos to be dubious. Unlike Blair’s prescription for preciseness in language, John Thorpe is unclear and focused solely on his perceptions and opinions: “All the rest of his conversation, or rather talk, began and ended with himself and his own concerns” (63.). Lacing his conversation with profanities and hyperbole, John reveals his character to Catherine through his duplicitous and exaggerated rhetoric. Later, he will go so far as to intentionally lie when he will tell General Tilney of Catherine’s speculated inheritance.

Austen makes clear that the conversation and society of the Thorpes and the Allens leave much to be desired. Mrs. Allen is focused on fashion and has little to say of value. She was happy to spend the day “by the side of Mrs. Thorpe, in what they called conversation, but in which there was scarcely ever any exchange of opinion, and not often any resemblance of subject, for Mrs. Thorpe talked chiefly of her children, and Mrs. Allen of her gowns” (30). Their discourse is marked by a lack of compatibility and even the basic understanding that listening is integral to genuine conversation, the “exchange of opinions.”

To Catherine’s credit, however, notwithstanding her innocence, Catherine has been inculcated with a sense of right and wrong and does not intentionally go against the rules of socially sanctioned behavior as Isabella does. When Catherine learns, for example, that it was not proper for a single woman to ride with an unrelated man in an open carriage, she immediately petitions Mrs. Allen regarding why she had not been apprised of this social rule: “Dear madam... why did not you tell me so before? I am sure if I had known it to be improper, I would not have gone with Mr. Thorpe at all; but I always hoped you would tell me, if you thought I was doing wrong” (105). She also takes a resolute stand in favor of propriety when she does not allow the Thorpes to keep her from her earlier commitment with the Tilneys, even as they resort to manipulative rhetoric.

When Catherine apprises the Thorpes of her previous engagement and, therefore, cannot join them on their trip to Clifton, they tell her that she “*must* and *should* retract” (97). Their language is prescriptive as they do not give her the benefit of a choice: “must” implies a command and “should” suggests that it is morally sanctioned, that it is the right thing to do. As their entreaties are not successful, Isabella switches her argumentative tactics to employing “flattering supplications” (98): “She was sure her dearest, sweetest Catherine would not seriously

refuse such a trifling request to a friend who loved her so dearly. She knew her beloved Catherine to have so feeling a heart, so sweet a temper, to be so easily persuaded by those she loved” (98). Again, Catherine is not persuaded. The flattering supplications become manipulative assignations of guilt: “I cannot help being jealous, Catherine, when I see myself slighted for strangers... and to see myself supplanted in your friendship by strangers, does cut me to the quick” (98). Catherine notices that Isabella’s rhetoric is “ungenerous and selfish, regardless of every thing but her own gratification” (99), but it will take time for her to make the connection that Blair draws so overtly in his *Lectures*: that style and eloquence in rhetoric are irretrievably linked to virtue and character. Moreover, because they lack the ethos that would make them eloquent and, therefore, convincing, their feeble arguments are not persuasive. As Catherine remarks, “If I could not be *persuaded* into doing what I think is wrong, I never will be tricked into it” (101, emphasis added).

Austen contrasts the discourses among the Thorpes with the conversations between Henry and Eleanor Tilney. Eleanor, who has a “very agreeable countenance,” “real elegance” and “good sense” (51), is not as pretentious as Isabella, and while she has read some of the same gothic romances, her reading is much more diverse and consists of serious histories. The conversations between Catherine and Eleanor are emblematic of Blair’s counsel to speak truthfully from the heart:

...though in all probability not an observation was made, nor an expression used by either which had not been made and used some thousands of times before, under that roof, in every Bath season, yet the merit of their being spoken with simplicity and truth, and without personal conceit, might be something uncommon. (69)⁵

⁵ In Blair’s defense of the novel, he uses a similar juxtaposition of words; he praises the *Adventures of Robinson Crusoe* for its “appearance of truth and simplicity, which takes a strong hold of the imagination of all Readers” (L XXXVII 423).

As Blair writes in *Lecture XXXIV*, “No kind of Language is so generally understood, and so powerfully felt, as the native *language of worthy and virtuous feelings*. He only, therefore, who possesses these full and strong, *can speak properly, and in its own language to the heart*” (382, emphasis added). Unlike Isabella’s disingenuous, threatening, guilt-ridden and manipulative rhetoric, Eleanor exercises taste and sincerity, “without personal conceit” (69).

Similar to Isabella, Catherine is unaware that she is misusing language and is not clear and direct in her discourse. She learns this rhetorical lesson, however, on a walk she takes with Eleanor and Henry; this particular scene also features Austen’s direct reference to Blair’s *Lectures*. In their conversation on appropriate language, Eleanor cites both Samuel Johnson and Hugh Blair.⁶ Catherine begins the conversation asking Henry and Eleanor of their opinion of the novel *Udolpho*:

- ... But now really, do not you think *Udolpho* the nicest book in the world?
- The nicest – by which I suppose you mean the neatest. That must depend upon the binding.
- Henry, said Miss Tilney, you are very impertinent. Miss Morland, he is treating you exactly as he does his sister. He is forever finding fault with me, for some incorrectness of language, and now is taking the same liberty with you. The word ‘nicest’ as you used it, did not suit him; and you had better change it as soon as you can, or we shall be overpowered with Johnson and Blair all the rest of the way. (109)⁷

Catherine is being made aware of her lack of discernment, her inability to use language judiciously and appropriately. As when Henry points out the inappropriateness in her comments about a “faithful promise” (201), he is encouraging her understanding of Blair’s belletristic

⁶ Reference to both Samuel Johnson (1709-84), who compiled *A Dictionary of the English Language*, and Hugh Blair (1718-1800), famous for both his *Lectures* and *Sermons* (Ed. note, *Northanger Abbey* 330).

⁷ John Odmark suggests that the allusions to Johnson and Blair indicate that by the end of the eighteenth century “notions of prescriptive grammar and correct usage were well established” (131). Lynn Rigberg suggests that Austen uses this direct reference to point to Blair’s disparaging categorization of novels as “fictitious histories” (37). However, given the immediate context as well as Eleanor’s own words, I believe the reference relates more to perspicuity and preciseness in language as promulgated in Blair’s *Lectures*. Moreover, as I wrote in Chapter 3, Blair qualitatively *defends* novels.

rhetoric. As Blair writes, “Propriety, is the selection of such words in the Language, as the best and most established usage has appropriated to those ideas we intend to express by them. It implies the *correct* and happy application of them... in opposition to vulgarisms, or low expressions...” (*L X* 100-1, my emphasis). The fact that Catherine shows herself to be amenable to instruction and to improvement indicates that while her judgment is suspect, her character is not.

Henry’s comments might appear pedantic and overbearing, but as she undergoes this education in rhetoric, Catherine ultimately recognizes they are true. She sees her own faults readily as when she tells Henry, “I cannot speak well enough to be unintelligible” (135). At this stage, Catherine still sees language as obscured by ornament and formality; she does not understand the value of eloquence as emanating from a virtuous individual whose language has been tempered and improved by criticism, reason and intellect. Henry, who has interpreted her comments as an indictment on ostentatious speech, compliments her on her insight: “Bravo, – an excellent satire on modern language” (135). Joseph Wiesenfarth observes, “Henry clearly sees that language is used by many people to clothe their vanity and avarice in acceptable clichés” (12). By promulgating propriety, eloquence and style as Blair dictated, Henry is illustrating to Catherine that discernment in language is akin to discrimination in eloquence and taste in general. Consequently, his instruction moves beyond preciseness and correctness in language to understanding aesthetic taste in the picturesque and literature:

They were viewing the country with the eyes of persons accustomed to drawing, and decided on its capability of being formed into pictures, with all the eagerness of real taste. Here Catherine was quite lost. She knew nothing of drawing – nothing of taste: and she listened to them with an attention which brought her little profit, for they talked in phrases which conveyed scarcely any idea to her. The little which she could understand, however, appeared contradict the very few notions she had entertained on the matter before... She was heartily ashamed of her ignorance. (111-12)

Catherine's sheltered life, as well as her own lack of intellectual curiosity and proclivity for gothic romances, has shaped a worldview that is susceptible to imagination and falsehood. She is taken to task by Henry not only for her discourse but also for relying on imagination as a tool for interpreting the world around her and for speculating that his father is a murderer. Laura Mooneyham suggests that for Austen's heroines, including Catherine, "changing one's self requires that one first change one's rhetoric" (xi). By learning to be more circumspect in her rhetoric, Catherine will apply that same acumen in distinguishing those scintillating tales of gothic romance from those that offer "the most thorough knowledge of human nature, the happiest delineation of all its varieties...conveyed to the world in the best chosen language" (31).

Catherine has been instructed in the foundational canons of belletristic rhetoric as promoted by Hugh Blair. She has learned to see how rhetoric, as embodied by John and Isabella Thorpe, can be used to manipulate and deceive. She has discovered that to form accurate understanding and taste, discourse must feature language that is correct, perspicuous, and precise. The reader is led to believe that under the tutelage of Henry, Catherine may yet reach that higher level of rhetoric as Blair promulgates, namely that of true eloquence.

Blair, who as both rhetor and sermonizer recognized the power of soaring oratory and persuasive public proclamations, predictably advises that the highest degree of eloquence is discourse marked by passion:

...wherein a greater power is exerted over the human mind; by which we are not only convinced, but are interested, agitated, and carried along with the Speaker; our passions are made to rise together with his: we enter into all his emotions; we love, we detest, we resent, according as he inspires us; and are prompted to resolve, or to act, with vigour and warmth. (*L XXV 266*)

Passionate orators or writers are able to effect a transformation on their audience that goes beyond persuasion. Passionate discourse, however, does not need to be formal or rely on tropes or extravagant figures of speech. In fact, both Austen and Blair suggest that the most passionate addresses are those that are the most simple, the most direct, and the most heartfelt. In the example of Mr. George Knightley of Donwell Abbey in the novel *Emma*, Mr. Knightley professes his passionate affection for Emma by pointedly restricting his use of inflated language:

‘I cannot make speeches, Emma:’ he soon resumed; and in a tone of such sincere, decided, intelligible tenderness as was tolerably convincing. – ‘If I loved you less, I might be able to talk about it more. But you know what I am. – You hear nothing but truth from me.’ (469)

Mr. Knightley says that he “cannot make speeches” and yet he does, most eloquently. In fact, it is because he hints that he is not using inflated or ceremonious rhetoric that his words become that much more poignant and convincing. As Blair writes in *Lecture XXV on Eloquence, or Public Speaking*, “A man, actuated by a strong passion, becomes much greater than he is at other times. He is conscious of more strength and force; he utters great sentiments, conceives higher designs, and executes them with a boldness and a felicity, of which, on other occasions, he could not think himself capable” (266).

Mr. Knightley is persuasive precisely by being passionate. His disavowal of using rhetorical means signals that what follows is direct, rather than cloaked in any kind of superfluous language. Moreover, he highlights that his discourse is based on his own character: “You hear nothing but truth from me” (469). In two measurable ways, then, his rhetoric subscribes to Blair’s dictates on persuasion and true eloquence: it is delivered with passion and by an individual who displays and articulates virtue. Austen characterizes Mr. Knightley’s discourse thus: “It was in plain, unaffected, gentleman-like English, such as Mr. Knightley used

even to the woman he was in love with” (489). While he conveys the depths of his feelings for Emma, Mr. Knightley is not carried away by emotions nor does he defy his ethical principles by altering his rhetoric to make it more amenable to his audience, in this case, Emma.

This is in sharp contrast to another character in the novel, Mr. Frank Churchill. Until his appearance in *Highbury*, Frank’s eloquence has been evidenced solely in his polite and effusive letters to his father and Mrs. Weston. In their effort to ascertain his character and the quality of his conversation, Emma and Mr. Knightley speculate on Mr. Churchill’s rhetorical skills. Mr. Knightley’s responses reinforce his own perceptions of what proper conversation should entail and the qualities of the individual as revealed through the discourse:

- If I find him conversable, I shall be glad of his acquaintance; but if he is only a chattering coxcomb, he will not occupy much of my time or thoughts.
- My idea of him is, that he can adapt his conversation to the taste of every body, and has the power as well as the wish of being universally agreeable. To you, he will talk of farming; to me, of drawing or music; and so on to every body, having that general information on all subjects which will enable him to follow the lead, or take the lead, just as propriety may require, and to speak extremely well on each; that is my idea of him.
- “And mine,” said Mr. Knightly warmly, “is, that if he turn out any thing like it, he will be the most insufferable fellow breathing! What! at three-and-twenty to be the king of his company—the great man—he practices politician, who is to read every body’s character, and make every body’s talents conduce to the display of his own superiority, to be dispensing his flatteries around, that we may make all appear like fools compared with himself! My dear Emma, your own good sense could not endure such a puppy when it came to the point.” (161-62)

In a dialogue where they speculate on the rhetorical skills of a stranger, Emma and Knightley reveal their own understanding of correct conversation. Emma believes that the eloquent speaker is one who can speak convincingly on any topic and can converse with a polished air. Because she has taken on the ceremonial role as mistress of her father’s household, she highlights the importance of solicitous rather than substantive speech. Her father, Mr. Woodhouse, is a hypochondriac whose own discourse is wrought with worry and fear. While he

is nominally polite, his conversation is not marked by any depth or insight; “neither wine nor conversation was any thing to him. . .” (131). His concern is for the petty: the weather, gruel, and cake – and for the corporal: illness, fever, and digestion. He is a bit of a caricature, but even in his fussiness, he still exerts considerable control over Emma’s life. Accordingly, Emma has learned how to deflect, to carefully steer conversations from tumultuous topics, as she does when her sister’s family joins them over Christmas and the rhetoric between Mr. Woodhouse and Mr. and Mrs. John Knightley escalates over their decision to spend time at South End in lieu of Hartfield. Her brother-in-law, Mr. John Knightly, succinctly summarizes the nature of their conversations as they prepare to visit the Westons: “... here we are setting forward to spend five dull hours in another man’s house, with nothing to say or to hear that was not said and heard yesterday, and may not be said and hear again to-morrow” (122).

Emma’s conversation is marked by civility, decorum and agility. She is polite and conversational, but because she is focused on the trappings of social discourse, she does not devote her attention to content. Jane Nardin suggests that “...Emma’s conventionally polite behavior, because it merely glosses over her hostility to others, reveals moral weakness, rather than moral strength” (23). While not capricious or deceitful, Emma must nevertheless be taught how to be truly eloquent by altering her moral behavior.

Mr. Knightley, on the other hand, interprets facile conversability as the talk of politicians and those who aim to impress. His own conversation is polite, honest and direct; his discourse is never marked by the studied polish he perceives to be a veneer of artifice. Mr. Knightley shares Blair’s abhorrence of flattery and studied rhetoric: “Even the show of Eloquence which they make, will please only the trifling and superficial” (*L XXVII* 289). Mr. Knightley speaks with candor and selects his words with precision, such as when he discusses the nuances of the words

“amiable” and “aimable” with Emma (160). He epitomizes Blair’s assertion that to be eloquent requires virtue; mirroring Blair, he believes that those who lack ethos cannot have credible or persuasive rhetoric. Discourse that is not based on truthfulness becomes hollow and vapid, and the person who uses language such as this is a mere “puppy” (162).

Perhaps the character who most famously utilizes such vacuous and vapid rhetoric among Austen’s *oeuvre* is Mr. Collins in *Pride and Prejudice*. As future heir of the Bennet estate, Mr. Collins visits Longbourn and seeks to atone for the entail by selecting a potential wife from among the five daughters. He speaks a great deal, thinks highly of himself, and lavishes effusive praise on his patroness Lady Catherine de Bourgh and her daughter (70, 74). When Mr. Collins admits that he intentionally uses flattery to ingratiate himself with them and others, Mr. Bennet mockingly asks whether his flattery is studied or the result of the moment:

- May I ask whether these pleasing attentions proceed from the impulse of the moment, or are the result of previous study?
- They arise chiefly from what is passing at the time, and though I sometimes amuse myself with suggesting and arranging such little elegant compliments as may be adapted to ordinary occasions, I always give them as unstudied an air as possible. (76)

Mr. Collins’ confession highlights his superficiality and his endorsement of “pompous nothings” (80). His rhetoric is in direct opposition to Blair’s prescription for eloquent rhetoric in *Lecture XIX* where he admonishes those who rely on borrowed discourse: “[It is] infinitely better to have something that is our own, though of moderate beauty, than to affect to shine in borrowed ornaments, which will, at last, betray the utter poverty of our genius” (216-17).

Penelope Fritzer states that Austen shared Blair’s aversion for ostentatious flattery:

The courtesy books repudiate gratuitous flattery, and so does Austen. None of her best characters is guilty of it. Conversely, those who are impressed by it...expose their own shallowness by their gullibility, and those who are guilty of it are, like Mr. Collins, contemptible and ridiculous. (72)

Mr. Collins betrays his awareness that studied praise might be considered suspect by his audience, so he endeavors to give them “as unstudied an air as possible” (76). Austen’s treatment of Mr. Collins – and the Bennet family’s laughter at his expense – aligns closely with Blair’s strong disapproval of imitation:

...I must caution...against a servile imitation of any author whatsoever. This is always dangerous. It hampers genius; it is likely to produce a stiff manner; and those who are given to close imitation, generally imitate an author’s faults as well as his beauties....We ought to beware, in particular, of adopting an author’s noted phrases, or transcribing passages from him. (*L XIX* 216-17)

When he later proposes to Elizabeth, his dubious rhetoric will be on full display. He begins by launching into a foray of flattery: “Your modesty...adds to your other perfections” (118), and then proceeds to exaggerate his emotional investment in the proposal by furthering his discourse “before I am run away with my feelings” (118). Those feelings are nowhere evident as he continues to rationally outline his reasons for marrying: duty, his own happiness, and the recommendation of Lady Catherine de Bourgh (118).

Throughout his appeal, he assumes that Elizabeth will respond favorably to his petition even before giving her the opportunity to respond: “You will find [Lady Catherine de Bourgh’s] manners beyond any thing I can describe” (119). He concludes by assuring her “of the violence of my affection” and mentions that he will not reproach her for not having a dowry (119). As Jeffrey Herrle observes, “If this speech represents what Collins calls ‘the violence of my affection,’ it is obviously violent self-love that he is talking about” (245). In fact, Mr. Collins does not even pose a question to Elizabeth throughout the entire proposal; he assumes that she understands his offer of marriage and will, of course, accept it. This contradicts Blair’s advice for persuasive and eloquent speech: “...a Speaker is never to presume, that by a frothy and ostentatious harangue, without solid sense and argument, he can either make impression on them,

or acquire fame for himself” (*L XXVII* 289). His specious argument is without persuasion or even a resounding rationale. Mr. Collins even denies Elizabeth’s role as audience in the rhetorical equation by not allowing her to respond to or interject his discourse. This is yet another *faux pas* according to Blair: “Nothing merits the name of eloquent or beautiful which is not suited to the occasion, and *to the persons to whom it is addressed*” (*L XIX* 217, emphasis added).

