

Montclair State University

## Montclair State University Digital Commons

---

Theses, Dissertations and Culminating Projects


---

5-2017

### **"Oh! why does he not look at me? why cannot I speak to him?" : Indirectness in Three Novels by Jane Austen**

Claire A. Davanzo

Follow this and additional works at: <https://digitalcommons.montclair.edu/etd>

 Part of the [English Language and Literature Commons](#)

---

## Abstract

In this thesis, I focus on several encounters from Jane Austen's *Sense and Sensibility*, *Pride and Prejudice*, and *Persuasion*. Each encounter is characterized by patterns of specific behaviors on the part of each text's heroine. I examine these patterns of behavior and argue that they function as filters for allowing the heroines to resist directness. The filters are particularly valuable because, as sociologist Erving Goffman shows, directness amplifies threats of social and emotional vulnerabilities.

In Chapter I, "Evasions of Emotion in *Sense and Sensibility*," I argue that Elinor's encounters are typified by patterns of behavior designed to avoid, suppress, and deny emotion. I analyze the filter of evasion with respect to Goffman's concepts of face-work and the avoidance process. In Chapter II, "Meta-Conversations in *Pride and Prejudice*," I show that Elizabeth's encounters are characterized by defensive behaviors and strategies that create shifts in Elizabeth's conversations from discussing her social and emotional statuses to debating the structures and strengths of logic and argument. I consider the filter of the meta-conversation in conjunction with Goffman's concepts of face-work, the avoidance process, and the corrective process. In Chapter III, "Interpretations of Hints in *Persuasion*," I claim that Anne's encounters are driven by verbal and non-verbal forms of indirect communication as well as the use of hint, which Goffman explicates and analyzes in his research. In each chapter, I examine the behaviors that characterize these heroines' encounters as mechanisms that protect the characters from attacks to their faces and, consequently, to their emotions. The analyses of the encounters in this thesis show the various means by which Austen's heroines recognize and protect their own emotional vulnerability.

MONTCLAIR STATE UNIVERSITY

“Oh! why does he not look at me? why cannot I speak to him?”

Indirectness in Three Novels by Jane Austen

by

Claire A. Davanzo

A Master's Thesis Submitted to the Faculty of

Montclair State University

In Partial Fulfillment of the Requirements

For the Degree of

Master of Arts

May 2017

College of Arts and Sciences

Thesis Committee:

English Department

[REDACTED]

Lucy McDiarmid, Thesis Sponsor

[REDACTED]

Monika Elbert, Committee Member

[REDACTED]

Melinda Knight, Committee Member

“Oh! why does he not look at me? why cannot I speak to him?”

Indirectness in Three Novels by Jane Austen

A THESIS

Submitted in partial fulfillment of the requirements

For the degree of Master of Arts

by

CLAIRE A. DAVANZO

Montclair State University

Montclair, NJ

2017

Copyright © 2017 by *Claire A. Davanzo*. All rights reserved.

## Acknowledgements

Time and again, and to various, modest parties, I have insisted that I could never have completed this thesis alone, and I still believe that to be true. I offer my sincere gratitude and appreciation to the talented faculty of the Department of English at Montclair State University, as well as to the faculty of all the incredible schools at which I have had the privilege to study.

I give particular thanks, naturally, to the matchless Dr. Lucy McDiarmid. Without her patience, determination, attention to detail, dedication to academic rigor, and towering intellect, this thesis would not be as nuanced or as incisive as I believe it, at last, is. I am certain that I am a stronger thinker, reader, and writer after working with her, and I hope that this thesis serves both as a testament to that, and as a piece of work that will make her proud of her exhaustive efforts and of me.

I thank Dr. Monika Elbert, one of my first and greatest professors at Montclair State University, for her readership, her trust in my skills and scholarship, and her willingness to give her time and attention to my work despite her own most difficult circumstances. I also thank Dr. Melinda Knight for her readership, her compassion and advice at times when they were most needed, and her value of razor-sharp detail and accuracy, which I hope to bring with me and implement wherever I may find myself.

Although he was not one of my readers, I would be remiss if I did not thank Dr. Jeffrey Miller for his illimitable enthusiasm, his intellect, his willingness to listen, and his reassurances. I am not too proud to admit that I did not expect his course or his love for John Milton to sustain me in the ways that they did throughout this process. I thank my fellow scholars in Dr. Miller's class for their levity and their conversation.

I thank Christie, Brittany, Taylor, and all my other wonderful co-workers and friends at the Center for Writing Excellence, all of whom a serendipitous twist of fate allowed me to meet just less than one year ago. I thank Becky, Brendan, Emily, Jackie, Jess, John, Lauren, Meg, Melanie, Rachel, and all my friends near and far for their support, patience, and understanding.