Mr. Collins speaks of passion as Blair advocates, but he is not passionate. His proposal to Elizabeth is as calculated and studied as his attempts at flattery. He is incredulous that his rhetoric is inadequate, that he has failed to persuade her. By incorporating flattery and referencing passion and emotions (without displaying either), Mr. Collins is convinced that he had constructed a persuasive discourse, not unlike those promoted by Blair:

On all great subjects and occasions, there is a dignity, there is an energy in noble sentiments, which is overcoming and irresistible. They give an ardour and a flame to one’s discourse, which seldom fails to kindle a like flame in those who hear; and which, more than any other cause, bestows on eloquence that power, for which it is famed, of seizing and transporting an audience. (*L II* 382)

Unfortunately for Mr. Collins, his speech on passion does not fan any flames, much less ignite a spark. In not listening to Elizabeth and not choosing to take her words at face value, he is, in fact, demeaning her. He does not allow her own words to speak for themselves or admit that she is a “rational creature” (122) rather than someone who is trifling with his emotions. Because Mr. Collins does not validate *her* rhetoric, he assumes that he is the arbiter of what words and language mean. Therefore, her negative responses are part of a ritual or game, only meant to make him want her more (122). Not unlike Isabella Thorpe, Mr. Collins finally resorts to threatening and manipulative rhetoric, telling Elizabeth that there is no guarantee she will receive another offer of marriage. Elizabeth will remain resolute in her refusal, and Mr. Collins

will be compelled to employ his sanctimonious rhetoric on Charlotte Lucas, who, not unlike Mary Crawford in *Mansfield Park*, believes that marriage is a “manoeuvring business” (53) and rationally decides she will gain from the merger.

Mr. Collins is but one of the characters in Austen’s novels who utilize rhetoric that is marked by effusive, vague and careless language. As noted earlier, perspicuity in language was pivotal to style and instrumental in eloquence according to Blair:

Perspicuity, it will be readily admitted, is the fundamental quality of Style; a quality so essential in every kind of writing, that, for the want of it, nothing can atone. Without this, the richest ornaments of Style only glimmer through the dark; and puzzle, instead of pleasing, the reader. This, therefore, must be our first object, to make our meaning clearly and fully understood, and understood without the least difficulty. (*L X* 100)

In *Sense and Sensibility*, the lack of perspicuity in language not only indicates lack of character or virtue, but it pilots the plot of the novel. Mr. Henry Dashwood’s lack of clarity and concrete language in his will allows John Dashwood, his son by a first marriage and heir of Norland, to misinterpret the level of financial assistance he promised to provide to his father’s second family. Coaxed by his wife Fanny, who scolds him for even thinking of “robbing” money from their dear child (9), John finally resolves that the assistance his father wanted him to provide would consist exclusively of “neighborly acts,”⁸ namely seasonal gifts of fish and game (13). He willfully ignores that he is subjecting Mrs. Dashwood and her three daughters to dire financial hardship.

Elinor, who is the oldest daughter, has become the de facto adult in the Henry Dashwood family: “Elinor ... possessed a strength of understanding, and coolness of judgment which qualified her, though only nineteen, to be the counsellor of her mother...her feelings were

⁸ Allusion to Biblical references of helping one’s neighbor (Ed. note, *Sense and Sensibility* 441).

strong; but she knew how to govern them” (7).⁹ Elinor does not give into self-pity, unlike her sister Marianne and her mother: “The agony of grief which overpowered them at first, was voluntarily renewed....They gave themselves up wholly to their sorrow...and resolved against ever admitting consolation in the future” (8). Elinor’s rationality, her ability to control her emotions, is evident in the language she uses as well.

Fanny Dashwood’s brother Edward Ferrars visits Norland, and he and Elinor form an attachment. Marianne pries Elinor to ascertain the status of their relationship and the depth of her feelings for Edward:

- ‘When you tell me to love him as a brother, I shall no more see imperfection in his face, than I now do in his heart....
- ‘I do not attempt to deny,’ said [Elinor], ‘that I think very highly of him – that I greatly esteem, that I like him.’....
- ‘Esteem him! Like him! Cold-hearted Elinor! Oh! Worse than cold-hearted! Ashamed of being otherwise. Use those words again and I will leave the room this moment.’ (24)

Marianne finds fault with Elinor because she is using perspicuous language; she is precisely conveying the nature of her attachment to Edward without embellishment. Elinor knows that if she is not circumspect, Marianne will infer a depth of feeling that is not valid: “She knew that what Marianne and her mother conjectured one moment, they believed the next – that with them, to wish was to hope, and to hope was to expect” (24).¹⁰ Elinor reinforces, to echo Blair, that precise language is important – sentimental embellishment is not: “Good sense, clear ideas, perspicuity of language, and proper arrangement of words and thoughts, will always

⁹ Austen writes later that Elinor is determined to “subdue” her feelings, which both Johnson and Blair suggest is necessary so that “the past might no longer encroach on the present” (Ed. note, *Sense and Sensibility* 463).

¹⁰ This expression echoes Dr. Johnson’s statement that “[W]hat men allow themselves to wish they will soon believe” (Ed. note, *Sense and Sensibility* 443).

command attention. These are indeed the foundations of all solid merit, both in speaking and writing” (*L XVIII* 197).¹¹

Marianne’s own rhetoric is characterized by an over-reliance on emotion and feelings to the detriment of decorum and duty. While she allows emotions to dictate the content of her language, she does have the ability to ascertain proper taste and style. When Sir John uses a trite colloquialism, namely “setting one’s cap,” she takes him to task: “That is an expression, Sir John, which I particularly dislike. I abhor every common-place phrase by which wit is intended; and ‘setting one’s cap at a man’ or ‘making a conquest’ are the most odious of all. Their tendency is gross and illiberal” (53). In fact, Blair sanctions Marianne’s perspective in *Lecture XVIII on Figurative Language*, in which he chides those who “endeavor to supply the defect by poetical words, *cold exclamations*, by *common place figures*, and every thing that has the appearance of pomp and magnificance” (*L XVIII* 205, emphasis added). As Ian Watt observes, “... Marianne’s proclaimed dislike of cliché is a sign of her genuine sense as well as of her verbal sensibility...” (Watt 43). While Marianne will adhere to some prescriptive rules of appropriate discourse, she chafes under those she considers restrictive:

I have been too much at my ease, too happy, too frank. I have erred against any commonplace notion of decorum; I have been open and sincere where I ought to have been reserved, spiritless, dull and deceitful; – had I talked only of the weather and the roads, and had I spoken only once in ten minutes, this reproach would have been spared. (57)

Conversation and language for Marianne is all or nothing. In her mind, civility and decorum can only be bland; sensibility is her authority. Jane Nardin suggests that Marianne uses

¹¹ Elinor follows Blair’s dicta in another fashion as well. When Lucy Steele inappropriately confides in her and reveals her secret engagement to Edward, Elinor resolutely adheres to her promised secrecy. In his *Sermons*, Blair counsels individuals not to “expose ... yourselves to the reproach of lightness and inconstancy, which always bespeak, either a trifling, or a base mind. Reveal none of the secrets of your friend. Be faithful to his interests” (*Sermons* 167).

sensibility as both reason and rationale for her comportment: “Marianne’s adherence to the cult of sensibility not only causes her to disregard the forms of common politeness but also gives her a rationale for ignoring the major rules of propriety” (29). She perceives nothing in degrees; decorum is censorious because it stifles. Marianne deflects Mrs. Jennings’ censure by remarking, “If the impertinent remarks of Mrs. Jennings are to be proof of impropriety in conduct, we are all offending every moment of all our lives” (80).

Marianne, who believes she is her own moral guide, does not recognize the responsibility inherent in society to be dutiful and respectful. As she will discover, however, speech without the sanction of assiduousness can be dangerous, especially when it leads to inappropriate relationships.

Willoughby is seemingly everything the young Marianne envisions as the model gentleman, her “idea of perfection” (58). He is “a young man of good abilities, quick imagination, lively spirits, and open, affectionate manners” (57-58). However, to the more discerning Elinor, there are warning signs of impropriety, notably in his conversation: “In hastily forming and giving his opinion of other people, in sacrificing general politeness ... and in slighting too easily the forms of worldly propriety, he displayed a want of caution which Elinor could not approve” (58). Because Marianne is not cautious in her judgment and is herself oblivious to principled precepts, she is unaware of Willoughby’s lack of propriety.

Later, after he has confirmed his engagement with the wealthy Miss Grey, Elinor tells Marianne that it was better for their engagement to end abruptly and for her to know his true character now. Marianne must confess that there was no engagement or explicit declaration of love by means of language: “Yes – no – never absolutely. It was every day implied, but never

professedly declared. Sometimes I thought it had been – but it never was” (212).¹² The depth of their relationship was inferred, never verbalized. It was hinted, with the petition for the locks of hair, his desire to give her a horse as a gift, but it was never directly stated. Even her mother relied on Willoughby’s behavior and comportment rather than his rhetoric as indicators of his serious attachment:

I have not wanted syllables where actions have spoken so plainly. Has not his behaviour to Marianne and to all of us . . . declared that he loved her and considered her his future wife, and that he felt for all of us the attachment of the nearest relation? Have we not perfectly understood each other? Has not my consent been daily asked by his looks, his manners, his attentive and affectionate respect? (92)

Mrs. Dashwood’s fault has been in using gestures and manners rather than language to guide her comportment and feelings: “It is enough to say that he is unlike Fanny is enough, it implies everything amiable. I love him already” (19). She pointedly does not adhere to Blair’s call for precision in language with her admission that “I have never yet known what it was to separate esteem and love” (19). As Elinor has already shown, there is a vast difference between love and esteem, and the choice to not be precise and perspicuous is a moral failing as well as a rhetorical one. By her imperfect language, Mrs. Dashwood is demonstrating that she is as fallible as her daughter Marianne and is likewise relying on sensibility and emotion as guides for behavior. This emphasizes, according to Mooneyham, that “[t]here is no division in Austen’s moral philosophy between the verbal expressions of the self and the self entire. Language is character; character, language” (ix).

Because Marianne and Mrs. Dashwood have not been circumspect in their language, they cannot correctly interpret Willoughby’s. For Marianne, her lesson will come at the cost of her health and strained relationships with her family. She will ultimately atone for her behavior,

¹²“Generally, the use of the Christian name by men to women seems to have marked at least an understanding of the kind leading to betrothal (Phillipps 211). See also Baker’s observations in *Jane Austen: A Critical Companion* (251).

however, while keeping her reputation intact. Marianne learns that she has been unguided and selfish in her relationships and promises to make amends. She turns to Elinor's actions and discourse as models to emulate. As Blair so conspicuously advocates in his course on belletristic rhetoric, preciseness and perspicuity can be learned and style can be polished, but eloquence must be grounded on internal morals and judgment. Having seen the errors in her thought, behavior and discourse, Marianne embarks on a serious course of study, a course that has already featured education in belletristic rhetoric as well as instruction in the importance of moral duty.

If there is a particular moment in her novels in which Austen underscores her agreement with Blair's promotion of perspicuity in language that moment occurs in *Mansfield Park*. Indeed in this instance, the carelessly spoken word not only reveals the character of the speaker but ultimately steers the resolution of the novel.

As Edmund relates the incident to Fanny Price, he had recently visited Mary Crawford in London where he was apprised of Maria Bertram's elopement with Henry Crawford. Mary downplays the seriousness of the scandal and calls the elopement a "folly":

... but how she went on, Fanny, is not fit – is hardly fit to be repeated to you. I cannot recall all her words. I would not dwell upon them if I could. Their substance was great anger at the *folly* of each To hear the woman whom – no harsher name than folly given! ... – No reluctance, no horror, no feminine – shall I say? no modest loathings! (526)

It is because she is so careless with language that her spell over Edmund is finally broken. Of course, Fanny has long recognized the inappropriateness of Mary's conversations, and even Edmund, before falling for Mary's sensuous siren call of harp and song, was alerted to her misuse of language during their initial encounters: "It is her countenance that is so attractive. She has a wonderful play of feature! But was there nothing in her conversation that struck you, Fanny, as not quite right?" (74). Austen repeatedly signals that in Miss Crawford's discourse

something is clearly amiss. As Edmund notes only a page later, “I do not censure her *opinions*, but there certainly *is* impropriety in making them public” (75).

Fanny may be a reluctant and novice conversationalist, but she still recognizes faulty rhetoric. Mooneyham remarks that Fanny “sees that Mary is a social chameleon who relies on flattery and wit to win approval. She is capable of detecting Mary’s manipulative use of language” (85). Fanny understands that Mary is merely a smooth operator. Kelly observes that “... Fanny means what she says; thus by contrast we become aware of how little meaning there is in what is said by others” (“Reading Aloud” 41).

Edmund, on the other hand, is completely besotted. He makes excuses for Mary’s impropriety, suggesting that she had been influenced by wayward individuals:

I know her disposition to be a sweet and faultless as your own [Fanny’s], but the influence of her former companions makes her seem, gives to her conversation, to her professed opinions, sometimes a tinge of wrong. She does not *think* evil, but she speaks it – speaks it in playfulness – and though I know it to be playfulness, it grieves me to the soul. (312)¹³

Edmund suggests that he knows her character; he claims that her discourse is mere playfulness and that she is only being mischievous. However, Austen aligns herself squarely with Blair’s assertion that virtue is requisite to eloquence. As referenced earlier, oral discourse has the ability of elevating the speaker’s thoughts; according to Blair: “... it is to the intercourse and transmission of thought, by means of speech, that we are chiefly indebted for the improvement of thought itself” (*L I 3*). Therefore, Edmund is entirely wrong in claiming that Mary does not *think* evil, she only speaks it. Austen re-emphasizes the connection between speech and thought in the final conversation between Edmund and Mary, which features the poor word choice of “folly” for scandalous elopement. Finally, Edmund recognizes that, in fact,

¹³ Reference to Biblical Scripture, II Peter 2: 12-15 (Ed. note, *Mansfield Park* 708).

Mary's thoughts and speech are one and the same. The scales come off his eyes, and the magic is gone.

It is illustrative that the narrator projects Sir Thomas's reaction to Miss Crawford's words rather than her actions: "Had he been privy to her conversation with his son, he would not have wished her to belong to him, though her twenty thousand pounds had been forty" (523). Even Sir Thomas, whose sense of value is derived primarily from material goods and money, would be hypothetically taken aback by what her careless words reveal about her character and morals. As Kelly observes, "...Jane Austen examines the nature of true eloquence in *Mansfield Park* and shows the relationship between moral character and public utterance..." ("Reading Aloud" 48). While Austen's female characters such as Catherine Morland and Marianne Dashwood modify their actions and manners by reforming and improving their rhetoric, Mary Crawford does not undergo a similar path of improvement. She expresses genuine remorse only once, when she admits she may have been too impudent in her discourse and "wished such words unsaid..." (332).

Although her role is not a central one, lack of perspicuity is a hallmark of Miss Bingley's mode of discourse in *Pride and Prejudice* as well. In *Lecture X*, Blair analyzes words that are related and frequently misused, among them the words "surprised," "astonished," "amazed," and "confounded." He explains their nuances: "I am surprised with what is new or unexpected; I am astonished, at what is vast or great; I am amazed, with what is incomprehensible; I am confounded, by what is shocking or terrible" (*L X* 105). Therefore, in her response to Mr. Darcy's praise of Miss Eliza Bennet's "fine eyes" (30), any¹⁴ of the other words would have been more appropriate and correct than the retort she used: "I am all astonishment" (30). She

¹⁴ Admittedly, "confounded" would be appropriate only if Miss Bingley detested (not abhorred, see Blair's distinction, 106) Miss Bennet and believed that any praise of her was indeed terrible and or shocking.

makes the same mistake again later when she remarks, “I am astonished that my father should have left so small a collection of books” (41). That Austen intentionally signals to the reader that Miss Bingley’s lack of preciseness is related to her character is unmistakable, especially when contrasted with Catherine’s use of the related word in *Northanger Abbey*. Henry Tilney pointedly praises Catherine for using the word “amazingly” in the appropriate context: “It *is* amazingly. I may well suggest amazement if they do” (108, emphasis added). As Ian Watt observes, in Austen’s novels “...talk may not always illuminate its ostensible subject, [but] it can at least be depended on to enlighten us about the talker” (1). With her inappropriate choice of words, Miss Bingley’s character and claim to being accomplished are circumspect.

In addition to perspicuity, Blair advocates purity in language. In *Lecture X*, Blair defines purity as “the use of such words, and such constructions, as belong to the idiom of the language which we speak; in opposition to words and phrases that are imported from other languages, or that are obsolete, or new-coined, or used without proper authority” (*L X* 100). Blair is convinced that those who resort to foreign words or expressions currently in vogue are those who merely seek to impress or to shine in borrowed language and consequently exhibit a “faulty” style (*L XIX* 214).

In *Emma*, Mrs. Elton is one such speaker who lacks both precision and propriety. As the newly married wife of Mr. Elton, she sees herself as a role model for other females in Highbury. Notwithstanding her father’s profession in business, she feigns gentility and exaggerates her connections. Her pretentiousness is displayed openly. As Emma remarks after listening to a quarter of an hour of Mrs. Elton’s conversation, “Mrs. Elton was a vain woman, extremely well satisfied with herself, and thinking much of her own importance; that she meant to shine and be very superior, but with manners which had been formed in a bad school, pert and familiar” (293).

Blair also specifically criticizes those who through their conversation and speech aim to dazzle and impress: "...that where the Speaker has no farther aim than merely to shine and to please, there is great danger of Art being strained into ostentation, and of the Composition becoming tiresome and languid" (*L XXV* 266).