I thank my dear friend and colleague Michael Pasternak for his limitless support and trust even (and, perhaps, particularly) in moments that I did not believe his faith justly founded. Soon, I hope to return his favors of help and thoughtfulness.

I do not yet know how to thank Fernanda Sued, but I must try. I thank her for her unfailing confidence in my intellect and in me. I thank her for reading each new version of each chapter, each page, each paragraph, and each sentence without once complaining or growing frustrated with me. I thank her for reassuring and comforting me when such a labor seemed impossible, for making me smile when I wanted nothing more than to cry, and for doing all of this with nothing but selfless friendship as both her motivation and her reward.

I thank Allie and Christopher for their sunniness and their positivity. I thank my father for his willingness to listen, though I have never seen him read a novel, and for his quiet but constant support even in times of immediate trial.

With boundless love and appreciation, I thank my mother for her unwavering empathy, her kindness, and her faith. I thank her for, from the beginning, kindling in me the passionate adoration of stories that has brought me to this point. I thank her for encouraging me to pursue this thesis, to pursue this degree, and to pursue the next star on the proverbial horizon, regardless of what or where it will be.

And, lastly, I thank Jane Austen. Her beautiful novels speak (or, in this thesis, sometimes do not speak) for themselves, but, with respect, I have added some thoughts on them. I flatter myself to hope that she would find my work worthy and illuminating.



## Table of Contents

Abstract	i
Signature Page	ii
Title Page	iii
Copyright Page	iv
Acknowledgments	v
Introduction	1
Chapter I: Evasions of Emotion in <i>Sense and Sensibility</i>	15
Chapter II: Meta-Conversations in <i>Pride and Prejudice</i>	37
Chapter III: Interpretations of Hints in <i>Persuasion</i>	56
Conclusion	75
Works Cited	77

## Introduction

In 1850, Charlotte Brontë wrote in a letter to a friend that “what sees keenly, speaks aptly, moves flexibly, it suits her [Jane Austen] to study; but what throbs fast and full, though hidden, what the blood rushes through, what is the unseen seat of life and the sentient target of death—this Miss Austen ignores” (354). In her letter, Brontë notes an emphasis on observation, communication, and movement in the novels of Jane Austen but also notes that such an emphasis does not incite passion or interest. Brontë seems to underscore and mourn the absence of fervent, dramatic action and meaning in the texts. In doing so, however, Brontë also reveals a lack of appreciation for the extensive portions of Austen’s books that are dedicated to the “study” of nuanced social encounters.

One aim of this thesis is to show the breadth of meaning inherent in social encounters in Austen novels. In the hope of drawing specific conclusions on this and other matters, I focus on several encounters from *Sense and Sensibility*, *Pride and Prejudice*, and *Persuasion*. Each encounter is characterized by patterns of specific behaviors on the part of each text’s heroine. I examine these patterns of behavior and argue that they function as filters for allowing the heroines to resist directness. The filters are particularly valuable because, as sociologist Erving Goffman shows, directness amplifies threats of social and emotional vulnerabilities. Specifically, behaviors that evade displays of emotion characterize Elinor Dashwood’s encounters; meta-conversations typify Elizabeth Bennet’s encounters; and behaviors that use hint as well as written and non-verbal communications characterize Anne Elliot’s encounters. The analyses of the encounters in this thesis show the various means by which Austen’s heroines recognize and protect their own emotional vulnerability.

Because Goffman's observations and theories about social encounters apply to each of the three chapters that follow, it is useful to outline some of his concepts here first. In his essay "On Face-Work: An Analysis of Ritual Elements in Social Interaction," Goffman examines the motivations and mechanisms of "social encounters" and the participants that drive them (5). According to Goffman, each person in an encounter has "face," or "an image of self delineated in terms of approved social attributes—albeit an image that others may share," and face can be maintained, gained, lost, or shamed through interactions during the encounter (5). Furthermore, as "a person tends to experience an immediate emotional response" to his or her face and as "his 'feelings' become attached to it," that person engages in various kinds of "face-work," or "actions taken by a person to make whatever he is doing consistent with face," to avoid humiliating moments of "shamefacedness" or losses of face (6; 12).

While Goffman outlines a number of different kinds of face-work in his essay, his examinations and analyses of "the avoidance process" and "the corrective process" in encounters are particularly relevant to this thesis (15; 19). Both avoidance and corrective processes are critical means for participants in encounters to "save face," or to recover their own faces or the faces of their fellow participants; if the participant acts to "[save] his own face," this is called "defensive orientation," and if the participant acts to "[save] the others' face," this is called "protective orientation" (Goffman 14). The avoidance process, then, is "the surest way for a person to prevent threats to his face" or to the face of another in that the process requires a person "to avoid contacts in which these threats are likely to occur" (15). However, if "the person does chance an encounter, other kinds of avoidance practices come into play as defensive measures," including avoidance of

certain conversational topics and suppressions of emotion (16). In the avoidance process, “certain protective maneuvers” can also be performed, including “shows [of] respect and politeness” and replies grounded in “circumlocutions and deceptions . . . so that the others’ face is preserved even if their welfare is not” (16-17).

When an encounter occurs and “the participants in [it] fail to prevent the occurrence of an event that is expressively incompatible with the judgments of social worth that are being maintained, and when the event is of the kind that it is difficult to overlook, then the participants are likely to give it accredited status as an incident” and employ the corrective rather than the avoidance process (Goffman 19). The corrective process requires participants to acknowledge a social “misconduct” and to take steps to “correct for [the] effects” of that misconduct (19). There are numerous variations of responses within the corrective process. Further, as Goffman notes, “cooperation in face-work” or the absence of such cooperation influences the encounter as well (27).

Both avoidance and corrective processes can and often do include direct verbal communications between participants. As Goffman states, however, less direct means of communication are also present and significant in encounters. Goffman emphasizes the influence of such communicative behaviors with respect to the preservation of face and the transference of meaning in encounters:

The human tendency to use signs and symbols means that evidence of social worth and of mutual evaluations will be conveyed by very minor things, and these things will be witnessed, as will the fact that they have been witnessed. An unguarded glance, a momentary change in tone of voice, an ecological position taken or not taken, can drench a talk with judgmental significance. Therefore, just

as there is no occasion to talk in which improper impressions could not intentionally or unintentionally arise, so there is no occasion of talk so trivial as not to require each participant to show serious concern with the way in which he handles himself and the others present. (33)

Here, Goffman argues that “signs and symbols” like eye contact, tone of voice, and location guide an encounter as much as direct verbal meaning does, and that all of these small behaviors “can drench a talk with judgmental significance.” As such behaviors can communicate meaning, so too can such behaviors cause risks in encounters through the threats of losses of face or shamefacedness.

Near the end of his essay, Goffman further stresses the risks inherent in engaging in an encounter:

By saying something, the speaker opens himself up to the possibility that the intended recipients will affront him by not listening or will think him forward, foolish, or offensive in what he has said. And should he meet with such a reception, he will then find himself committed to the necessity of taking face-saving action against them. Furthermore, by saying something the speaker opens his intended recipients up to the possibility that the message will be self-approving, presumptuous, demanding, insulting, and generally an affront to them or to their conception of him, so that they will find themselves obliged to take action against him in defense of the ritual code. (37-38)

Goffman argues that the act of speaking, in and of itself, threatens the participant with real potential losses of face. The indirectness of the “signs and symbols” as well as the avoidance and corrective processes discussed in the previous quotations create degrees of

separation between the intention of the participant and the perceived meaning of the behavior; these degrees of separation allow the participant more freedom to save face. Therefore, these processes and behaviors allow participants to distance themselves from threats of losses of face.

Like Goffman, Claudia Johnson perceives the connection between behaviors and emotional conditions. Johnson argues that “the manners of young ladies are of such consequence . . . because the larger world around [women] is so menacing in the first place,” and that the “codes” that characterize women’s behaviors are matters “not [of] propriety, but [of] survival” (50). For Johnson, who analyzes Austen from feminist and political perspectives, the patterns of female behavior that typify encounters in Austen’s novels are often unfortunate but necessary, and unfortunate in that they are necessary. I support Johnson in her claim that these behaviors are indeed necessary, but, in approaching them from a sociological perspective, I find them more effective and valuable as means of protection and preservation for Austen’s heroines.