In another example of how closely Austen heeded Blair's belletristic directives, K.C. Phillipps remarks that "Jane Austen seems to have felt that foreign phrases in conversation were generally pedantic or affected" (21). Mrs. Elton ridicules Mr. Woodhouse by calling him "an old *beau* of mine" (326) and frequently refers to her husband as "*caro sposo*" (300). In his *Lectures*, Blair is judicious in his disapproval of using inflated or foreign language: "The introduction of foreign and learned words, unless where necessity requires them, *should always be avoided*. Barren Languages may need such assistances; but ours is not one of these" (*L X* 101, emphasis added). It is noteworthy that those characters who use foreign words – Mrs. Elton, Mary Crawford and Lucy Steele – are all characters with questionable morals.¹⁵ As Norman Page observes, "The use of such language may reveal lack of taste or discretion, a brash modishness, or a more serious indifference to right conduct and sound principles" (150). Austen has clearly associated all of these deficits with Mrs. Elton and her husband, the ambitious Mr. Elton.

Mr. Elton is a young clergyman who, according to Emma, "is good-humoured, cheerful, obliging and gentle" (34). His manners and address display his desire to fit in and adapt to the rhetoric of those around him: "Sighs and fine words had been given in abundance..." (146). He ingratiates himself by miming the words of others, inserting his gallantries to indicate his agreement and approval. Mr. Elton's lack of perspicuity is especially evident when he completes

¹⁵ Mary Crawford in *Mansfield Park* utilizes French words such as *menus plaisirs* (264) and *tout ensemble* (268). Caroline Bingley mentions tête-à-tête (33) in her invitations to Jane Bennet; however, rather than an indication of moral fault, she uses the expression as an affectation or "social pretension" (Baker 382).

a riddle for Harriet Smith's collection but later tells Emma it was written exclusively for her (141). Austen clearly signals that notwithstanding his attempts at decorous and elevated language, he falls short of sincerity and eloquence. As Emma discovers, "with all the gentleness of his address, true elegance was sometimes wanting" (146).

Mr. Elton's discourse is contrary to the instructions by Blair who would surely censure Mr. Elton for his displays of deference, his attempts to acquiesce to the conversation of others, and his reliance on superficial rhetoric. In *Lecture XXV*, Blair observes that "... all labored declamation, and affected ornaments of Style, which shew [*sic*] the mind to be cool and unmoved, are so inconsistent with persuasive Eloquence. Hence all studied prettinesses, in gesture or pronunciation, detract so greatly from the weight of a Speaker" (*L XXV* 267).

As Emma surmises, Mr. Elton is in desperate need a wife. As a self-proclaimed matchmaker, she believes that Harriet Smith would be an apt choice. Mr. Elton has his own thoughts on the matter, however. Bharat Tandon observes:

The bluff surface of Elton's behaviour hides, from a superficial listener like Emma, the truth that 'echoing' is not his natural mode of speaking, but one adopted deliberately in pursuit of an ulterior motive: 'Miss Woodhouse of Hartfield, heiress of thirty thousand pounds.' (155)

Because she is so focused on the accoutrements of polished civility, Emma does not engage with the substance of Mr. Elton's discourse, nor does she notice his attempts to develop an understanding with her. Emma has misread Mr. Elton's rhetorical cues; Mr. Knightly, on the other hand, has perceptively discovered Mr. Elton's true nature: "Elton may talk sentimentally, but he will act rationally" (70). This assertion becomes manifest when, after Miss Woodhouse rejects him, Mr. Elton abruptly leaves for Bath. While there, he quickly chooses a bride who, as a

daughter of an affluent businessman, happens to have a significant income of ten thousand pounds.

Shortly after her arrival at Highbury, the new Mrs. Elton has the audacity to presume to know Emma's background and even station in life. As she waxes rhapsodically about Bath:

And it is so cheerful a place, that it could not fail of being of use to Mr. Woodhouse's spirits, which, I understand, are sometimes much depressed. And as to its recommendations to you, I fancy I need not take much pains to dwell on them. The advantages of Bath to the young are generally understood. It would be a charming introduction for you, who have lived so secluded a life; and I could immediately secure you some of the best society in the place. A line from me would bring you a host of acquaintance.... (297)

Emma, born into the upper ranks of society, is taken aback by Mrs. Elton's presumption that she has the status to make social introductions on her behalf. Juliet McMaster emphasizes Austen's awareness of conversation as representative of moral and social positions: "Given the highly structured and formal society she belongs to, and the fullness and specificity of Austen's created world, what a character says, with the way she says it, is as salient an aspect of identity as her genetic inheritance, her body, her class, certainly her actions." (78). Mrs. Elton, with her idiosyncratic style and lack of social propriety, betrays her status as a member of the *nouveau riche*.

Mrs. Elton is improper in recognizing standard rules of decorum. When not referring to her husband as *caro sposo*, she abbreviates his name and drops the titles of others as when she asserts that "Mr. E is Knightley's right hand" (497). As Jane Nardin notes, "Mrs. Elton's use of excessively informal modes of address reveals the fact that she has lived in the sort of inferior society that mistakes affected ease for aristocratic breeding" (22). Referring to someone by using their Christian name or name without the prefix goes against social protocol, as Emma observes:

“Jane Fairfax and Jane Fairfax. Heavens! Let me not suppose that she dares go about, Emma Woodhouse-ing me!” (306).¹⁶

Mrs. Elton’s discourse is marked by other faults in style. She displays her pretentiousness as she refers to herself in the plural when she prohibits Jane Fairfax’s ability to make her own decisions: “We will not allow her” (319). Later, Mrs. Elton mistakenly asserts that “Surry is the garden of England” (295), which is not only a cliché but an inaccurate one at that. Emma graciously gives her a way to save face, by noticing that many counties could be referred to as such (and presumably one of those is Kent), which Mrs. Elton does not heed. Emma has no choice but to be “silenced” (295). As Blair observes, conceitedness in writing is a “most disgusting blemish” (*L XIX* 214) and, one avers, that applies to spoken discourse as well.

Lucy Steele in *Sense and Sensibility* follows a similar pattern of rhetorical misuse. She uses foreign words and makes rude comments, as when she overtly chides her sister: “‘Lord! Anne,’ cries Lucy Steele, ‘you can talk of nothing but *beaux*; -- you will make Miss Dashwood believe you think of nothing else’” (143). Elinor, who usually exhibits candor in her appraisal of those around her, criticizes Lucy for her significant faults:

Elinor saw, and pitied her for, the neglect of abilities which education might have rendered so respectable; but she saw, with less tenderness of feeling, the thorough want of delicacy, of rectitude, and integrity of mind, which her attentions, her assiduities, her flatteries at the Park betrayed; and she could have no lasting satisfaction in the company of a person who joined insincerity with ignorance; whose want to instruction prevented their meeting in conversation on terms of equality; and whose conduct toward others, made every shew of attention and deference towards herself perfectly valueless. (146)

Elinor’s realization that Lucy joined “insincerity with ignorance” mirrors Blair’s assertion of the link between virtue and persuasion and eloquence. Lucy’s “ignorance” reflects

¹⁶ Austen also incorporates examples of individuals who superfluously misuse social address, as when Sir Walter Elliot in *Persuasion* refers to his own daughters as Miss Elliot and Miss Anne Elliot (170).

an external fault – a lack of serious instruction and education – while “insincerity” is an internal, moral failing. “Such careless use of language is more than a linguistic offence,” Page observes. “It is a deeply-rooted sign of moral confusion, just as the vulgarisms of ... Lucy Steele are an offense against decorum and civilized behaviour” (22).

Another female whose character is revealed principally through her discourse is Miss Bates in *Emma*. Miss Bates resides with her mother, Mrs. Bates, and dotes on her niece, Jane Fairfax, who will stay with them when she visits Highbury. Born into the genteel rank of society, the Bates’ standard of living has fallen, and they are provided charity by various members of the community. Miss Bates’ primary rhetorical fault is loquaciousness and the inability to stay focused on one thought at a time, as is evident in this example of her discourse about a letter from her niece Jane:

I was reading it to Mrs. Cole, and since she went away, I was reading it again to my mother, for it is such a pleasure to her—a letter from Jane—that she can never hear it often enough; so I knew it could not be far off, and here it is, only just under my huswife¹⁷—and since you are so kind as to wish to hear what she says; —but, first of all, I really must, in justice to Jane, apologize 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. (167-68)

Unlike Mrs. Elton, whose conversation is intended to impress or convey a sense of social superiority and is therefore morally suspect, Miss Bates simply shares exactly what is going through her head at that moment with no intent to deceive or to set herself above others. As Austen’s narrator notes, “She was a great talker upon little matters... full of trivial communications and harmless gossip” (20). More importantly, as Austen underscores, Miss Bates was kind: “She loved every body, was interested in every body’s happiness, quicksighted to every body’s merits; thought herself a most fortunate creature, and surrounded with blessings

¹⁷ Sewing kit (Ed. note, *Emma* 562).

in such an excellent mother, and so many good neighbours and friends, and a home that wanted for nothing” (20).

However, notwithstanding her kindness and laudatory morals, Blair suggests that her lack of focus and her breathless wordiness should be avoided. In Blair’s estimation, loquaciousness is tiresome and even “disgusting”:

We ought always to remember, that how much soever we may be pleased with hearing ourselves speak, every audience is ready to be tired; and the moment they begin to be tired, all our Eloquence goes for nothing. A loose and verbose manner never fails to create disgust; and, on most occasions, we had better run the risque of saying too little, than too much. (*L XXVII* 294)

Emma would most definitely agree with Blair’s counsel that it is better to say too little than too much. She prides herself on her own ability of being an agile conversationalist: she can deftly steer conversations, respond with decorum and politeness even when slighted, and adhere to all the sanctioned guidelines for discourse. However, Emma too goes against Blair’s counsel, but for a different reason. Her conversation and eloquence do not come from the heart: “All high eloquence must be the offspring of passion, or warm emotion. It is this which makes every man persuasive; and gives a force to his genius, which it possesses at no other time” (*L XXVII* 290). Indeed, for as much as Emma censures Mrs. Elton, they actually share an elevated sense of superiority; for Mrs. Elton, it is superiority in her sense of taste, and for Emma, it is belief in her superior rhetoric and conversability. Emma flatters herself that she is always civil and polite, but she does not realize that in her promotion of polish over substance, she, too, is guilty of faulty and insincere rhetoric. During the outing at Box Hill, Emma’s shallow civility is manifest.

To hurt Jane Fairfax with whom he has quarreled, Frank Churchill indecorously flirts with Emma Woodhouse. He suggests that they should all play a game where they will be required to share one thing very clever, two things moderately clever or three very dull things for

Miss Woodhouse's approbation (403). Miss Bates good-naturedly volunteers that she believes she is readily capable of saying three very dull comments. Emma responds by telling Miss Bates that her difficulty will be in *limiting* herself to only three at once (403). The snide quip pains Miss Bates, who believes that she must be "very disagreeable, or she would not have said such a thing to an old friend" (403). When they are alone later, Knightley reprimands Emma for her sardonic comment: "How could you be so unfeeling to Miss Bates? How could you be so insolent in your wit to a woman of her character, age and situation? – Emma, I had not thought it possible" (407). As Ronald Hall notes, "...it is Emma, not Miss Bates, who talks too impulsively and unthinkingly without true attentive listening to others" (146).

Emma's instruction in the art of sincere conversation and eloquence begins with her confession that she had been "so brutal, so cruel" to Miss Bates (409). She sees the pretense in her conversation and her inflated ego, which presumes to be able to map out the lives of others better than they can themselves. Not unlike Blair's students and readers who benefit from his instruction, Emma learns that conversation that does not come from the heart might be polished, but it is not true eloquence. By focusing on the veneer of politeness, she has mistaken her own adeptness in conversation for substance. Not unlike Catherine Morland in *Northanger Abbey*, Emma, too, will undergo instruction in discernment and judgment and, by altering her discourse, discover the moral foundation of propriety and eloquence.

Lady Catherine in *Pride and Prejudice* also believes that she is superior to others; however, her sense of superiority derives from rank. Long used to being treated with deference, she views others only in relation to class and social standing. Jane Nardin suggests that "Lady Catherine's dictatorial and condescending manners toward those she considers socially inferior reveal her pride of rank as well as the fact that she is uninterested in judging people by their

inherent worth” (53). During her visit to see her old friend Charlotte, Elizabeth Bennet is invited to join the entourage who regularly dine at Rosings with Lady Catherine. As Elizabeth observes, the conversation consisted of listening to “Lady Catherine talk, which she did without any intermission till coffee came in, delivering her opinion on every subject in so decisive a manner as proved, that she was not used to have her judgement controverted” (185). Lady Catherine regally holds forth, her words as powerful as an imperial proclamation, preserving the “distinction of rank” (182). In fact, she practically claims divine status with her assertion that she knows conclusively what the weather will be the following day: “The party then gathered around the fire hear Lady Catherine *determine* what weather they were to have on the morrow” (188, emphasis added). According to Marilyn Butler, “...[T]he subject matter of a conversation becomes as important as the insight it offers into character, because conversation becomes the occasion for the clash of distinct systems of value” (224). Similar to Mrs. Elton, who incongruously claims a privileged status and rank, Lady Catherine asserts her distinguished place in the social strata.

Not accustomed to those who are circumspect in their deference toward her, she is initially perplexed and annoyed with Elizabeth’s manners: “[Y]ou give your opinion very decidedly for so young a person” (183). Lady Catherine, the reader is told, is astonished at such treatment; nevertheless, “Elizabeth’s courage did not fail her. She had heard nothing of Lady Catherine that spoke her awful from any extraordinary talents or miraculous virtue, and the mere stateliness of money and rank, she thought she could witness without trepidation” (182).

Lady Catherine will assert her superior social rank later when she asks Elizabeth to promise that she will never enter into an engagement with her nephew, Mr. Darcy. Elizabeth does not cower before Lady Catherine, notwithstanding the pronouncements of the power and

respect ostensibly due her: “Miss Bennet, do you know who I am? I have not been accustomed to such language as this” (393). Lady Catherine’s appeal to Elizabeth is based on the only source of value she recognizes, namely ancestry and rank: “My daughter and my nephew are formed for each other. They are descended, on the maternal side, from the same noble line; and, on the father’s, from respectable, honourable, and ancient—though untitled—families” (394). In his *Sermons and Lectures*, Blair claims that all individuals are similar, regardless of social class: “Human nature, and human passions, are much the same in every rank of life” (*L XXXIX* 442). Moreover, he emphasizes that the barometer of an individual’s worth is not based on social standing: “True dignity must be founded on *character*, not on dress and appearance” (*L XV* 159, emphasis added). Moreover, as Blair writes, “study and ostentation are apt to be visible, they are seldom so persuasive as more free and unconstrained discourses” (*L XXVII* 291).

It is ironic that Lady Catherine travels to Longbourn to ask Lizzy for the one thing she does not have – a pledge, a promise – to give her word that she is not and will not enter into an engagement with Mr. Darcy. Notwithstanding her offensive rhetoric, her emotional appeals, and her threats of Lizzy’s exile from respected society, Elizabeth is not persuaded and does not satisfy Lady Catherine’s supplications. In her proper, passionate and principled response to Lady Catherine, Elizabeth demonstrates firmness of character and, ultimately, true eloquence:

Allow me to say, Lady Catherine, that the arguments with which you have supported this extraordinary application have been as frivolous as the application was ill-judged. You have widely mistaken my character, if you think I can be worked on by such persuasions as these. (396)

Elizabeth’s response illustrates her rationality and ability to interpret the validity of arguments and appeals. She specifically accuses Lady Catherine of faulty rhetoric with her frivolous claims and lack of knowledge about her audience. In effect, Lady Catherine’s ethos and

logos are dubious, and she has failed to include those elements Blair recognizes as vital in order to persuade:

[I]n order to persuade, the most essential requisites are, solid argument, clear method, a character of probity appearing in the Speaker, joined with such graces of Style and utterance as shall draw our attention to what he says. Good sense is the foundation of all. No man can be truly eloquent without it; for fools can persuade none but fools. (*L XXV* 265)

Austen's repertoire of female characters includes those who do abide by Blair's rhetorical principles in their conversation and one of them is in *Pride and Prejudice*. Jane Bennet is the eldest daughter in the Bennet family and is widely considered the most beautiful and elegant. Unlike her younger sisters Kitty, Lydia and Mary, Jane is not flirtatious and her words and manners are marked by decency, sweetness and sense. Jane and Elizabeth have a close relationship, and Lizzy can find only one fault with her: "...[Y]ou are a great deal too apt, you know, to like people in general. You never see a fault in anybody. All the world are good and agreeable in your eyes. I never heard you speak ill of a human being in your life" (15). Lizzy's lighthearted criticism underscores the difference between them: while Elizabeth is quick to form an opinion or prejudice, Jane exercises candor in all her relationships.

Unlike the contemporary understanding of candor as frank and honest, Jane Nardin suggests that Austen's definition of candor is "a willingness to suspend judgment...and to eliminate malice and personal bias...from the process of evaluating others" (3). This characterization is similar to Blair's definition of the term, as he describes in one of his sermons, aptly titled *On Candour*:¹⁸

¹⁸ Blair also references candour in his *Lectures*. Specifically, he lists candour as an essential component in establishing ethos: "For, consider first, Whether any thing be more essential to persuasion, than the opinion which we entertain of the probity, disinterestedness, candour, and other good moral qualities of the person who endeavors to persuade?" (*L XXXIV* 381).

It is necessary to observe, that true candour is altogether different from that guarded, inoffensive language, and that studied openness of behavior, which we frequently meet with among men of the world. Smiling very often, is the aspect, and smooth are the words of those who inwardly are the most ready to think evil of others. That candour which is a Christian virtue consists, not in fairness of speech, but in fairness of heart. It may want the blandishment of external courtesy, but supplies its place with humane and generous liberality of sentiment. Its manners are unaffected, and its professions cordial. (*S* 384)

As Blair recommends, Jane's candor is based on the propensity of finding what is good and amenable in each individual and suspending judgment. She is not being naïve by giving everyone the benefit of the doubt; rather she is exercising, according to Blair, a Christian value that has at its core fairness of heart. She illustrates this faith in human nature by being unwilling to assign negative motivations to Mr. Darcy, Wickham and even Miss Bingley. She is always second-guessing Lizzy's decided opinions, as when she reacts to the tale of woe offered by George Wickham: "The possibility of his having really endured such unkindness, was enough to interest all her tender feelings; and nothing therefore remained to be done, but to think well of them both, to defend the conduct of each, and throw into the account of accident or mistake, whatever could not be otherwise explained" (95). While events reveal that Lizzy was justified in questioning Miss Bingley's character, only Jane gave Mr. Darcy the benefit of the doubt regarding Wickham. Jane's candor is prescient when Wickham's true character is subsequently revealed.

As noted earlier, Blair postulates that virtue is a necessary component in eloquence, "that, without possessing the virtuous affections in a strong degree, no man can attain eminence in the sublime parts of eloquence" (*L I* 9). Does Austen challenge this critical precept of Blair's belletristic rhetoric? On the surface, it appears she does. With the examples of Henry Crawford's flirtatious acting, George Wickham's suave conversation, and William Elliot's

debonair discourse, Austen seemingly presents characters of dubious morality and questionable virtue who nonetheless are ostensibly persuasive and eloquent. I suggest, however, that while the rogues initially appear eloquent, Austen always signals that something is amiss. In fact, Austen's portrayal of these cads complies with Blair's understanding of eloquence as she distinguishes between polished manners and external civility and true eloquence.

When Wickham is introduced on the streets of Meryton, it is his external appearance that receives the approbation of the Bennet women. Wickham "had all the best part of beauty, a fine countenance, a good figure, and very pleasing address" (81).¹⁹ Austen focuses on his physical appearance rather than giving the reader a sense of his inner character. This is fitting because this is precisely Elizabeth's focus as well. She is smitten by his address, his apt smile and pleasing countenance. She is also admittedly intrigued by the chance meeting between Mr. Darcy and Mr. Wickham in which both barely feign rudimentary politeness. Because she has already judged Darcy's manners to be insolent and cold, she will naturally be more amenable to Mr. Wickham's perspective of their fractured relationship.

They become better acquainted at dinner with the Philips family when Mr. Wickham singles her out for a tête-à-tête: "Mr. Wickham was the happy man towards whom almost every female eye was turned, and Elizabeth was the happy woman by whom he finally seated himself..." (85). In this discourse, he shares a preposterous tale of woe and deceit, all the while accompanied by a carefully studied and suave demeanor. As Nardin observes, "...Wickham's flattering behavior to her at the very opening of her acquaintance with him, leads Elizabeth to misjudge radically the nature of his manners and hence of his moral character" (57). Elizabeth recognizes his rhetorical skills and his ability to embellish and to shine in conversation, which

¹⁹ "Address" meaning "manner of speech" (Ed. note, *Pride and Prejudice* 487).

“though it was only on its being a wet night and on the probability of a rainy season, made her feel that the commonest, dullest, most threadbare topic might be rendered interesting by the skill of the speaker” (85). Elizabeth’s observation reflects the awareness that rhetoric and solicitous addresses can be manipulated and embellished.

Wickham is able to deceive because of his smooth talk and manners, and Elizabeth excuses his self-promotion as his manners spoke “truth” (96). She did not heed the obvious warning signs. Wickham underscores his own shallowness and focus on external appearances when he tries to ascertain Elizabeth’s change of heart regarding Mr. Darcy: “Is it in address that he improves? Has he deigned to add aught²⁰ of civility to his ordinary style?” (259). Later, he accuses Darcy of a trait Wickham himself has perfected: “He is wise enough to assume even the *appearance* of what is right” (260, emphasis added).

Both Austen and Blair reaffirm that decorous discourse and smooth manners can be alluring. However, as Blair asserts, ornament and embellishment can never supplant the sound reasoning that is vital to persuasion and true eloquence. Its artifice will be revealed by those who show discernment:

When modelled upon this false idea [lack of sound reasoning], they may have the show, but never can produce the effect, or real Eloquence. Even the show of Eloquence which they make, will please only the trifling and superficial. For, with all tolerable judges, indeed almost with all men, mere declamation soon becomes insipid. (*L XXVII* 289)

Austen, in accordance with Blair, distinguishes between discourse that follows prescribed norms of civility with eloquence that is genuine and sincere. In fact, she is aware that dishonesty is frequently a component of socially sanctioned politeness and civility. For example, in *Sense and Sensibility*, the narrator observes that “[u]pon Elinor the whole task of telling lies when politeness required it always fell” (141). And in *Northanger Abbey*, Edmund remarks on the

²⁰ “Aught” means “anything” (Ed. note, *Pride and Prejudice* 515).

shallowness of civil discourse: “‘I am worn out with civility,’ said he. ‘I have been talking incessantly all night, and with nothing to say’” (323-4). Politeness, because it is superficial, can therefore be deceptive, insincere and vacuous. Austen signals that outward civility and a pretense of eloquence and ease should therefore be suspect.

As Lizzy learns to differentiate between the polite language of civility and conversations of substance, she will recognize that “[o]ne has got all the goodness, and the other the *appearance* of it” (250, emphasis added).

His countenance, voice, and manner had established him at once in the possession of every virtue. She tried to recollect some instance of goodness, some distinguished trait of integrity or benevolence, that might rescue him from the attacks of Mr. Darcy. . . .But no such recollection befriended her. She could see him instantly before her, in every charm of air and address; but she could remember no more substantial good than the general approbation of the neighborhood, and the regard which his social powers gained him in the mess. (228)

In her zeal to believe that Mr. Darcy was as ill-mannered as she prejudged him to be, Elizabeth overlooked the improprieties of Wickham’s speech, his indecorous comments about Darcy and his family, and his fabricated tale of woe. Elizabeth failed to see the immorality exhibited by a man who goes after women who are wealthy, not to mention his proclivity for secret elopements. He believes that his charm is sufficient to persuade women to elope with him, and unfortunately, in Lydia’s case it is.²¹

Wickham’s lack of genuine eloquence is also underscored when contrasted with that of Mr. Darcy. Unlike Wickham, Darcy cannot perform on demand: “I certainly have not the talent

²¹ Lynn Rigberg argues that in accordance with George Campbell’s understanding of eloquence, “... Wickham uses his eloquence to influence others’ opinions, Henry Crawford uses it to influence another’s actions” (22). However, I suggest that Wickham does use his eloquence to attempt to elope with Georgianna Darcy (£30,000) and Miss King (£10,000), so arguably, action (and wealth) is the intended result of Wickham’s rhetoric as well.

which some people possess...of conversing easily with those I have never seen before” (197), he admits. As his housekeeper converses with the Gardiners and Elizabeth on their visit to Pemberley, she praises Mr. Darcy for his measured discourse and claims if he is considered proud, it is “because he does not rattle away like other young men” (276).

Elizabeth and Mr. Darcy discover each other’s characters through their conversation and verbal sparring. Elizabeth interprets Mr. Darcy’s reserve as the language of rank and assumed authority and relies on her quick wit to distinguish herself from the studied civility of other women. As she playfully remarks of her discourse later, “[Y]ou were sick of civility, of deference, of officious attention. You were disgusted with the women who were always speaking and looking, and thinking for *your* approbation alone. I roused, and interested you, because I was so unlike them” (421).

Their banter illustrates that they are equals in intellect, which is manifest at the Netherfield ball. Contrary to Elizabeth’s assertion that she would never dance with Mr. Darcy, she attempts to initiate small-talk with him as they dance. That she is accusing him of haughtiness and assumed arrogance is clear:

- ‘...for the advantage of *some*, conversation ought to be so arranged as they may have the trouble of saying as little as possible.’
- ‘Are you consulting your own feelings in the present case, or do you imagine that you are gratifying mine?’
- ‘Both,’ replied Elizabeth archly, ‘for I have always seen a great similarity in the turn of our minds. – We are each of an unsocial, taciturn disposition, unwilling to speak, unless we expect to say something that will amaze the whole room, and be handed down to posterity with all the eclat of a proverb.’ (102-03)

In their conversations, Darcy scrupulously communicates about himself while Elizabeth deliberately misreads him. While acknowledging that his “temper would perhaps be called resentful” (63), he assures her that his motives have always been truthful. “My manners must

have been in fault, but not intentionally, I assure you. I never meant to deceive you, but my spirits might often lead me wrong” (410). His rhetoric is modeled on Blair’s understanding of virtue as requisite to eloquence. Mr. Darcy admits that the manner (delivery and style) of his discourse may be improved, but his words are in fact honest and heartfelt.

Elizabeth willfully prejudges Mr. Darcy as an insolent and prideful man, which is in opposition to Blair’s advice. In his *Sermons*, Blair admonishes those who are quick to form specious judgments and specifically counsels against forming prejudices:

On the whole, it clearly appears that no part of the government of temper deserves attention more, than to keep our minds pure from uncharitable prejudices, and open to candour and humanity in judging of others. The worst consequences, both to ourselves and to society, follow from the opposite spirit. Let us beware of encouraging a habit of suspicion, by forming too severe and harsh opinions concerning human nature in general. (S 397)

As Wickham’s true character is revealed, Elizabeth discovers that she has been too quick to judge and has been prejudiced in her opinions; she has been too eager to form “harsh opinions.” Darcy learns through Elizabeth’s example that his reserve and reticence in speech have been the result of pride. At the conclusion of the novel, it is clear that they have both acquired the features of what Blair promotes as genuine eloquence in discourse, namely virtue in character enlightened by passion and reason.

In this chapter, I have examined Austen’s appropriation of key elements of belletristic rhetoric, namely Blair’s characterization of style and eloquence. I suggest that in the novel *Persuasion*, Austen answers the question of what it means to be truly eloquent, and this becomes one of the novel’s principal themes. Throughout the novel, she presents various examples of discourse as barometers of character; significantly, however, Austen takes the central character, Anne Elliot, and through her examines the nature of eloquence and how is it acquired or

subsumed. Ultimately, as Anne discovers, true eloquence emerges by adherence to principle, to sincerity (with oneself and others) and to duty. Akin to Blair's understanding of virtue, both Anne and Captain Wentworth reaffirm their moral identities and ultimately display true eloquence following both Austen's and Blair's prescriptions.

While Anne had "an elegance of mind and sweetness of character" (6), she was considered to be a "nobody" by her father and sister (6). Anne is mostly ignored or contradicted: "her word had no weight...she was only Anne" (6). After Sir Walter has agreed to economize by renting a house in Bath and securing new tenants for Kellynch Hall, Anne's older sister, Elizabeth, commands Anne to go their sister's house, as "nobody will want her in Bath" (36). She compounds the insult by instead inviting Mrs. Clay to be her companion. When Anne warns Elizabeth of her concerns about this arrangement and how she might worm her way into the affections of their father, Elizabeth flatly tells Anne that she is wrong. And to guarantee that Anne is put in her proper place, she adds, "I think it rather unnecessary in *you* to be advising *me*" (38, emphasis added).

Her father, Sir Walter Elliot, Bart., is vain and believes himself to be handsome: "He considered the blessing of beauty as inferior only to the blessing of a baronetcy; and the Sir Walter Elliot, who united these gifts, was the constant object of his warmest respect and devotion" (4). Sir Walter and Elizabeth carry themselves with arrogance, base their approbation on rank and title, and infuse their rhetoric with a sense of superiority. For example, later in the novel when Sir Walter and Elizabeth arrive at the White Hart to disburse invitations for a gathering the following evening, they cast "... a general chill. Anne felt an instant oppression, and wherever she looked she saw symptoms of the same. The comfort, the freedom, the gaiety of the room was over, hushed into cold composure, determined silence or insipid talk, to meet the

heartless elegance of her father and sister” (245). Clearly, it is not just Anne who is silenced by their discourse and demeanor.

Her family members are not her only trial. Over seven years ago, Anne had formed an attachment with a young naval officer and was counseled by a family friend, Lady Russell, to drop the engagement to a man with no fortune or promise of one. As duty to someone who counseled Anne in the position of quasi-parent and her own sense of duty to Frederick, she acquiesced in being persuaded to sever ties with him. He had made a fortune subsequently and was now a distinguished officer in the Navy. Her remorse and sadness is great:

How eloquent could Anne Elliot have been! How eloquent, at least, were her wishes on the side of early warm attachment, and a cheerful confidence in futurity, against that over-anxious caution which seems to insult exertion and distrust Providence! She had been forced into prudence in her youth, she learned romance as she grew older; the natural sequel of an unnatural beginning. (32)

Austen repeatedly asserts that Anne’s voice has been silenced. When Anne moves to Uppercross to stay with her sister Mary, her identity is once again validated by the Musgroves, who esteem her and her sister’s family, who rely on her: “Anne had not wanted this visit to Uppercross, to learn that a removal from one set of people to another, though at a distance of only three miles, will often include a total change of conversation, opinion and idea” (45). While at Uppercross, Anne meets Captain Wentworth again, who is visiting his sister at Kellynch.

Frederick Wentworth has not forgiven Anne for dissolving their earlier engagement. While his manners are polished, generous and open, his demeanor toward Anne is anything but. Not unlike her family’s treatment of her, Captain Wentworth appears to ignore her and avoid any discussion with her:

They had no conversation together, no intercourse but what the commonest civility required. Once so much to each other! Now nothing! . . . Now they were as strangers; nay, worse than strangers, for they could never become acquainted. It was a perpetual estrangement. (68-69)

Austen underscores how empty the commonest civility truly is; it is perfunctory, superficial, and hollow. Conversing with Captain Wentworth would allow them to be reacquainted, and she is even denied that.

Paradoxically, it is through Captain Wentworth's friends that Anne is able to regain her discourse. On the visit to Lyme to meet some of Captain Wentworth's naval comrades, Anne is impressed with their informality, their conversations featuring cordiality, sincerity and candor. One of those friends is Captain Benwick, who is introduced as having "a pleasing face, and a melancholy air, just as he ought to have, and drew back from conversation" (105). His reluctance for society is understandable as he is mourning the loss of his fiancée, who died before he returned. Anne, however, attempts to draw him out in conversation and to help him with his grief. Her outreach is noticed by Captain Harville, who compliments her for kind attentions on Benwick's behalf: "Miss Elliot.... you have done a good deed in making that poor fellow talk so much" (116). Anne's rhetoric is empowered by a new audience; among sincere and thoughtful individuals, she enjoys positive and genuine conversations. She who had been ignored by her own family is reaching out to someone who, like her, has internalized pain and loss. It is yet another of Anne's selfless acts that reveals the steadfastness and generosity of her character.

When the evening was over, Anne could not but be amused at the idea of her coming to Lyme to preach patience and resignation to a young man whom she had never seen before; nor could she help fearing, on a more serious reflection, that, like so many other great moralists and preachers, she had been eloquent on a point in which her own conduct would ill bear examination. (109)²²

Austen emphasizes that to have real conversation, there must be receptivity in audience. Anne's budding ability to regain her voice and identity coincides with the introduction of another

²² This remark echoes Mary Crawford's observation in *Mansfield Park* when discussing Mr. Grant (131).

apparently eloquent individual. While at Lyme, Anne sees Mr. William Elliot, the cousin who will inherit her father's title and estate. When they are formally introduced later in Bath, he is recognized by his pleasing countenance and ease of conversation. William Elliot epitomizes the air and address of a gentleman: "His tone, his expressions, his choice of subject, his knowing where to stop, -- it was all the operation of a sensible, discerning mind" (155). However, as Anne and Mr. Elliot become better acquainted, Anne perceives that he appears to be too polished, too polite:

Though they had now been acquainted a month she could not be satisfied that she really knew his character. That he was a sensible man, an agreeable man – that he talked well, professed good opinions, seemed to judge properly and as a man of principle – this was all clear enough....yet she would have been afraid to answer for his conduct. . . . She felt she could so much more depend upon the sincerity of those who sometimes looked or said a careless or hasty thing, than those whose presence of mind never varied, whose tongue never slipped. (174-75)

His conversation appears to be as superficially eloquent as Wickham's in *Pride and Prejudice*. However, Anne will not be as gullible as Elizabeth Bennet. Anne notices that his conversation is too genteel and, therefore, becomes suspect:

Mr. Elliot was rational, discreet, polished—but he was not open. There was never any burst of feeling, any warmth of indignation or delight, at the evil or good of others.... She prized the frank, open-hearted, the eager character beyond all others.... Mr. Elliot was too generally agreeable. Various as were the tempers in her father's house, he pleased them all. (175)

Austen clearly distinguishes, as does Blair, between rhetoric that comes from the heart and rhetoric that is based on an external sense of conforming with accepted social protocol. The fact that Mr. Elliot's rhetoric appeals to everyone echoes a similar conversation in *Emma* in which Mr. Knightley likens that ability to please everyone as the talk of "politicians" (161). Austen underscores that there is a difference in being merely reserved or mysterious and secretive.

William Elliot beguiles with his ease of conversation, his propensity of agreeing and deferring to Anne. On one visit to the salons at Bath, they discuss the nature of good company and Anne reveals her view that it “is the company of clever, well-informed people, who have a great deal of conversation” (162). He saccharinely replies, “You are mistaken...that is not good company; that is the best” (162). Later, the depth of his deceit is exposed with his indecorous treatment of Mrs. Smith and clandestine relationship with Mrs. Clay. William Elliot, notwithstanding his pretense of eloquence and fine manners, turns out to be “a man without heart or conscience...black at heart, hollow and black!” (215). Austen may have had Blair’s observation in mind when she described Mr. Elliot: “Elegant speculations are sometimes found to float on the surface of the mind, while bad passions possess the interior regions of the heart” (LI9).

Unlike other central female characters in Austen’s novels, Anne undergoes instruction that is not a question of morals or virtue. She has always had firmness of character and has been resilient in the face of loss. The path of Anne’s education is specifically rhetorical; what she needs to relearn or to grasp is eloquence. With the change of audience—the receptive Crofts, the honest and warm Harvilles—Anne’s voice is restored, and she can vocally persuade Captain Wentworth of her love and constancy as they meet at the White Hart. As John Wiltshire observes, “By having her speak, and speak eloquently and fully, if indirectly, of her own experience and love, the famous climactic scene at the White Hart grants Anne Elliot a central position for the first time in the novel” (191). Captain Wentworth is captivated by her depth of feeling and her admission that “there is true attachment and constancy among men,” which finally gives him the impetus to declare himself and apprise her of his own depth of feelings. Appropriately, at the conclusion of *Persuasion*, Anne – who has regained her eloquence – and

Captain Wentworth – who has acquired it – are now able to engage in conversations with their circle of friends and family:

With the Musgroves, there was the happy chat of perfect ease; with Captain Harville, the kind-hearted intercourse of brother and sister; with Lady Russell, attempts at conversation, which a delicious consciousness cut short; with Admiral and Mrs. Croft, everything of peculiar cordiality and fervent interest, which the same consciousness sought to conceal; – and with Captain Wentworth, some moments of communication continually occurring, and always the hope of more and always the knowledge of his being there! (267)

Anne's path toward happiness and community began when she was silenced and had lost both her identity and ability to communicate. Throughout the course of the novel, she steadily regains her voice by asserting her sense of self and adherence to genuine principles. Finally, with the rapprochement between her and Captain Wentworth and their mutual affection, Anne's eloquence and conversation are restored.