In his chapter “*Pride and Prejudice*, Goffman, and Strategic Interaction,” James Thompson also studies behaviors during specific social encounters in Austen, and states that “Jane Austen and Erving Goffman are simply the most acute observers and analysts of the minutiae of conversation so far” (95).<sup>1</sup> Thompson then discusses the relationship between Elizabeth Bennet and Fitzwilliam Darcy in the context of Goffman’s explications and analyses of face-work. That is, Thompson argues that “the whole first

---

<sup>1</sup> While reading and researching Austen through Goffman, I was delighted to discover Thompson’s book and find another scholar examining Austen’s novels in this manner; indeed, Thompson is the first and only scholar in current academic research to pursue and use the link between Austen and Goffman beyond a passing reference. In Austen studies, Tony Tanner (“Knowledge and Opinion: *Pride and Prejudice*”), Massimiliano Morini (*Jane Austen’s Narrative Techniques: A Stylistic and Pragmatic Analysis*), Bharat Tandon (*Jane Austen and the Morality of Conversation*), and others refer to Goffman, but in passim.

half of *Pride and Prejudice*, up to Darcy's exculpatory letter, chronicles the hash they [he and Elizabeth] make of social interaction, and the whole second half of the novel is dedicated to remediation" (98). While Thompson and I both choose several specific encounters in Austen novels and show how such encounters function with respect to Goffman's theories, I examine and apply face and face-work as well as additional, relevant concepts that surround and connect to them.

In Chapter I, "Evasions of Emotion in *Sense and Sensibility*," I argue that Elinor's encounters are typified by patterns of behavior designed to avoid, suppress, and deny emotion. I analyze the filter of evasion with respect to Goffman's concepts of face-work and the avoidance process. In Chapter II, "Meta-Conversations in *Pride and Prejudice*," I show that Elizabeth's encounters are characterized by defensive behaviors and strategies that create shifts in Elizabeth's conversations from discussing her social and emotional statuses to debating the structures and strengths of logic and argument. I consider the filter of the meta-conversation in conjunction with Goffman's concepts of face-work, the avoidance process, and the corrective process. In Chapter III, "Interpretations of Hints in *Persuasion*," I claim that Anne's encounters are driven by verbal and non-verbal forms of indirect communication as well as the use of hint, which Goffman explicates and analyzes in his research. In each chapter, I examine the behaviors that characterize these heroines' encounters as mechanisms that protect the characters from attacks to their faces and, consequently, to their emotions.

Chapter I: Evasions of Emotion in *Sense and Sensibility*

Around the midpoint of *Sense and Sensibility*, an encounter occurs in London between Elinor Dashwood and Fanny Dashwood. During the visit, Elinor “[wants] very much to know, though she [does] not chuse to ask, whether Edward [is] then in town” (Austen 163). As she is obliged to spend time with Fanny, her sister-in-law, Elinor certainly has opportunities to inquire after Edward and his whereabouts. Despite her interest and curiosity, however, Elinor does not “chuse” to ask Edward’s own sister about him. In this encounter, Elinor actively avoids conversation with Fanny, no doubt because she understands that “nothing would have induced Fanny voluntarily to mention [Edward] before [Elinor] . . . because she [believes] them still so very much attached to each other, that they could not be too sedulously divided in word and deed on every occasion” (163). Fanny is averse to discussing Edward with Elinor because she knows of the emotional connection between them, and will not bring it into the encounter. Moreover, Elinor does not ask Fanny about Edward because to do so would incite additional discomfort in an already unpleasant encounter; therefore, Elinor simply chooses not to question Fanny about Edward at all and avoids heightening tensions further.

As in this encounter, throughout *Sense and Sensibility*, Elinor’s encounters are characterized by evasions, interruptions, or denials of impassioned emotions. As shown in the previous examples, these encounters can begin—or, indeed, fail to begin—with evasion or attempts at it, wherein conversations are prevented altogether and emotions remain unaddressed; further, additional attempts at evasion also recur mid-encounter. Essentially, Elinor’s encounters are characterized by what Goffman calls the avoidance



process, through which a person attempts to avoid or escape unpleasant encounters whenever possible. Moreover, when, for various reasons, an encounter cannot be avoided, interjections, silences, averted gazes, strategic exits, and other such verbal and physical behaviors characterize the encounter as well as the conversations within it. Such patterns of behavior also align with Goffman's avoidance process, which shows that participants in unpleasant encounters implement defensive or protective measures in order to save face. Ultimately, Elinor's encounters reveal the techniques, conscious or otherwise, that she uses to prevent or curtail intense displays of emotion and, as a result, to protect her face and the self with which it is associated.

After her encounter with Fanny, Elinor learns, if indirectly, from Edward himself that he is in London. Elinor's internal response to his presence sheds additional light on the influence of significant, powerful emotion on her in the context of encounters:

Edward assured them himself of his being in town, within a very short time, by twice calling in Berkeley-street. Twice was his card found on the table, when they returned from their morning's engagements. Elinor was pleased that he had called; and still more pleased that she had missed him. (Austen 163)

Twice, Edward attempts to visit Elinor and her companions, and twice, Elinor and her companions are not at home when he calls. In the context of the fact that Elinor wants "very much" to know his whereabouts, it is not unreasonable to assume that she might want to see Edward. However, Elinor is "pleased that he [has] called; and still more pleased that she [has] missed him." Here, the evasion of emotion that typifies Elinor's encounters is evident in her pleasure at her missed chances of visits with Edward. Elinor

avoids an encounter with a person who stirs intense emotion in her, and she is relieved to have avoided both this and the consequent threat of a loss of face before Edward.