In conclusion, by promoting taste, style and eloquence, Blair instructed his students and readers in the nuances of discernment to be able to evaluate both written and spoken rhetoric and to provide them with the means of being able to engage and participate in society. Austen shares this belief in the enlightening prospects of belletristic rhetoric as this is precisely the path of instruction that Catherine Morland undergoes: first, by her tutelage under Henry Tilney, and second, by observing models of discourse (negative ones as offered by Isabella and John Thorpe and positive ones in Eleanor and Henry Tilney). Emma learns to understand the difference between interest and interference, to understand that while well intentioned, she is not the arbiter of others' tastes – or mates. She, too, learns to differentiate between polished formality and the sincerity of genuine and eloquent conversation.

Moreover, Austen shares Blair's assertion that true eloquence is associated with morals and virtue. As Austen's novels illustrate, those individuals with faulty rhetorical styles are also

guilty of a moral or ethical weakness as well. The ostentatious and studied style of Mr. Collins is as aesthetically repugnant as the Eltons' efforts to impress and elevate their social standing.

Lady Catherine de Bourgh uses conversation as a method of delineating individuals based on rank and class and asserts superiority on imagined proficiencies. Austen re-enforces the idea that rhetoric can be used to deceive and manipulate, especially with the examples of Henry Crawford, George Wickham and William Elliot. Notwithstanding their ease of conversation and their polite and studied manners, they are not truly eloquent and their true characters are ultimately revealed. As we examined in *Persuasion*, Anne Elliot has chosen her identity and worth based on character rather than rank or status. As such, she is liberated in spirit and speech and can finally pursue a life of action, service, duty and worth. She is silent and shunned no longer.

While recognizing the merits of written discourse, including permanency and expanding audience, Blair believes that "spoken Language has a greater superiority over written Language, in point of energy of force" (*L VII 74*). The accompaniment of tone, countenance and gestures all combine, according to Blair, to make the spoken discourse more clear and expressive (74). He emphatically pronounces that "all the great and high efforts of eloquence must be made, by means of spoken, not of written, Language" (74). However, as we will see in the next chapter, Austen will challenge this belief by conveying the depth of her characters' passions and sentiments through epistolary rhetoric. Arguably, as we will examine the two endings in *Persuasion*, Austen affirms that the passionate words in a letter are much more powerful and eloquent than when spoken. We will also observe how Austen shares Blair's views on epistolary rhetoric with its ability to reveal and disguise character traits as readily as spoken discourse and how Austen uses the epistle to advance fictional themes and plots.

CHAPTER 5

SIGNED, SEALED, DELIVERED:

AUSTEN'S EPISTOLARY RHETORIC

That Austen, as an aspiring author, subscribed to the merits of epistolary rhetoric and form is evident in her juvenilia, notably *Love and Friendship*, *Lesley Castle* and *Lady Susan*.¹ It is also apparent in her novels as well. An earlier version of *Sense and Sensibility*, titled *Elinor and Marianne*, was drafted as a novel in letter form.² Predictably, as Bradbrook notes in *Jane Austen and Her Predecessors*, Austen held Richardson's epistolary novels in high esteem (12). As a literary genre, however, epistolary novels fell out of favor around the beginning of the 19th century with their "tendency towards repetitiveness and a certain enforced crudity in the handling of point of view" (172). But while Austen turned from the epistolary genre as narrative form for the structure of her texts, epistolary correspondence would continue to feature prominently within her novels.

In this chapter, I examine Austen's use of epistolary rhetoric as a means by which she illuminates the character of her fictional individuals and furthers the plot and development of the text itself. Letters within her fiction play a significant role by altering the course of the narrative and revealing characteristics that concurrently enlighten the reading audience and fictional characters alike. I argue that, as we have examined in previous chapters where Austen reveals

¹ For more on epistolary rhetoric in the juvenilia, specifically *A Collection of Letters*, see William Baker's *Critical Companion to Jane Austen* (33- 4).

² B. C. Southam suggested that *First Impressions*, an earlier form of *Pride and Prejudice* may also have been epistolary in form (qtd. in Page 178).

that oral discourse can be manipulated to deceive, written discourse also has the ability to disguise the true sentiments and motives behind the letter writer. More frequently, however, the examples of epistolary discourse within the novels serve to reveal character and, as I suggest, even the artifice of civility incorporated within the written form betrays a character's genuine traits and proclivities. Further, I suggest that Austen adheres to and is influenced by Blair's guidelines and counsel governing the socially sanctioned use of epistolary rhetoric. However, she differs from Blair in her example of written eloquence surpassing that of oral discourse.

To frame this analysis, I begin with Blair's perspectives and precepts on the epistolary form. He directly references the epistolary genre in his *Lectures*, specifically in *Lecture XXXVII, Lecture on Philosophical Writing, Dialogue, Epistolary Writing and Fictitious History*. Traditional rhetoric had long recognized the contributions made to rhetoric by the epistolary form, notably the emergence of the *ars dictaminis*³ during the medieval era. That Blair would devote one of his lectures on this less formal discourse suggests the importance of letters in commerce, news, and especially, human affairs.

According to Blair, epistolary writing is one that is broad and occupies a "place between the serious and amusing species of Composition" (*L XXXVII* 417). "Such an intercourse, when well conducted, may be rendered very agreeable to Readers of taste" (418), he assures his readers. It is far-reaching as "there is no subject whatever, on which one may not convey his thoughts to the Public, in the form of a Letter" (417). Blair does differentiate between the more public forms of discourse that have persuasion as their aim, notably legal and clerical discourse,

³ Historians of medieval culture generally cite the *ars dictaminis* or *ars dictandi*, the rhetorical study and practice of epistolary compositions, as a "major achievement of medieval civilization" (Cherewatuk and Wietnaus5). Alternately considered both the theory governing the epistolary genre as well as the "handbook" of letter writing, the *ars dictaminis* was a critical component of both clerical and administrative rule. Medieval ecclesiastical and secular bureaucracy necessitated a means a written communication; the *ars dictaminis*, or "art of letter writing," provided both the theoretical and practical means for the promulgation of the written correspondence (Perelman 98).

from the more personal nature of the epistle.⁴ As Blair explains, “Epistolary Writing becomes a distinct species of Composition, subject to the cognizance of criticism, only or chiefly, when it is of the easy and familiar kind; when it is conversation carried on upon paper, between two friends at a distance” (*L XXXVII* 417).

Austen herself would consider correspondence as a “conversation carried on upon paper.”

Consider her letter to Cassandra written January 3, 1801:

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. (*Letters*, 71)

Appropriately, the nature of letter writing suggests an ongoing conversation, albeit one-sided, as it is temporally suspended by virtue of geography. Distance dictates this particular format as letters were the only means of conveying and submitting sentiments, concerns and personal news, spatially removed. As Bharat Tandon asserts, “Distance is the logical prerequisite to all letter writing (even if the distance involved is, as at the end of *Persuasion*, no greater than the length of a room), and it naturally features strongly in both ancient and modern accounts of writing” (113).

Given Austen’s personal reliance on letters as conveying conversations and reaffirming relationships over a distance, it is not uncharacteristic that letter writing should feature prominently as a narratological device in her texts. Page, specifically referencing *Pride and Prejudice*, observes that letter-writing assumes a major role in the development of relationships and the transmission of news, and material which would otherwise have been conveyed through

⁴ Arguably, if one recalls that the *Acts of the Apostles* are themselves epistles, it is interesting that Blair does not make this explicit distinction when addressing the rhetoric of the pulpit in either his *Sermons* or *Lectures*.

dialogue is presented in letter-form. A letter can thus be seen as a form of ‘speech to the absent’, and a correspondence as a prolonged conversation or debate (32).

Arguably, epistolary rhetoric is critical to the development of each of her novels. In fact, the subject of letter writing itself is featured as a topic of conversation in three of Austen’s full-length novels: *Pride and Prejudice*, *Northanger Abbey* and *Emma*.

In *Pride and Prejudice*, this discussion takes place in the early chapters of the novel. Elizabeth Bennet has traveled to Netherfield to minister to and comfort her sister Jane, who has become ill. In the evening, while the invalid rests upstairs, host and guests mingle together in the drawing room and pass the evening by writing, reading, playing cards and conversing. On this particular evening, Mr. Darcy is writing a long letter to his sister, Miss Georgianna Darcy, and Miss Bingley, who is addled by the extended presence of both Jane and Elizabeth Bennet at Netherfield, uses Darcy’s epistolary exercise as an opportunity to vocally sing his sister’s praises. She also takes this occasion to suggest how close, how intimate, she is to Darcy and his family. In fact, she is even physically close to Darcy as she hovers over his writing, offers to “mend his pen,” remarks on the “evenness” of his handwriting, and suggests that she even become part of his letter with the insertion of her regards to Georgianna (51). The length and style of correspondence rather than its content becomes a secondary topic as Bingley remarks that he is not one for long turns of phrases,⁵ while Darcy accuses Bingley of an indecisive manner (53).⁶ Lynn Rigberg observes, “Both friends are astute, but incomplete in their

⁵Bingley comments that Darcy “does not write with ease [but] studies too much for words of four syllables” (52). As Mooneyham notes, the one example of Darcy’s writing confirms this observation: his vocabulary is formal, “sentence structures are complex and labourously balanced; and there are ninety-nine words of four syllables or more” (54).

⁶Incidentally, in *Mansfield Park*, Mary Crawford argues that the “manly style” in letters is brief and disjointed (not unlike Bingley, perhaps) but Fanny tells her that her brother William writes letters that are well composed and lengthy (70).

observations. Yet the character traits they discover in each other's writing will prove decisive to their future actions and the course of the narrative itself' (109).

With this example of rhetorical banter between the two men, Austen conveys a critical distinction between Bingley and Darcy and their different manners of writing. Implicitly, Austen has signaled to the reader that Darcy is a man of communal and familial duty – duty to the larger community by upholding the tenets of decorum and civility and duty as the older brother who fulfills his responsibilities to his younger sister and ward.

The topic of letter writing in *Northanger Abbey* also serves to highlight distinctions, although, in this case, it is in addressing preconceived notions of the content of letters by young females. Henry Tilney, a young clergyman, is portrayed by Austen as an aficionado of both Johnson and Blair (109), and therefore, by implication, he is a serious student of rhetoric and language. His literary knowledge is enhanced by reading, which meets with the approbation of the young and impressionable Catherine Morland. Henry's understanding of the art of letter writing as practiced by women, however, appears confined to the romantic notion of gossip-infused young females turning to journals, diaries and letters to chronicle their excessively dramatized events. Henry Tilney assumes that Catherine keeps a journal relating the day's events and that these journal contents would be the basis of her correspondence with her friends and acquaintances. In this, he appears to have been as susceptible to the romance and intrigue featured in romance novels as Catherine has been. Indeed, given his sister Eleanor's elegant and accomplished character and demeanor, Henry's most credible sources for such a prognostication might be the fiction he has admitted to enjoying. Catherine appears to surprise him when she confesses that she has no journal, leaving both Henry and the reader with the impression that her

letters are perhaps much more newsworthy and less riddled with gossip than Henry surmised (19-20).

Emma contains not only a discourse on the nature of letter writing but also an expanded discussion on the marvels of the postal system (320).⁷ Fittingly, the discussion of letter writing and its ability to strengthen relationships marked by distance is between Jane Fairfax and Mr. John Knightley. John, the brother of George Knightley, is a man of business who differentiates between business and personal correspondence by noting that “[b]usiness, you know, may bring money, but friendship hardly ever does” (317). Jane, as the reader later discovers, has been making solitary treks to the post office, since she is secretly engaged to Frank Churchill. During his frequent absences, letters are their only method of communication. Jane understandably argues that when a loved one is absent, news of that individual by means of a letter carries significant power: “You have every body dearest to you always at hand, I, probably, never shall again; 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” (317).

To better understand Austen’s use of epistolary rhetoric in her fiction, we can look to Austen’s own correspondence to understand how vital written discourse was to fostering relationships and communicating information and news. Understandably, that news could also be labeled gossip and salacious tittle-tattle.

For Jane Austen, as for Richardson and Sterne and others, letter-writing is an acceptable substitute for gossip, unpretentious but civilized and highly enjoyable to the parties concerned; and the lively, affectionate, humorous manner of these informal productions served to ensure the continuing vitality of a relationship during the sometimes prolonged physical separation of the correspondents. To talk on paper was the next best thing to doing so in the flesh (169).

⁷ For more information on the postal system during Austen’s lifetime, see Jo Modert’s essay, “Post/Mail,” in *The Jane Austen Companion*, (Bok 345-346).

Before addressing Austen's use of epistolary rhetoric as a means of furthering plot or narrative action, I assert that a significant role in Austen's incorporation of letters is as a barometer of the letter writer's character. In his *Lectures*, Blair alludes to this power of self-revelation when he notes that "[m]uch, therefore, of the merit, and the agreeableness of Epistolary Writing, will depend on *its introducing us into some acquaintance with the Writer. There, if any where, we look for the man, not for the Author*" (L XXXVII 418, emphasis added). It is a noteworthy distinction from a man well versed in the tenets of oral and written rhetoric that letters are not authored as much as they are written. The personality of the writer himself is revealed by the very personal nature of the letter, and one needs only to analyze Austen's texts to conclude that she was of one accord with Blair's assertion.

Indeed Austen incorporates different epistolary methods to showcase a character's personality. For example, Austen signals to what degree those personalities are revealed by whether she presents a letter verbatim, or if it is rather referred and summarized by the characters themselves in the novel.⁸ In the previous example of Darcy writing to his sister, the exact words of the letter are neither included nor referenced. This particular letter still serves a rhetorical role in disclosing aspects of Darcy's own character, however, and as juxtaposition to the personal styles of Bingley and Darcy. Later in the novel, Austen incorporates verbatim another letter by Darcy, and this time it not only sheds more light on Darcy's character but illuminates the characters of Elizabeth Bennet and George Wickham as well.

The external provocation of Darcy's letter to Elizabeth Bennet is her refusal of his first offer of marriage. Mr. Darcy's response is predicated by those "[t]wo offences...you last night laid to my charge" (218) and his desire to be acquitted of them. During the earlier proposal

⁸ As Page observes, Austen incorporates letters written verbatim by "bad" characters more frequently than by "good" characters (182).

scene, Elizabeth accused him of indecorous behavior toward Wickham, which included ruining his future prospects and prosperity, meddling and orchestrating distance between her sister and Bingley, and last, unchivalrous and “[un]gentleman-like” behavior toward herself (213-215).

These accusations compel Darcy to respond first by framing the context of the letter as a refutation of those charges rather than as a renewal or justification of the earlier proposal itself. He begins with a modicum of bitterness as he tells her to “be not alarmed, Madam, on receiving this letter, by the apprehension of its containing any repetition of those sentiments, or renewal of those offers, which were last night so disgusting to you” (218). The snarkiness of the salutation tapers off, however, and his subsequent words are level-headed and direct. He makes no excuses for the observations he has made regarding her family, nor does he apologize for interfering with Bingley and her sister Jane’s relationship, as he could not discern any particular warmth displayed by Jane:

Her looks and manners were open, cheerful and engaging as ever, but without any symptom of peculiar regard, and I remained convinced from the evening’s scrutiny, that though she received his attentions with pleasure, she did not invite them by any participation of sentiment. (219)

Following Blair’s assertion that one looks for the individual and not the author in correspondence, this letter also reveals the inner workings of Darcy’s mind. His meddling into Bingley and Jane’s affair was based on what he perceived to be her apathy and Bingley’s lack of reasoning. He is aware that in his affection for Lizzy, he too has acted without reason, initially basing his sense of her inferiority (211) by focusing on her family connections. His expressions are natural and eloquent, not overwrought. He does not flatter her or use stilted language. His epistolary style, then, resembles his character.

Lizzy's response to his correspondence runs the gamut from anger, to exasperation, to disbelief, and finally to admittance and acknowledgement. Her opinion of him has been based on behavior and discourse; it is not "*until his written speech, his letter to her, forces her to see his words and therefore himself anew*" (Young 62, emphasis added).

While Darcy's earlier observations dwell on emotion – Jane's feelings and Bingley's infatuation – the section on Wickham is all logic and reason. Wickham's childhood – as well as Darcy's own – are described. Darcy's recognition of the merits of Wickham's father, without belittling his station as steward, is a testament to his balanced and unbiased account. Assisting in the veracity of his recollection is the fact that it corresponds to several facets of the story told by Wickham himself, at least until Wickham's account diverges on the will of the late Mr. Darcy and Wickham's choice of profession. Darcy's inclusion of the scandalous anecdote of his sister lends additional credence, since Georgianna's and Wickham's reputations are both impugned. Even Elizabeth recognizes the cost of this admission when she later talks of the letter with Jane (248-251).

Austen has already given Elizabeth a template on how to approach Darcy's letter. Notwithstanding her emotions and wounded pride, Elizabeth recognizes, again by virtue of that first discussion on letter writing and Darcy's letter to Georgianna, that Darcy has taken this letter seriously and has labored on it prodigiously. His aim is not to offend, but rather, in contemporary parlance, to set the record straight. Persuaded by his direct and truthful rhetoric, Elizabeth comes to the conclusion that, sadly, her family's actions speak for themselves (231).

She is less sanguine about the portion of the letter that relates to Wickham, as the letter reveals how much she has overlooked in her zeal to support and believe the wounded Wickham: "[S]he saw the indelicacy of putting himself forward as he had done, and the inconsistency of his

professions with his conduct” (229). It is this rush to judgment that reveals Lizzy’s character as she admits to herself:

Pleased with the preference of one, and offended by the neglect of the other, on the very beginning of our acquaintance, I have courted prepossession⁹ and ignorance, and driven reason away, where either were concerned. Till this moment, I never knew myself. (230)
The plot of the novel has been shaped by this correspondence, as Elizabeth now

challenges Wickham’s tales of woe and begins to reconsider the merits of both gentlemen.

Elizabeth chides Jane for wanting to justify the actions of both men, but Lizzy, persuaded by epistolary rhetoric, has learned a lesson about them and herself: “One has got all the goodness, and the other all the appearance of it” (250). Lizzy has learned that in Wickham there may have been the look of truth in his comportment, but she ultimately discovers that the truth resides in Darcy’s epistolary words.

The passionate letter of Captain Wentworth to Anne Elliot at the conclusion of *Persuasion*, also included verbatim, is another example of correspondence which exposes the genuine character of the writer. Captain Wentworth’s letter to Anne declares his emotional appeal to her and professes his abiding and long-enduring love. Paradoxically, his mission at the writing desk is to secure a new setting for a portrait of Benwick that was painted for a former fiancée and will now be gifted to Benwick’s newly betrothed. The task that keeps him at the desk, a correspondence of commerce, is the result of a transfer of affections. As he overhears Anne’s discussion with Captain Harville, however, Captain Wentworth understands that his own feelings cannot be reassigned. His feelings are, have been, and will be for Anne alone.

I can no longer listen in silence, I must speak to you by such means as are within my reach. You pierce my soul. I am half agony, half hope. Tell me not that I am too late, that such precious feelings are gone for ever. I offer myself to you again with a heart even more your own, than when you almost broke it eight years and a half ago. (257-8)

⁹ “Prepossession” means “prejudice” (Ed. note, *Pride and Prejudice* 508).

In fact, coming as it does from a man who has, until now, expressed aloofness and only occasionally a kind word or gesture for Anne, the letter is surprisingly personal, direct and confessional in nature. With concrete and forceful words, he conveys the depths of his feelings for her, how she pierces his soul. His offer has an expiration date, however: “A word, a look will be enough to decide whether I enter your father’s house this evening, or never” (258).

It is only with the written word that Captain Wentworth can be eloquent, but it is clearly in response to Anne’s vocal and deliberate eloquence. Anne’s assertion that a woman loves longest even after hope is lost gives Wentworth the courage to hope—much as Lizzy’s denial to comply with Lady Catherine De Bourgh’s wishes gave Darcy reason to hope in *Pride and Prejudice*. Anne knew Captain Wentworth’s character years before; “there could have been no two hearts so open, no tastes so similar, no feelings so in unison, no countenances so beloved” (69). With his amorous admission, he reveals that he, too, has been constant and his earlier affection for her unchanged.

The importance of this letter is especially pronounced when one considers that this ending was not the original one drafted by Austen. The earlier ending lacks the rhetorical device of a letter in which Wentworth can convey his feelings and instead relies on dialogue exchanged between the two. It omits both the overheard conversation (the impetus or call to action as it were) as well as the letter, where Captain Wentworth can covertly, yet properly, declare his love in a public place. With the incorporation of the letter, Austen is able to put them, in accordance with accepted norms and customs, together in the same room. Anne is aware that Wentworth is overhearing her remarks, and so they are tailored for his benefit, arguably more so than for Captain Harville with whom she is speaking. Captain Wentworth relies on the power of his epistolary rhetoric to convey to Anne the depth of his feelings and his attachment to her.

In *Emma*, Austen presents an epistolary marriage proposal that is not conveyed verbatim. Since the reader cannot access the text, we decipher it through the opinions of those who read it. In the example of Robert Martin's proposal to Miss Harriet Smith, the reader knows it to be a persuasive and well-written document precisely because of Emma's puzzlement while reading it:

The style of the letter was much above her expectation. There were not merely no grammatical errors, but as a composition it would not have disgraced a gentleman; the language, though plain, was strong and unaffected, and the sentiments it conveyed very much to the credit of the writer. It was short, but expressed good sense, warm attachment, liberality, propriety, even delicacy of feeling. (53)

Blair advises that in drafting correspondence, "its first and fundamental requisite is, to be natural and simple; for a stiff and laboured manner is as bad in a Letter, as it is in Conversation" (*L XXXVII* 418). Robert Martin appears to have followed Blair's counsel, as the idiom goes, to the letter. Affectations are absent from his amorous assail. His proposal is sensible, direct, and proper. In short, it is a model of a letter of feeling: natural, direct and devoid of pretense. Page suggests that Emma's vocal confession to Harriet about the merits of Robert Martin's proposal "...tells us something about the canons of epistolary excellence of Emma and her class; not only did Martin satisfy the prerequisite of grammatical correctness, but he produced a satisfactory composition..." (184). The letter is so good, in fact, that Emma does not believe Robert Martin actually wrote it – although even as she says that, she has to admit that the style is "too strong and concise; not diffuse enough for a woman" (53). Begrudgingly, Emma is forced to admit that Robert Martin was a better letter writer than she expected, and one can infer, although Emma does not recognize this yet, a better man also.

Gary Kelly observes that the "[c]entral characters' talk and epistolary style resemble the flexible, elegant prose recommended in conduct manuals for conversation and writing in the civil society shared by gentry and professional middle classes" ("Imagined Communities" 131). But

if these three examples epitomize the elegant and estimable tenets of Blair's instructions, Austen most certainly gives examples of those who fall decidedly short.

Considering Blair's advice on epistolary rhetoric, it is easy to see where these fictional characters err. Among his instructions, he coaches letter writers to include taste, style, verve, and above all, natural expressions:

This does not banish sprightliness and wit. These are graceful in Letters; just as they are in conversation; when they flow easily, and without being studied; when employed so as to season, not to cloy. One who, either in Conversation or in Letters, affects to shine and to sparkle always, will not please long. The style of Letters should not be too highly polished. It ought to be neat and correct, but no more. All nicety about words, betrays study... (*L XXXVII* 418).

Perhaps one the most notorious of epistolary rhetoric abusers in Austen's canon, those who "affect to shine and sparkle" and who betray "study" if not downright physical labor, hails from *Pride and Prejudice*. The infamous Mr. Collins is introduced to both the reading audience and the Bennet family by means of correspondence. In fact, not only is his letter included verbatim, but Mr. Bennet reads the letter out loud to his assembled fictional family so they too can draw conclusions about the nature of his character through epistolary rhetoric.

The purported mission of the letter is reconciliation, in which he proposes to make amends for the longstanding familial discord:

The agreement subsisting between yourself and my late honoured father always gave me such uneasiness, and since I have had the misfortune to lose him, I have frequently wished to heal the breach; but for some time I was kept back by my own doubt, fearing lest it might seem disrespectful to his memory for me to be on good term with anyone with whom it had always pleased him to be at variance. (69-79)

Mr. Collins' words betray a reliance on the overly dramatic, "since I have had the misfortune to lose him" (69), while being indecisive on whether he genuinely wants to restore the relationship and go against his father and "be on good term[s] with anyone with whom it had

always pleased him to be at variance” (70). Not only does Mr. Collins use trite expressions and clichés such as “to heal the breach,” but he is figuratively throwing his father under the bus by admitting that Pops was pleased to have nothing to do with the Bennets of Longbourn. His epistolary tone is full of pomposity:

... I have been so fortunate as to be distinguished by the patronage of the Right Honourable Lady Catherine de Bourgh, widow of Sir Lewis de Bourgh, whose bounty and beneficence has preferred me to the valuable rectory of this parish, where it shall be my earnest endeavor to demean myself with grateful respect towards her Ladyship. . . .
(70)

Mr. Collins’ language is flowery and artificial. Contrary to Blair’s observation that style should be clear and natural, he does not directly communicate his thoughts but wraps them in effusive and inflated language. His style is evidently not one marked by perspicuity or conciseness, much less simplicity. Mr. Collins’ turns of phrases are convoluted; his deference is therefore suspect. His character is cemented in the minds of audience and fictional personages alike by his own wily words. “There is something very pompous in his stile... Can he be a sensible man, sir?” Lizzy asks bewildered, unable “to make him out.” “No,” responds her father, “I think not... There is a mixture of servility and self-importance in his letter, which promises well” (71). Page observes that “[s]ince a letter offers a more sustained revelation of an individual manner than dialogue normally provides, it can also offer a magnified view of an idiosyncratic style, with consequently more humorous or satiric effect – or, in some cases, a more devastating exposure of weaknesses of character” (185). If Mr. Collins’ epistolary style can be said to be marked by any particular, idiosyncratic characteristic, it may very well be his

studied verbiage, his feigning attempts at servility all cloaked in an abundance of clichés.

Comically, Mary Bennet's praise of his rhetoric is itself an indictment.¹⁰

This image of a man who is focused on superficial civility is reinforced when, upon hearing of Lady Catherine de Burgh's disapproval of the potential marital alliance between Mr. Darcy and Elizabeth, Mr. Collins again writes to Mr. Bennet and advises him to counsel Elizabeth to reconsider her course of action. In the only example of a letter written by Mr. Bennet that Austen cites verbatim, Mr. Bennet curtly suggests that congratulations are indeed in order in the upcoming nuptials of his daughter Elizabeth with Mr. Darcy: "Console Lady Catherine as well as you can. But, if I were you, I would stand by the nephew. He has more to give"¹¹ (424).

Of course, not only families such as the Bennets are brought asunder by elopements, infidelities, misunderstandings, jealousy, and inheritances (mostly the lack thereof). In *Persuasion*, the rupturing of the Elliot family is due to the misunderstandings that have risen from the lack of epistolary rhetoric, namely the timely receipt of a condolence letter. Letters therefore (including the earlier example of Captain Wentworth's letter of declaration to Anne) serve as both integral to the actions within the narrative and as an exposition of character. In essence, the estrangement between the Elliots is based on certain family members not adhering to accepted protocol on the sending of condolence letters. Their fractured family is an example of a breach that went beyond standing on ceremony to letting ceremony itself dictate the parameters of their relationship.

¹⁰ According to Blair, even Mr. Collins can be outdone. As an example of effusive and thoroughly regrettable epistolary rhetoric, Blair adds the following example of Pope's letter to Mr. Addison: "I am more joyed at your return, than I should be at that of the Sun, as much as I wish for him in this melancholy wet season; but it is his fate too, like yours, to be displeasing to owls and obscene animals, who cannot bear his lustre" (qtd in Blair, *Lectures* 420). This is, I believe, delightfully saccharine schmaltz of the variety to which only Mr. Collins could aspire.

¹¹ According to an editorial note, "more to give" refers to more church livings (*Pride and Prejudice* 539).

Not unlike *Pride and Prejudice*, a young male heir attempts to restore ties and possibly enamor himself with one of the daughters in *Persuasion*. William Elliot appears to be courting both Anne and Elizabeth Elliot while simultaneously securing the good graces of Sir Walter Elliot, whose title and rank William will inherit. William Elliot's character has been disguised by his suave manners, his agreeableness to everyone. His own words, captured verbatim when Anne's friend Mrs. Smith produces a letter he had written years ago, shatter the veneer of civility as artifice: "I wish I had any name but Elliot. I am sick of it" (220). When Mrs. Smith notices that Anne's face becomes flushed while reading the letter, she adds, "The language, I know, is highly disrespectful. Though I have forgot the exact terms, I have a perfect impression of the general meaning. *But it shows you the man*" (220, emphasis added). *Ecce homo*.

Mr. Elliot's words reveal disgust with his own family, his heritage, and even his station in life. This is critical. He is effectively reneging on his duty as heir while besmirching his familial name. As Anne realizes, these words are not filtered through the gossip of a Nurse Rooke or the tittle-tattle of overheard conversations; these are his own words, formed under his own hand. Anne is uneasy reading these words as an unintended audience, but that does not detract from her recognition that she was right to mistrust his character and his recent overtures toward her family.

Another male character in *Persuasion* whose epistolary rhetoric is shown to be weak is the patriarch of the Elliot clan. Austen appears to indict Sir Walter Elliot not only for being vain and fastidious about his looks but for literally standing on ceremony. Having taken umbrage at the lack of an earlier condolence letter when his wife died, he will restore his connections with the Dalrymples by sending the Dowager Viscountess a letter of "explanation" and "entreaty" (161). Austen does not quote Sir Walter's draft verbatim, but she clearly indicates the

difficulties Sir Walter endured while trying to compose a few lines. Perhaps Austen recalled this admonition from Blair in his *Lectures*:

What the heart or the imagination dictates, always flows readily; but where there is no subject to warm or interest these, constraint appears; and hence, those Letters of mere compliment, congratulation, or affected condolance, which have cost the Authors most labour in composing, and which, for that reason, they perhaps consider as their master-pieces, never fail of being the most disagreeable and insipid to the Readers. (*L XXXVII* 418)

Austen does not imply that Sir Walter's letter was insipid or disagreeable, but she does convey a certain lack of quality in his rhetoric: "Sir Walter...at last wrote a very fine letter of ample explanation, regret, and entreaty, to his right honorable cousin. Neither Lady Russell nor Mr. Elliot could admire the letter; but it did all that was wanted, in bringing three lines of scrawl from the Dowager Viscountess" (161-62).

Poor letter writing, according to Austen, is an equal opportunity trait. She gives us ample examples of appalling epistolary rhetoric by both men and women. In *Pride and Prejudice*, for example, the fact that Lydia does not write letters is a mark against her character: "... married women have never much time for writing. My sisters may write to *me*. They will have nothing else to do" (365), she tells her mother and sisters after she has eloped and she and Wickham are setting off for Newcastle. She is too vacuous to write more than a few lines. Her note announcing her intended elopement is telling: "You will laugh when you know where I am gone, and I cannot help laughing myself at your surprise to-morrow morning as soon as I am missed.... What a good joke it will be! I can hardly write for laughing..." (321). As Page claims in describing Austen's use of letters, "Considerable importance is attached to decorum of language, and departures from accepted standards serve to indicate moral inadequacies" (170).

Moral inadequacy, thy name is Lydia Bennet. Notwithstanding the long-lasting implications of this decision to elope on her reputation, not to mention the reputation of her entire family, she continues her letter by incredulously asking Harriet Forster to make her apologies for not dancing with Pratt as she had engaged and to arrange for a muslin gown to be repaired (321). As discussed earlier, several fictional characters assess others through their letter writing. Accordingly, Lydia's letters from Brighton are vapid, and Elizabeth is disturbed by them, as they are "much too full of lines under the words to be made public" (264). The inclusion of Lydia's letter has a profound effect; "letters bear the imprint of their writers' individuality at least as much as dialogue" (31-32) and even "Mr. Collins' pomposity and Lydia's irresponsibility appear more blatant in the kind of sustained monologue that a letter represents" (33).

Understandably, Lizzy remarks how thoughtless Lydia was at such a serious time. However, she takes a modicum of comfort that at least it appears that Lydia's intent was to get married. All the details about the elopement are divulged through letters, and the audience or reader learns of the details concurrently with Elizabeth. Interestingly, Austen conveys the scandalous events through the impressions of Elizabeth not Lydia, while the subsequent actions dealing with the elopement are relayed through the correspondence of Jane and later from the Gardiners. While the letters surrounding the event cause anguish, it is through them that Lizzy learns that Darcy was instrumental in bribing Wickham to marry Lydia, and "[t]hey owed the restoration, her character, every thing to him" (361). As her aunt later shares in a letter included in its entirety, she admits to Darcy's involvement and suspects that Darcy is in love with Lizzy and that his actions were done on her behalf. Lizzy herself has been entertaining a similar notion; her heart does tell her he did it for her, but "it was a hope checked by other

considerations,” including her earlier refusal and accepting Wickham as a potential brother-in-law (360-361). The letter from the Gardiners is an interesting device, as it shows Lizzy’s more responsible family members growing in their acceptance of him and it re-enforces Darcy’s character of generosity and anonymity as he shies away from the limelight.

Not unlike Lydia, Isabella Thorpe’s epistolary discourse in *Northanger Abbey* is a transparent exposition of her character as well as a means to further plot. News of Isabella’s jilting of James Morland occurs by means of epistolary correspondence and is scandalous enough to be read aloud in its entirety. Austen also includes a letter from Isabella – also relayed verbatim – to Catherine. Her letter to Catherine, however, is significant, as it finally reveals her character to unsuspecting Catherine. As readers, the audience is already aware of Isabella’s flirty nature; Catherine, however, has been too naïve to discredit Isabella—first as friend and later as future sister-in-law.

After Catherine has removed herself from the influence of the Thorpes, her brother’s missive alerts Catherine to what has transpired during her absence. Isabella has jilted her brother and released him from their engagement. His words are replete with a justified anger at having been duped and Austen includes his letter verbatim. Contrary to epistolary protocol, he bypasses the customary salutation and readily admits his lack of “inclination for writing,” but he has a duty, and that is to tell her the news of his severed engagement. He asks her to consider him blameless but a fool in thinking that his affection was returned:

I left her and Bath yesterday, never to see either again, I shall not enter into particulars, they would only pain you more. You will soon hear enough from another quarter to know where lies the blame; and I hope will acquit your brother of every thing but the folly of too easily thinking his affection returned. Thank God! I am undeceived in time! But it is a heavy blow! – After my father’s consent had been so kindly given – but no more of this. She had made me miserable for ever! (207)

Her brother's request is for her to respond to his letter quickly and to assure him of her continued fraternal love. Last, as a bit of brotherly advice, James counsels her to "beware how you give your heart" (207). While Blair would recommend less of the soliloquy and stream of consciousness, he would praise the simplicity and directness of James' words. James' letter reflects his justifiable hurt and bitterness; his words are conveyed with honesty and depth of feeling. His sister's subsequent commiseration and empathy are deep.

As James alluded in his letter, Catherine does indeed hear from "another quarter" (207), albeit delayed. Again, Austen has provided the letter from Isabella in its entirety so the character of the writer is self-evident to both the reading audience and Catherine alike. Her letter showcases her scattered thoughts as she discusses fashion, Bath, James and Captain Tilney, and fashion yet again.

I really am quite ashamed of my idleness; but in this horrid place one can find time for nothing . . . I am quite uneasy about your dear brother, not having heard from him since he went to Oxford; and am fearful of some misunderstanding. Your kind offices will set all right; – he is the only man I ever did or could love, and I trust you will convince him of it. The spring fashions are partly down; and the hats the most frightful you can imagine. (222)

Isabella rambles on and repeats her petition that Catherine contact her brother on her behalf to set things straight while adding that Tilney admired her turban and that she wears purple now, as "it is your brother's favorite colour" (224). She signs off reiterating her request, "Lose no time, my dearest, my sweetest Catherine, in writing to him and to me" (224).

The audience is already familiar with the hollowness of Isabella's rhetoric, but now it is Catherine's turn. Naïve and innocent Catherine has finally learned discernment: Such a strain of shallow artifice could not impose even upon Catherine. Its inconsistencies, contradictions, and falsehood struck her from the very first. She was ashamed of Isabella and ashamed of having

ever loved her. Her professions of attachment were now as disgusting as her excuses were empty, and her demands impudent (224).

Catherine finally sees Isabella as she truly is, exposed by a letter inked in black.