One emotional encounter that Elinor first does not know to avoid and then cannot escape occurs during her time as Mrs. Jennings's guest in London, when she and the "wholly dispirited" Marianne Dashwood "[are] engaged to attend Lady Middleton to a party" (Austen 124). Socially, Elinor and Marianne are obligated to attend the event, but as there does not seem to be a threat of a conflagration of emotion at the party, there is also no real reason for Elinor to attempt to avoid it. The party is "splendidly lit up, quite full of company, and insufferably hot," and such a setting, which emphasizes the uncomfortable environment, seems to foreshadow additional trouble (124). The description of the party also accentuates its undeniably public nature and, as a result, the increased potential for losses of face. Once Elinor and Marianne have "luckily" secured a pair of chairs, Elinor, less luckily, sees John Willoughby standing near enough for her and Marianne to encounter:

They had not remained in this manner long, before Elinor perceived Willoughby, standing within a few yards of them, in earnest conversation with a very fashionable looking young woman. She soon caught his eye, and he immediately bowed, but without attempting to speak to her, or to approach Marianne, though he could not but see her; and then continued his discourse with the same lady. Elinor turned involuntarily to Marianne, to see whether it could be unobserved by her. At that moment she first perceived him, and her whole countenance glowing with sudden delight, she would have moved towards him instantly, had not her sister caught hold of her.

“Good heavens!” she exclaimed, “he is there—he is there—Oh! why does he not look at me? why cannot I speak to him?”

“Pray, pray be composed,” cried Elinor, “and do not betray what you feel to every body present. Perhaps he has not observed you yet.” (124; 124-25)

Willoughby's unanticipated presence alone sparks the potential for an intense emotional encounter between him and Marianne; Willoughby's dangerously close proximity as well as his “earnest conversation with [the] very fashionable looking young woman” multiply the likelihood of such an encounter all the more, as both Elinor and Marianne must notice him, and as he appears to be fascinated with another attractive woman when he has only recently abandoned a similar interest in Marianne. Notably, Elinor “[perceives]”

Willoughby, his closeness, and his conversation with the lady before Marianne does.

Elinor's earlier notice of Willoughby, her subsequent observations of him, and her non-verbal interactions with him inevitably alter the course and character of the encounter.

When Elinor makes eye contact with Willoughby, he “immediately [bows], but without attempting to speak to her, or to approach Marianne, though he could not but see her.”

With his bow, Willoughby fulfills the minimum social obligation to recognize an acquaintance, but his decisions not to initiate additional conversation or to engage, either verbally or non-verbally, with Marianne reveal the avoidance process and indicate the emotion an encounter between them would incite.

As soon as Willoughby acknowledges Elinor, the encounter becomes characterized by avoidance for each of them. Consciously or unconsciously, Elinor interprets Willoughby's negative behaviors and “involuntarily” turns to Marianne to gauge her reactions. In direct contrast to Willoughby, whose behaviors indicate his hope

to avoid an encounter, Marianne “[glows] with sudden delight” as she sees Willoughby and tries to “[move] toward him instantly.” Willoughby resists an encounter with Marianne, but Marianne actively seeks an encounter with Willoughby; the stark differences in the wishes and behaviors of these two characters must render an unavoidably tense and emotional encounter, which is to be avoided in order to save face. By “[catching] hold” of Marianne as she attempts to rush to Willoughby, Elinor delays that encounter and saves her own face as well as Marianne’s and Willoughby’s for a short time.

Elinor’s prevention, however, sparks further excitement and new agitation in Marianne, who exclaims over Willoughby’s presence and frantically questions Elinor on her reasons for keeping Marianne from Willoughby; Marianne’s behaviors function in direct opposition to avoidance, and, in turn, complicate the encounter for Elinor. In order to calm Marianne and avoid the losses of face Marianne’s emotional outbursts threaten to trigger, Elinor begs her sister to “be composed,” urges Marianne to conceal her feelings from the other guests, and suggests that Willoughby may have not yet seen Marianne despite the fact that Elinor knows otherwise. With these three different comments, Elinor tries three different techniques for soothing and calming Marianne. Elinor knows Marianne and knows that her encounter with Willoughby is inevitable, but Elinor tries to ensure that Marianne is less emotional when the moment of engagement between her and Willoughby does arrive.

Elinor’s efforts both to avoid an encounter with Willoughby and to quieten Marianne prove ineffective the instant Marianne and Willoughby make eye contact:

At last he [Willoughby] turned round again, and regarded them both; she [Marianne] started up, and pronouncing his name in a tone of affection, held out her hand to him. He approached, and addressing himself rather to Elinor than to Marianne, as if wishing to avoid her eye, and determined not to observe her attitude, inquired in a hurried manner after Mrs. Dashwood, and asked how long they had been in town. Elinor was robbed of all presence of mind by such an address, and was unable to say a word. But the feelings of her sister were instantly expressed. Her face was crimsoned over, and she exclaimed in a voice of the greatest emotion, "Good God! Willoughby, what is the meaning of this? Have you not received my letters? Will you not shake hands with me?"

He could not then avoid it, but her touch seemed painful to him, and he held her hand only for a moment. During all this time he was evidently struggling for composure. Elinor watched his countenance and saw its expression becoming more tranquil. After a moment's pause, he spoke with calmness.

"I did myself the honour of calling in Berkeley-street last Tuesday, and very much regretted that I was not fortunate enough to find yourselves and Mrs. Jennings at home. My card was not lost, I hope."

"But have you not received my notes?" cried Marianne in the wildest anxiety.

"Here is some mistake I am sure—some dreadful mistake. What can be the meaning of it? Tell me, Willoughby; for heaven's sake tell me, what is the matter?"

He made no reply; his complexion changed and all his embarrassment returned; but as if, on catching the eye of the young lady with whom he had been

previously talking, he felt the necessity of instant exertion, he recovered himself again, and after saying, "Yes, I had the pleasure of receiving the information of your arrival in town, which you were so good as to send me," turned hastily away with a slight bow and joined his friend. (Austen 125)

After delaying the encounter for as long as possible, Willoughby "at last . . . [regards]" Elinor and Marianne; in contrast to Willoughby's passivity, Marianne "[starts] up" from her seat, "[pronounces] his name in a tone of affection," and "[holds] out her hand to him." The emotional differences in Willoughby's and Marianne's behaviors foreshadow the impending discomfort of the encounter and cause Willoughby to attempt the avoidance process again, this time within the encounter itself. His evasion of Marianne's eye, his obvious but non-verbal neglect of Marianne's hand, his direction of his conversation to Elinor rather than to Marianne, and his use of small talk all constitute his attempts to evade Marianne and her feelings during this encounter.

Willoughby's techniques, however, do not allow him to avoid or even de-escalate the encounter, and instead charge it with fresh emotion. Marianne "[crimsons] over" at once and speaks in "a voice of the greatest emotion" or "wildest anxiety" throughout the encounter, heightening its emotional tension. The emotional character of this moment in the encounter is best illustrated by the handshake between Willoughby and Marianne. After Willoughby spurns her offered hand, Marianne questions him directly on his reason for doing so and, in response, receives nothing more than a brief, grudging handshake that Willoughby "could not then avoid." The encounter is characterized by conflicting responses to the avoidance process and a loss of face for Marianne, though she does not seem to attend to this; Willoughby attempts to evade Marianne while, simultaneously, she

attempts to engage him and reacts emotionally when she is unable to do so. Ultimately, in keeping with the avoidance process, Willoughby constructs an excuse to exit, but, in doing so, he leaves Marianne emotionally compromised. Here, Marianne functions as a counterexample to Elinor's behaviors during encounters; Marianne's behaviors are characterized not by avoidance of emotion but by open expression of it, and it is this directness and vulnerability that hurts her so deeply in this exchange with Willoughby.

During Marianne and Willoughby's conversation, Elinor is "robbed of all presence of mind . . . and [is] unable to say a word." In a sense, Elinor's silence here indicates her own avoidance of the emotional tension that typifies that moment in the encounter. Once Willoughby exits and Marianne begins to emote even more blatantly, Elinor reengages to attempt to save Marianne's face:

Marianne, now looking dreadfully white, and unable to stand, sunk into her chair, and Elinor, expecting every moment to see her faint, tried to screen her from the observation of others, while reviving her with lavender water.

"Go to him, Elinor," she cried, as soon as she could speak, "and force him to come to me. Tell him I must see him again—must speak to him instantly.—I cannot rest—I shall not have a moment's peace till this is explained—some dreadful misapprehension or other.—Oh go to him this moment."

"How can that be done? No, my dearest Marianne, you must wait. This is not a place for explanations. Wait only till to-morrow."