Isabella's flirtatious behavior is accompanied by her disingenuous civility. On paper, Isabella's littleness, her frivolity and her capriciousness are on display. Isabella's carelessness clearly goes against the guidelines for epistolary rhetoric as promulgated by Blair:

It ought, at the same time, to be remembered that the ease and simplicity which I have recommended in Epistolary Correspondence are not to be understood as importing entire carelessness. In writing to the most intimate friend, a certain degree of attention, both to the subject and to the style, is requisite and becoming... A slovenly and negligent manner of Writing, is a disobliging mark of want of respect. The liberty, besides, of writing Letters with too careless a hand, is apt to betray persons into impudence in what they write. (*L XXXVII* 418)

Given that letters are of a more permanent nature and can be re-read and shared with others, Isabella's impetuosity is yet another indication of her self-centeredness and capriciousness. As Blair observes, "The first requisite, both in conversation and correspondence, is to attend to all the proper decorums which our own character, and that of others, demand. An imprudent expression in conversation may be forgotten and pass away; but when we take the pen into our hand, we must remember, that 'Litera scripta manet'" (*L XXXVII* 419).¹²

Isabella's lack of character and her inability to understand the ramifications of her flirtatious behavior is manifest in her correspondence. Her attempt at being solicitous is false. She writes not out of concern nor interest for Catherine but rather to secure her goodwill in doing an unpleasant errand for her. Isabella's head, notwithstanding the addition of the turban, appears to be as vacuous as her letter.

¹² From the Latin *Vox audita perit littera scripta manet*: "The spoken word perishes after it is heard; the word committed to writing endures" (Translation by Dr. Justin Stover, All Souls College, Oxford University, 02-07-15).

Arguably, the letters by James and Isabella not only advance the central plot, but they reveal aspects of their personalities. James, good hearted and impetuous as he is, will undoubtedly recover from his impulsive engagement. Isabella, we assume, will continue her flirtatious behavior as long as she can. Catherine has learned from Henry and from her own mistakes and can now be more discerning regarding rhetoric: she finally sees through the artifice of Isabella's spoken and written rhetoric and applies that discernment to her understanding of the gothic romance novel and literary taste in general.

In *Mansfield Park*, Mary and Henry Crawford's manners have initially inculcated them from any notion of falseness or artifice. She is accomplished, witty and quick; he is suave and entertaining. Their fault lies, however, in their conversation, their conduct, and in their letters.

Mansfield Park is set in motion by the transmission of letters. Mrs. Price writes to her sisters asking for their assistance in helping to raise one of her nine children. Fanny Price, a girl aged nine, will move to Mansfield Park, which will become her new home. Now eight years later, the Bertram family will enjoy the addition of Mary and Henry Crawford, who are visiting their sister Mrs. Grant. Clearly, they are used to a different set of moral guidelines; Henry flirts as sport, and Mary, who subscribes to the London maxim that "everything is to be got with money" (69), connives to gain a wealthy husband.

Soon Henry turns his attentions from the recently married Maria Bertram to Fanny Price. Fanny has seen through Henry's gallant behavior and does not agree to his proposal of marriage. Yet the Crawfords act as if Fanny has said yes and that she welcomed Henry's overtures. The receipt of a congratulatory note from Mary about their ostensible betrothal is unsettling for Fanny, and she is further vexed when Henry demands that she respond to it immediately. Her

verbatim response is one of the rare examples in Austen's novels of a heroine or positive protagonist responding in full.

I am very much obliged to you, my dear Miss Crawford, for your kind congratulations, as far as they relate to my dearest William. The rest of your note I know means nothing; but I am so unequal to any thing of the sort, that I hope you will excuse my begging you to take no further notice. I have seen too much of Mr. Crawford not to understand his manners; if he understood me as well, he would, I dare say, behave differently. I do not know what I write, but it would be a great favour of you never to mention the subject again. With thanks for the honour of your note.... (355-6)

While she responds with deference and discomfort, "I do not know what I write," she has indicated to Mary that if congratulations are in order, they are for the promotion of her brother William to Second Lieutenant of His Majesty's sloop *Thrush* and nothing more. Fanny asks Mary twice to discount whatever Henry might have said to her regarding a union between them. Later, Fanny self-critiques her own letter, recognizing fault in its form rather than content: "She had no doubt that her note must appear excessively ill-written, that the language would disgrace a child, for her distress had allowed no arrangement, but as least it would assure them both of her being neither imposed on, nor gratified by Mr. Crawford's attentions" (356). Of course, Henry does not perceive her discomfort or the sincerity in her words. He playfully waits for round two.

The epistolary words from Edmund are, of course, the words that Fanny cherishes. The man who became Fanny's friend and confidant by giving her the means by which she could write a letter to William so many years ago has up to this point only written her once. She had interrupted him while he was writing a note to accompany the gift of a chain, so it remains only the fragmented salutation, "My very dear Fanny, you must do me the favour to accept" (307). Fanny treasures these few words; "[t]wo lines more prized had never fallen from the pen of the most distinguished author – never more completely blessed the researches of the fondest biographer" (308). Her eagerness for Edmund's letters will cease, however, and she will fear the

postman's "sickening knock" (512) when she is removed from Mansfield Park to her family home in Portsmouth. Correspondence from Edmund, she believes, will tell and finally confirm his betrothal to Mary Crawford. The irony is not lost on Fanny; against "this letter she must try to arm herself. That a letter from Edmund should be a subject of terror!" (431).

While much of this analysis has focused on epistolary rhetoric as a means of revealing character, I suggest that it is also used to deceive. Words can be easily manipulated – whether written or spoken – as we have seen in the preceding chapters. Returning to Blair's earlier assertion that in letter writing we find the writer, the personal nature of correspondence lends credence to the rhetoric, especially if it appears to be unscripted. As Tandon asserts, "One complication in writing is the fact that to be unguarded in a letter to a friend does not necessarily commit a writer to categorical sincerity" (118).

Blair, in his *Lectures*, concedes as much himself. While Blair emphasizes the personal nature of epistolary rhetoric, he admits that "[i]t is childish indeed to expect, that in Letters we are to find the whole heart of the Author unveiled. Concealment and disguise take place, more or less, in all human intercourse" (*L XXXVII* 417).

Austen echoes Blair, this time with the sentiments of her misguided heroine, Emma: "Seldom, very seldom," muses the narrator of *Emma*, "does complete truth belong to any human disclosure; seldom can it happen that something is not a little disguised or a little mistaken..." (470).

Austen incorporates examples throughout her novels of characters who use epistolary rhetoric as a means to deceive, to hide their character or to conceal other secrets. Of course, the vehicle of the personal letter makes it all the more a subterfuge. For example, in *Northanger Abbey*, General Tilney conveys his "courteously worded" assent for the union between Henry

and Catherine with a “page full of empty professions to Mr. Morland” (261). In discussing the ability to deceive in what is purportedly a personal and sincere message, Tandon cites Johnson’s observation that “[t]here is, indeed, no transaction which offers stronger temptations to fallacy and sophistication than epistolary discourse” (qtd. in Tandon 120). “Like Johnson before her,” Tandon continues, “Austen had to balance her desire to communicate in writing against her knowledge that such communication will never be wholly transparent...” (Tandon 129).

One particular example of deceptive epistolary rhetoric is in the novel *Emma*. Specifically, Emma requests a charade from Mr. Elton to Harriet Smith for her collection of charades and riddles. Admittedly, the request itself is frivolous, part of a game, and not an example of serious epistolary rhetoric. But, under Elton’s hand, even though he professes that it was written by a “friend” (75), the charade becomes more than an exchange of innocent verse and grows into a de facto declaration of serious attachment -- to the other woman. He maneuvers within the confines of social protocol by engaging in flirtation, a gimmick that disguises his true object of desire and allows both women to misconstrue his intentions. Of course, throughout the playful and more serious rituals of “court ship,” he never loses sight of his ultimate quest – Miss Emma Woodhouse, heiress of £30,000.

Initially, Mr. Elton is reluctant to participate in such a game: “[O]h no! he had never written, hardly ever, any thing of the kind in his life. The stupidest fellow! He was afraid not even Miss Woodhouse– or Miss Smith could inspire him” (75). Of course, he feigns lack of ability and effectively lowers their expectations (one can only assume that it was a mad race back to the parsonage to begin drafting). Let the games begin.

Emma, who has already criticized the epistolary rhetoric of Robert Martin, is pleased when Harriet takes her bait and tries to distinguish between the rhetoric of a letter and the talent

inherent in a riddle or charade: “It is one thing... to have very good sense in a common way, like everybody else, and if there is any thing to say, to sit down and write a letter, and say just what you must, in a short way; and another, to write charades and verses like this” (81). Emma suggests that a charade requires more skill, more aptitude, than a mere heartfelt proposal.

The riddle is solved by Emma, who believes that object of Mr. Elton’s desire for “courtship” (76) is Harriet. Emma goes so far as to build him up in Harriet’s estimation and reassures her that “[Y]ou are his object – and you will soon receive the completest proof of it. I thought it must be so. I thought I could not be so deceived...” (78).

Emma has spoken too soon. After a rather discomfoting carriage ride after a Christmas celebration at the Westons’, Mr. Elton reveals his infatuation and preference for Emma by seizing her hand and

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. (140)

But what of the charade, the framed drawing of Harriet? Mr. Elton denies ever having had Harriet as an object of his affection: “I never thought of Miss Smith in the whole course of my existence – never paid her any attentions, but as your friend: never cared whether she were dead or alive...” (141). Emma has been duped. She has fallen for his false rhetoric and realizes that she has misinterpreted his words all along: “To be sure, the charade, with its ‘ready wit’ – but then, the ‘soft eyes’ – in fact it suited neither; it was just a jumble without taste or truth. Who could have seen through such thick-headed nonsense?” (145-146). Emma puts the blame on Mr. Elton’s rhetoric, not her lack of discernment. Still, Emma was responsible for promoting Mr. Elton in Harriet’s eyes and must now deal with the consequential pain and disappointment.

In *Mansfield Park*, Mary Crawford, of the droll and clever repartee, might consider herself too witty for charades. She believes she is adroitly concealing her ultimate aim, but her epistolary rhetoric – and her intent to deceive – exposes yet another dimension of her character.

Lynn Rigberg observes that

...precisely because authors of letters may intend concealment and disguise, letters can shed insight to the audience beyond the writer's intention. For an author of such ironic dimensions as Austen, letters provide irresistible occasions for unintended insights into their authors and evaluations by their readers. (75-76)

Earlier examples of letters from Mary to Fanny were playful and coy, extending congratulations on a non-existent betrothal, for example. News of the serious illness of Edmund's older brother, Tom, has reached Mary in London and has put the reluctant letter writer in a tizzy. Her letter to Fanny begins with the serious purpose of ascertaining the current state of the invalid: "...now it is confidently asserted that he is really in a decline, that the symptoms are most alarming, and that part of the family, at least are aware of it" (502). As the letter progresses, however, her questions take an almost urgent turn; just how sick is the poor boy? It does not take her long to march off the precipitous cliff of innuendo and wishful thinking: "If he is to die, there will be *two* poor young men less in the world; and with a fearless face and bold voice would I say to any one, that wealth and consequence could fall into no hands more deserving of them" (502). Visualizing Edmund as the heir of the Bertram estate, she rhetorically asks Fanny whether she shares her belief that Edmund would be a wonderful substitute for Tom: "I put it to your conscience, whether 'Sir Edmund' would not do more good with all the Bertram property, than any other possible 'Sir'" (503). A letter in which she begs Fanny to enlighten her, to give her fresh accounts of the state of Tom's health, has revealed Mary's ultimate aim: to marry Edmund

who, upon Tom's death, will be inheritor of the estate and title. Appropriately, Fanny is "disgusted" (504) with Mary's letter.

Not ready to give up deceitful rhetoric just yet, Mary attempts a similar sleight of hand when she writes Fanny about the alleged elopement of Mrs. Rushworth with her own dear brother Henry: "A most scandalous, ill-natured rumour has just reached me, and I write, dear Fanny, to warn you against giving the least credit to it... Depend on it there is some mistake, and that a day or two will clear it up" (506). She contradicts herself, however, with her lackadaisical comment, "I am sure that it will be all hushed up, and nothing proved but Rushworth's folly" (506-7). Initially denying that anything scandalous has happened, she basically acknowledges the elopement but dismisses it, as it will be covered up. Fanny's response to the letter is not provided by Austen. As the narrator relates, however, Fanny does find her voice and acknowledges the baseness and lack of morality suggested in Mary's correspondence:

Her eager defence of her brother, her hope of its being hushed up, her evident agitation, were all of a piece with something very bad; and if there was a woman of character in existence, who could treat as trifle this sin of the first magnitude, who could try to gloss it over, and desire to have it unpunished, she could believe Miss Crawford to be the woman! (510)

Mary's *laissez faire* epistolary rhetoric indicts her more than her conduct. In her reluctance to reveal, in her carelessness and in her deceit, she betrays herself. As Page observes, "...wicked or selfish or foolish character[s]... whose hypocrisies and affectations are often manifested in the letters they write more plainly than in their speech – if not explicitly, then in a falsity of language ... unconsciously betray themselves" (183).

In *Sense and Sensibility*, letters are featured first as plot device as when Mrs. Dashwood learns of the offer of a cottage in Devon by means of a letter from her cousin, which will allow the Dashwood family to leave the insolence of Fanny and John and begin a new chapter in their

lives. Unique to this novel, two young couples correspond clandestinely: Lucy Steele and Edward Ferrars and Marianne Dashwood and Willoughby. The secret engagement between Lucy and Edward is revealed, not through examples of their correspondence but by the spoken confession of Lucy Steele to Elinor Dashwood. Austen does include a sample of Lucy's epistolary rhetoric, however, and one of them is notably her letter to her former fiancé Edward announcing her marriage to his brother, Robert Ferrars:

Being very sure I have long lost your affections, I have thought myself at liberty to bestow my own on another... Your brother has gained my affections entirely, and as we could not live without one another, we are just returned from the altar, and are now on our way to Dawlish for a few weeks, which place your dear brother has great curiosity to see, but I thought I would first trouble you with these few lines....(413-4)

Curiously, Edward had not received any prior indication that a "Dear John" letter was on its way; "her letters to the last were neither less frequent nor less affectionate than usual" (413). Lucy has deceived her intended through her epistolary rhetoric by intimating that her affections for him remained steadfast. Happily, the initial shock gives way to joy when Edward realizes that he has been delivered from her and he is now at liberty to pursue his relationship with Elinor. His elation, however, does not temper his disdain for Lucy's epistolary rhetoric, her "patchwork of trite phrases" (155), as he shares its contents with Elinor: "For worlds would not I have had a letter seen by you in former days. . . how I have blushed over the pages of her writing!... this is the only letter I ever received from her, of which the substance made me amends for the defect of style" (414).

Deception will also be a hallmark of Marianne and Willoughby's correspondence. Marianne's "preserver" (55) appears to have tastes similar to her in poetry and music; "they talked, they sang together; his musical talents were considerable, and he read with all the sensibility and spirit which Edward had unfortunately wanted" (58). Their personalities mirror

each other as they are both impetuous, sensitive, reckless, headstrong and spontaneous. Marianne and Willoughby will form a quick and, to all appearances, strong attachment until he is summoned to quit Devonshire and Combe Magna and move to London.

When the sisters are offered the opportunity to travel to London with Mrs. Jennings, Marianne is ecstatic. Upon arriving in London, Marianne quickly pens and posts a letter to Willoughby. This confirms in Elinor's mind that there is an understanding, an attachment, between Willoughby and Marianne that is strong – and binding – since “a strict code of conventions governed the sending and receiving of letters by eligible but unmarried persons of different sexes, [and] the mere possession of a letter became a certificate of intimacy” (174-175).¹³

During the sisters' stay in London, it is the sending and waiting for letters that marks most of Marianne's time. After encountering Willoughby at a soiree where his demeanor is abrupt and cold, Marianne writes her final letters to Willoughby. His response is pivotal to the plot of the novel:

My esteem for your whole family is very sincere; but if I have been so unfortunate as to give rise to a belief of more than I felt, or meant to express, I shall reproach myself for not having been more guarded in my professions of that esteem. That I should ever have meant more you will allow to be impossible, when you understand that my affections have been long engaged elsewhere, and it will not be many weeks, I believe, before this engagement is fulfilled. It is with great regret that I obey your commands of returning the letters with which I have been honoured from you, and the lock of hair, which you so obligingly bestowed on me, I am....(208)

Willoughby's response is deceitful for multiple reasons: he includes “no professions of regret, acknowledged no breach of faith, [and] denied all peculiar affection whatsoever...” (209). In Elinor's estimation, Willoughby has “depart[ed]...so far from the common decorum of a

¹³ Austen is careful not to put her positive heroines in an uncompromising light with inappropriate correspondence. Emma, for example, will provide an acceptable reason for being familiar with Frank Churchill's script (322).

gentleman, as to send a letter so impudently cruel” (209). Aside from the indignation sparked by his rhetoric, both sisters are baffled by the curt and distant tone, the superficial civility.

Willoughby, with his reckless behavior, had implied an engagement; with his request for a lock of Marianne’s hair, he had confirmed it, and now he coldly asserts that there was never any attachment whatsoever. In her final letter to Willoughby (Austen includes the last three letters by Marianne verbatim), Marianne asks to receive some kind of justification, to understand his behavior, and to learn that if she had in fact been deceived by his behavior “if I am to learn that you are not what we hitherto believed you...let it be told as soon as possible” (214). Willoughby does not address these charges nor does he justify his behavior. Mysteriously, he does not provide Marianne with any rationale or insight.

As proof that even aloof, cold and impersonal rhetoric can reveal character traits, Willoughby later confesses to Elinor that in fact he was not the author but rather merely the scribe of the impersonal response to Marianne: “And in short – what do you think of my wife’s style of letter-writing – delicate – tender – truly feminine, was it not?” (372). Willoughby tells Elinor that his wife wrote the letter for him: “The original was all her own – her own happy thoughts and gentle diction.” His sarcasm illustrates that he was well aware of the egregious example of epistolary rhetoric he was submitting. Lynn Rigberg suggests that Willoughby uses Miss Grey’s “authorship to distance himself from responsibility, focusing on form rather than on substance” (Rigberg 76). Tellingly, the fact that he could be commandeered to take dictation from his future wife reveals the power she held over him. As he finally confesses to Elinor, the hold she held over him was money and reputation. He goes so far as to admit that if this letter would turn Marianne and her family away from him, it was entirely inconsequential to him: “Willoughby’s greatest embarrassment is not his behaviour but how he is represented

rhetorically, in his own trite words and in the letter penned in his name by Miss Grey” (Rigberg 76). Willoughby recognizes the lack of style and eloquence Miss Grey’s letter evokes: “– Every line, every word was – in the hackneyed metaphor which their dear writer, were she here, would forbid – a dagger to my heart” (368). But while Blair would sanction Willoughby’s recognition of the rules governing epistolary discourse, especially his abhorrence of clichés and banalities, he would observe that Willoughby lacked the moral caliber upon which genuine taste and eloquence is built.