With difficulty however could she prevent her from following him herself; and to persuade her to check her agitation, to wait, at least with the appearance of composure, till she might speak to him with more privacy and more effect, was

impossible; for Marianne continued incessantly to give way in a low voice to the misery of her feelings, by exclamations of wretchedness. (Austen 125-26)

Here, verbal and somatic techniques are used to conceal emotion and, as a result, to save face. Elinor uses her own body to attempt “to screen [Marianne] from the observation of others, while reviving her with lavender water.” At this point in the encounter, intense emotion is hidden bodily while lavender water is offered to soothe and return composure to Marianne. Further, Elinor’s continued prevention of Marianne “following [Willoughby] herself” shows active implementation of the avoidance process in order to evade additional emotion and consequent losses of face. In a similar fashion, emotion is avoided and even repressed when Elinor refuses to “force” Willoughby to return to the impassioned, spluttering Marianne. Ultimately, although Marianne does continue to give “exclamations of wretchedness” as she recovers, she does so “in a low voice,” drawing less attention to herself and decreasing the chances of further losses of face. Finally, Elinor completes the avoidance process in successfully “[begging] her sister would entreat Lady Middleton to take them home” (126). Throughout this subsection of the encounter, Elinor protectively orients herself to help preserve Marianne’s face and feelings after each is abused, and Elinor’s avoidance of emotion throughout the encounter is the behavior that allows her to fill this role.

In this encounter, Marianne’s behaviors support Claudia Johnson’s claim that Marianne’s emotional openness and consequent defiance of more modest, socially conventional behaviors cause most of her pain in the novel: “if Marianne has resisted the codes which not only require but reward calculation and coldheartedness, she has submitted without resistance to those which dictate desolation . . . at the price of feeling”



(50). Johnson argues that Marianne succumbs to “desolation . . . at the price of feeling,” and Marianne’s swooning distress as Willoughby spurns her affection is proof of this. In contrast, Elinor’s behaviors in this and other encounters are not characterized by “calculation and coldheartedness” but by avoidance, restraint, and protectiveness. With respect to Johnson’s argument, then, Elinor evades “desolation” because she is willing to conceal her feelings. As a result of her calm, Elinor is able to function as Marianne’s carer and defender in this encounter.

Another encounter characterized by evasions of emotion occurs later in *Sense and Sensibility*, when Willoughby arrives at Cleveland to explain to Elinor his reasons for severing his previous connection to Marianne. Marianne is ill, and Elinor acts as her nurse while she awaits the return of Colonel Brandon with Mrs. Dashwood. As a result of Marianne’s sickness, a certain amount of emotional tension permeates Cleveland even before Willoughby arrives and sparks the beginning of the encounter. When she hears a carriage downstairs, Elinor descends; she expects her mother and Brandon, but is immediately and unavoidably thrust into an encounter with Willoughby instead:

She rushed forwards towards the drawing-room,—she entered it,—and saw only Willoughby.

Elinor, starting back with a look of horror at the sight of him, obeyed the first impulse of her heart in turning instantly to quit the room, and her hand was already on the lock, when its action was suspended by his hastily advancing, and saying, in a voice rather of command than supplication,

“Miss Dashwood, for half an hour—for ten minutes—I entreat you to stay.”

“No, sir,” she replied with firmness, “I shall not stay. Your business cannot be with me. The servants, I suppose, forgot to tell you that Mr. Palmer was not in the house.”

“Had they told me,” he cried with vehemence, “that Mr. Palmer and all his relations were at the devil, it would not have turned me from the door. My business is with you, and only you.”

“With me!”—in the utmost amazement—“well, sir—be quick—and if you can—less violent.”

“Sit down, and I will be both.” (Austen 224-25)

The instant Elinor realizes that Willoughby is present, the encounter is characterized by evasion. Elinor recoils in “horror” and “[obeys] the first impulse of her heart in turning instantly to quit the room,” or attempts to exit to avoid the emotion an encounter with Willoughby will incite. Like the spurned Marianne in the previous encounter, Willoughby frantically persists in attempting to engage Elinor; he “hastily” rushes after her, using “a voice rather of command than supplication” to demand that Elinor remain and speak with him. Like Marianne, Willoughby freely shows his desperation in this moment, thus heightening the emotional tension in the encounter. When her move to escape the encounter through physical evasion has failed and she is forced to engage with Willoughby, Elinor still persists in her attempts not to remain with him. Elinor insists “with firmness” that she will not speak with Willoughby and, through the connection she draws between Willoughby and Mr. Palmer, provides an excuse for Willoughby to end the encounter without further loss of face on either side. Willoughby does not accept the proffered excuse, and at last Elinor agrees to speak with him only if he is “quick” and

“less violent.” Here, Elinor qualifies her promise of conversing with Willoughby with the requirement that he behave less emotionally; this demand differs in the force with which it is delivered, but is similar to Elinor’s attempts to calm Marianne in the previous encounter. In each instance, Elinor avoids encounters characterized by emotion if possible; however, when such evasion is impossible, Elinor attempts to minimize the amount of emotion felt, or, at least, displayed.