In *Emma*, Austen again incorporates a couple who, like Lucy Steele and Edward Ferrars, are conducting a clandestine epistolary correspondence. Jane Fairfax’s letters to Frank Churchill are not cited verbatim, but her letters to her family are read out loud repeatedly to diverse audiences.¹⁴ She is a prolific and dutiful writer, so her correspondence is a regular feature at every visit to the Mrs. and Miss Bates. As Emma observes after one visit where Jane’s letter was summarized, she was pleased “though she had in fact heard the whole substance of Jane Fairfax’s letter, she had been able to escape the letter itself” (173).

Similar to Jane’s letter, Frank Churchill’s letters are reread, summarized and critiqued. His first letter, in which he congratulates the new Mrs. Weston, is commented on by various individuals: “I suppose you have heard of the handsome letter Mr. Frank Churchill had written to Mrs. Weston? . . . Mr. Woodhouse saw the letter, and he says he never saw such a handsome letter in his life” (16). His letter speaks for him; it was, in the mind of Mrs. Weston, “irresistible proof of his great good sense” (16). However, Austen has already signaled that something is

¹⁴ Another unique component to the *ars dictaminis* genre was its auditory nature. Medieval letters – even those considered to be of a personal nature – were composed to be read aloud before an audience that could comprise multiple individuals. As Camargo observes, “In the Latin textbooks specifically devoted to letter writing (*artes dictandi*), references to the intended recipients of letters as ‘hearers’ (*auditores*), to composing letters as ‘speaking’ (*loqui*), and to epistolary discourse as ‘speech’ (*oratio*) are quite common. . . . The word for composing texts, including letters, is *dictare* . . .” (175).

amiss, namely that typically a son will not miss an event such as a wedding. “Now, upon his father’s marriage, it was very generally proposed, *as a most proper attention*, that the visit should take place” (16, emphasis added). Frank’s absences, excused by a handsomely penned note, will become his trademark. He relies on his excellent epistolary rhetoric in lieu of actually fulfilling filial duty. Indeed, Frank’s deceit lies not so much in the rhetoric that he uses, but rather that he uses rhetoric instead of doing the duty his position requires.

Mr. Knightley is the only one who is not taken in by Mr. Churchill’s elegant expositions. As he remarks to Emma, “He can sit down and write a fine flourishing letter, *full of professions and falsehoods*, and persuade himself that he has hit upon the very best method in the world of preserving peace at home and preventing his father’s having any right to complain. His letters disgust me” (160, emphasis added).

This is very strong indictment against a man Mr. Knightley has never met, and Emma suggests initially that he is too harsh. But Mr. Knightley is a gentleman of taste, good sense and discernment. He has been able to see through the decorous phrases and the myriads of excuses Frank has offered:

There is one thing, Emma, which a man can always do, if he chuses, and that is, his duty; not by manoeuvring and finessing, but by vigour and resolution. It is Frank Churchill’s duty to pay this attention to his father. He knows it to be so, by his promises and messages, but if he wished to do it, it might be done. (157-8)

Mr. Knightley recognizes that Frank’s rhetoric, while suave and polite, has trifled with the expectations of his father and stepmother. Emma herself sees the validity of Mr. Knightley’s remarks (156) but chooses to give Frank the benefit of the doubt. Tellingly, the language Knightley uses is severe, for Frank’s deceit goes beyond mere rhetoric. Frank Churchill’s letters are not frivolous or empty; they are so disingenuous and laden with civilities and excuses as to

cause Mr. Knightley to be disgusted by them. Therein lies the distinction: unlike Mr. Elton whose deceit is vague and nuanced, Frank is dishonest. He is not a man of his word, as elegant as it might be.

Later, Knightley's censure is justified when Frank finally pens his *mea culpa* and confesses his errors in judgment, his lapse of integrity, and his deceitful behavior. The letter is included verbatim, and Austen has incorporated enough verbiage to assuage the most stalwart of Frank's opponents: "I am conscious of wrong, for that visit might have been sooner paid... my manners to Miss W[oodhouse]... were highly blamable... [my]shameful, insolent neglect of [Jane]..." (477- 480). Frank's confession obtains the desired forgiveness from Mrs. Weston, Miss Woodhouse, and his beloved Jane. Mr. Knightley, however, is not persuaded as readily.

After Emma has read the lengthy letter and is able to pardon Frank for making her his accomplice for some rather circumspect behavior at Box Hill, she shares the letter with Knightley. He is not all that keen on reading another one of Mr. Churchill's notes initially and, as it appeared long, wanted to take it home to read it. He acquiesces to Emma, however, and as he reads it, he provides to Emma and audience alike a running commentary, not unlike a sporting match: "He proceeded a little farther, reading to himself; and then with a smile, observed, "Humph! A fine complimentary opening: – But it is his way. One man's style must not be the rule of another's. We will not be severe" (485). His comments are based on content, much less form. "He trifles here," said he, "as to the temptation. He knows he is wrong, and has nothing rational to urge. – Bad. – He ought not to have formed the engagement" (485).

Ultimately, however, even Mr. Knightley will forgive Frank for his dishonesty and deceitful discourse: "He has had great faults, faults of inconsideration and thoughtlessness; and I am very much of his opinion in thinking him likely to be happier than he deserves: but still ... I

am very ready to believe his character will improve, and acquire from [Jane's] the steadiness and delicacy of principle that it wants" (488).

Notwithstanding attempts to conceal and deceive, Blair and Austen share the same confidence in the value of epistolary rhetoric to ultimately reveal and expose characteristics of the author's personality. As demonstrated, even the desire or attempt to deceive is in itself an indication of the writer's character and disposition. Austen and Blair alike view epistolary rhetoric as intrinsically self-revealing:

But still, as Letters from one friend to another make the nearest approach to conversation, we may expect to see *more* of a character displayed in these than in other productions, which are studies for public view. We please ourselves with beholding the Writer in a situation which allows him to be at his ease, and to give vent occasionally to the overflowings of his heart (*L XXXVII* 417 – 418, emphasis added).

Fittingly, at the conclusion of *Pride and Prejudice*, which began with a discussion of letter writing, Darcy and Elizabeth Bennet sit adjacent to each other at their writing desks. They are writing to their respective families to inform them of their engagement. Austen not only evokes the initial scene at Netherfield, but she directly references it as Elizabeth reminds Darcy of that earlier event with someone who was quite enamored with the “evenness” (51) of his writing, someone willing to sharpen his pen. The juxtaposition of their being side by side tells us about their future partnership. Neither is sitting over the other or fawning with pretentious empty rhetoric. Darcy and Elizabeth are equals – in demeanor, in their sense of propriety and in performing their duty to their families. Unlike the earlier scene, however, where Darcy alone was writing, Elizabeth, as gentlelady and future mistress of Pemberley, now shares his duties and responsibilities. She is an epistolary rhetorician in her own right.

In this chapter, I have examined how character is revealed through the rhetoric of the epistle in Austen's novels. Used as a form of social protocol, they establish and foster

relationships or, as in the case with Sir Walter Elliot in *Persuasion*, cause those ties to be fractured. The polite language of letters to Mrs. Weston mask Frank Churchill's secretive and dishonest rhetoric in *Emma*. The nature of the individual is revealed through correspondence as Elizabeth is enlightened by Mr. Darcy's honesty as much as she is convinced of Mr. Collins' absurdity in *Pride and Prejudice*. Catherine Moreland perceives the insincere character of Isabella Thorpe in *Northanger Abbey* through empty epistolary rhetoric much as Mary Crawford reveals her true interest in wealth and title in *Mansfield Park*. Notwithstanding her fictional examples of characters who attempt to deceive and disguise their values, Austen shares Blair's observation that the epistle, "a conversation carried on upon paper" (*L XXXVII* 417), ultimately reveals the nature of the writer, and in it, we find both the man (*Persuasion* 220) – and woman.

CHAPTER 6

CONCLUSION

In *An Understanding of Jane Austen's Novels*, John Odmark censures those critics who assert that Austen “is an exponent of someone else’s ideas, such as Shaftesbury’s or Burke’s” (124). My examination of Blair’s belletristic influence on Jane Austen’s fiction is not intended to add yet another voice to that ostensibly dubious chorus. As the preceding chapters have indicated, there are ample direct and indirect examples of Blair’s influence and borrowings in her work. However, I do not assert that Blair was an exclusive influence or that she set out to follow Blair’s precepts as she leaned over her “little bit (two inches wide) of ivory” (*Letters* 337). Rather, as I have conveyed in this research, I suggest that understanding Blair’s tenets of belletristic theory (the study and criticism of the elements of style and taste in the polite arts and rhetoric to utilize and evaluate written and oral discourse) and examining his views of morality in his *Lectures* and *Sermons* allow us to discover additional nuances to Austen’s rhetorical skill. Moreover, I argue that Austen was influenced by Blair’s understanding and promulgation of belletristic rhetoric and his advocacy of taste and eloquence and that she incorporated these criteria as character traits (both positive and negative) in her novels.

The genesis for this inquiry stemmed from a curiosity into why Austen directly references two texts from Blair in her fiction and why so little has been written about this reference. Lynn Rigberg’s *Jane Austen’s Discourse with New Rhetoric* has addressed Austen’s familiarity with belletristic rhetoric by suggesting a strong influence on her work by George

Campbell, while others have focused on Austen's understanding of persuasion as a rhetorical aim and influenced by other rhetoricians (Lord Shaftesbury, Aristotle, et al.). Elaine Bander, in "Blair's Rhetoric and the Art of *Persuasion*," while addressing Blair's *Lectures* and his promotion of style and eloquence, focuses primarily on the novel *Persuasion* and does not reference Blair's other work that Austen cites. Therefore, my dissertation uniquely examines the direct references to both Blair's *Sermons* and *Lectures* and underscores Austen's familiarity with belletristic rhetoric. Indeed, given her brother's observation that "her reading was very extensive in history and *belles lettres*"¹ (emphasis added), one is puzzled why so little has been written about this affinity.

Blair's *Lectures on Rhetoric and Belles Lettres* was exceedingly popular and readily available – either complete, abridged, or extracted. We know, for example, that Jane Austen had a copy of Vicesimus Knox's *Elegant Extracts in Prose*, containing selections from Blair's *Lectures*, which contains her handwritten annotations.² Blair's *Lectures* were preceded by his collection of *Sermons*, which established his reputation as a writer and moralist. As I have illustrated, Blair infused his later *Lectures* with the same attention to morals and ethics as he discussed in his *Sermons*. In the *Lectures*, Blair was able to merge his emphasis on ethical principles and character with his belief in the edifying and didactic aspects of belletristic rhetoric.

In the preceding chapters, I have investigated how Austen allied herself with Blair's counsel in her understanding of style, eloquence, and taste. Granted, other earlier and contemporary writers in 18th- century Scotland had expounded on these same elements in

¹ Preface to *Persuasion* and *Northanger Abbey* by Henry Austen, Dec 13, 1817.

² Jane Austen owned a copy of Vicesimus Knox's *Elegant Extracts: or useful and entertaining Passages in Prose Selected for the Improvement of Scholars*. (Appendix C, Cambridge Edition of Austen's *Juvenilia*, 352).

belletristic rhetoric. Blair's *Lectures* are unique, however, as Ferreira-Buckley and Halloran observe: "Although Blair cannot be credited with inventing belletristic rhetoric, he brought its major principles together in a coherent and enormously popular synthesis that sustained its clear dominance in much of the Western world for at least a century. . ." (xxxv).

Notwithstanding the three direct textual references ("Catharine, or, The Bower"; *Northanger Abbey*, and *Mansfield Park*) to Blair's *oeuvre* and their implications for the narrative, Austen incorporates rhetoric as a *vital* feature in each of her novels. For example, belletristic rhetoric is the means by which Catherine Moreland in *Northanger Abbey* is taught to be discerning in art, literature, and life. The dubious rhetoric of the Thorpes conveys their lack of judgment and immoral character, while Henry Tilney's perspicuity of language and aesthetic taste emphasize his character and moral beliefs. As Wiesenfarth notes, "He [John Thorpe] and his sister are foreigners in the land of Johnson and Blair..." (19). Catherine is amendable to instruction, and while young and naïve, she is morally resolute. Catherine is not like Isabella who has been schooled in the ways of polite and shallow society. Catherine does not perceive language as a way of achieving superficial whims. By being judicious in her rhetoric, Catherine learns to be judicious in her other choices and tastes as well.

In the novel *Emma*, Emma believes she has superior rhetorical skills. Conversations according to her understanding should be abounding with a proper sense of decorum and address, which explains her preference for the polished and pleasing flatteries of Mr. Frank Churchill. Her epiphany occurs only when she realizes, in accordance with Blair, that rhetoric must be built on a more substantive – and moral – foundation. Emma undergoes an instruction in belletristic rhetoric that emphasizes less the external accoutrements of style and form and more her moral caliber. Had she focused more on the internal characters of Frank Churchill and Mr.

Elton rather than her superficial perception of them through their discourse, letters and address, she would not have been so mistaken in her observations and actions. Mr. Knightley, as Emma's rhetorical and moral mentor, leads Emma to discern that the true eloquence, which is built on morals, taste and tempered by reason, is far better than the mere conversability she championed earlier.

In *Mansfield Park*, Austen again focuses on the importance of morals as a measure of an individual and investigates the use of rhetoric to beguile and deceive. Mary and Henry Crawford appear to be eloquent and to espouse appropriate moral ideals. They are ultimately betrayed by their actions, however, and, notably for Mary, by her rhetoric. Unlike Fanny who epitomizes Blair's counsel in the acquisition and improving of aesthetic and literary taste, Mary will be exiled from Mansfield Park and left with remorse for "words unsaid" (332).

Those who affect to "shine in borrowed language" (*L XIX* 214) contrary to Blair's precepts are shown to be empty and shallow: Mr. Elliot, Mr. Crawford, George Wickham, to name but a few. They embody suave comportment, polite polish and ease in conversation. Their rhetoric follows the dictates of decorum. However, Austen repeatedly signals that something is amiss; their eloquence is practiced and insincere, and their words are revealed to be improper or indecorous. Henry Crawford and William Elliot both exude propriety, but their moral foundation is nonexistent. As Blair emphasizes, "Elegant speculations are sometimes found to float on the surface of the mind, while bad passions possess the interior regions of the heart" (*LI* 9).

Austen incorporates rhetorical style as an indication of rank and character. Mrs. Elton's *nouveau riche* status is confirmed by her expressions, her use of improper and foreign words (*L X* 100). Even Miss Bingley in *Pride and Prejudice* betrays her social upbringing with her improper word choices (30). Lady Catherine De Bourgh's sense of superiority is conveyed

through her arrogance and expectations of deference. She shares Sir Walter's view in *Persuasion* that titles are substitutes for character and that rank means more than an individual's moral identity. Austen clearly asserts her disdain for those who flaunt wealth over substance, rank over virtue.

Austen allies her understanding of aesthetic and literary taste squarely with Hugh Blair's promotion of taste as cultivated and improved through instruction and reason. Taste that is anchored in a moral underpinning can be improved and enlightened; taste that lacks a moral foundation cannot serve a valid guide. In *Sense and Sensibility*, Marianne's instruction in the nuances of belletristic rhetoric leads her to recognize that sentiments and feelings are transient and gullible; duty to oneself, family and community are not as limiting as they are self-identifying. Propriety and perspicuity in language do not hinder self expression; they inhibit misperceptions and miscommunication.

Similarly to spoken discourse, Austen uses epistolary rhetoric as a gauge of character and taste. Austen incorporates examples of characters who follow Blair's guidance for perspicuity, passion and taste – and those who do not. Indeed, in *Persuasion*, she counters Blair's assertion that spoken discourse is the most eloquent with the example of Captain Wentworth's admission, "I can no longer listen in silence, I must speak to you by such means as are within my reach. You pierce my soul" (257-8). Mr. Darcy's long letter outlining the history with Wickham as well as his own motivations for his actions is honest and sincere. It is through the medium of the letter that Elizabeth learns of her willful prejudice and her hasty judgment regarding both Wickham and Mr. Darcy. The epistle allows Elizabeth Bennet to finally know herself. As Blair observes, there is "more of a character displayed" (*L XXX VII* 417-18) in a letter.

Mr. Collins' epistolary style is clearly a barometer of his personality. He is taken in by titles and understands the value of elite patronage. Rank and social standing are important, so it is perhaps not surprising that his letter after the news of Lydia's elopement suggests that Mr. Bennet should cast her off. And yet, it is unexpected as Mr. Collins is a clergyman and should practice the virtues of forgiveness and mercy. Mr. Collins will go against the advice offered by Blair in his *Sermons*: "Let that courtesy distinguish your demeanour, which springs, not so much from studied politeness, as from a mild and gentle heart... Let your manners be simple and natural, and of course they will be engaging. Affectation is serious deformity" (S 167). Mr. Collins' focus is neither in preserving the state of Lydia's soul nor providing moral comfort to her and her family. His priority is preserving social mores and standing.

In *Persuasion*, Austen investigates the nature of communication when rhetoric is lost. Anne Elliot has been denied not only conversation but identity by her family. She has lost the man she held dear because of her sense of duty – duty to her family and to Captain Wentworth. Anne's eloquence is regained when she changes her rhetorical situation and discovers a new audience. With the Crofts and the Harvilles, her rhetoric is restored as she "is the company of clever, well-informed people, who have a great deal of conversation" (162). True eloquence, as Blair observes in his *Lectures* is linked to virtue and character. Therefore, Sir Walter and Elizabeth Elliot, who perceive value through rank and title, lack the moral foundation to be anything but polite puppets to titled individuals such as Lady Dalrymple.

As I have demonstrated, Austen adheres to and incorporates Blair's concepts of eloquence, taste and style in her choice of rhetoric. Her novels are realistic yet imaginative portrayals of characters in search of identity and community. In Austen's fictional world, rhetoric is used as a tool for character illumination, plot device, establishment of social

hierarchies and as a tool of deception and manipulation. As I have illustrated, even though Austen lacked access to formal, institutional instruction in either classical or belletristic rhetoric, she nonetheless artfully used those belletristic rhetorical techniques advocated by Blair in her fiction — and her knowledge of appropriate form, language and style as well as the consequences of the misuse of rhetoric permeate and ultimately illuminate her fictional discourse.

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