Once Willoughby breaks his promise to conduct himself more calmly in exchange for an audience with Elinor, the role of avoidance in the encounter shifts. More than a simple means of evasion of discomfort, here avoidance becomes a tool for controlling and managing responses in conversation. At first, the patterns of Willoughby’s verbal utterances lack both direction and relevance with respect to his purpose at Cleveland. Elinor’s evasion of emotion, however, allows her to alter his behaviors:

“ . . . For once, Miss Dashwood—it will be the last time, perhaps—let us be cheerful together.—I am in a fine mood for gaiety.—Tell me honestly”—a deeper glow overspreading his cheeks—“do you think me most a knave or a fool?”

Elinor looked at him with greater astonishment than ever. She began to think that he must be in liquor;—the strangeness of such a visit, and of such manners, seemed no otherwise intelligible; and with this impression she immediately rose, saying,

“Mr. Willoughby, I advise you at present to return to Combe.—I am not at leisure to remain with you longer.—Whatever your business may be with me, it will be better recollected and explained to-morrow.” (Austen 225; 225)

Initially, Willoughby moves from thought to thought with neither warning nor clear intent, and his spoken communication is flooded with pauses and self-interruptions. Elinor interprets Willoughby's inexplicable babbling in conjunction with the "deeper glow overspreading his cheeks," assumes that he is "in liquor," and "immediately [rises]" to end the encounter. As Willoughby soon explains and proves, he is not drunk but overemotional; Elinor retracts her promise to speak with Willoughby when he shows that he is unable or unwilling to behave in a less impassioned or uncontrolled manner. Indeed, Elinor attempts to use Willoughby's possible inebriation as an excuse to curtail an encounter relentlessly characterized by fervent emotion.

In the ultimatum Elinor offers Willoughby, in which he either controls his emotions or "[returns] to Combe," avoidance functions not only as a means of resisting unpleasant emotion but also as leverage for achieving a demand. Further, the threat of suffering avoidance is an effective one; faced with this choice, in "a voice perfectly calm," Willoughby provides a factual, detailed recitation of his schedule as proof that he cannot be intoxicated: "'Yes, I am very drunk. A pint of porter with my cold beef at Marlborough was enough to over-set me. . . . Yes—I left London this morning at eight o'clock, and the only ten minutes I have spent out of my chaise since that time, procured me a nuncheon at Marlborough'" (Austen 225-26). Through shifts in the tone, manner, and content of his verbal communication, Willoughby acquiesces to Elinor's wish that he behave with less emotion, thus illustrating the influence of the threat of avoidance. Further, the fresh calm in Willoughby allows Elinor to speak with him:

The steadiness of his manner, and the intelligence of his eye as he spoke, convincing Elinor, that whatever unpardonable folly might bring him to

Cleveland, he was not brought there by intoxication, she said, after a moment's recollection,

"Mr. Willoughby, you ought to feel, and I certainly do—that after what has passed—your coming here in this manner, and forcing yourself upon my notice requires a very particular excuse.—What is it, that you mean by it?"—

"I mean"—said he, with serious energy—"if I can, to make you hate me one degree less than you do now. . . . To obtain something like forgiveness from Ma—from your sister. . . . *Now* will you listen to me?"

Elinor bowed her assent. (226)

In this moment, "steadiness," "intelligence" and "serious . . . energy" characterize both Willoughby and the encounter, and Elinor's willingness to continue the conversation with the introduction of these qualities underscores the importance of evading emotion for her.

The entirety of this encounter contains instances like the previous one, in which Willoughby cannot or chooses not to contain his feelings, and Elinor threatens avoidance through her uses of questions or warnings of departure to shift the character of the encounter from emotional and scattered to calm and focused. For instance, when Willoughby confesses that, when charming Marianne, he had "endeavoured, by every means in [his] power, to make [himself] pleasing to her, without any design of returning her affection," Elinor "[turns] her eyes on him with the most angry contempt, [stops] him, [and] [says], 'It is hardly worth while, Mr. Willoughby, for you to relate, or for me to listen any longer. Such a beginning as this cannot be followed by any thing.—Do not let me be pained by hearing any thing more on the subject'" (Austen 227). Here, the avoidance process is evident within the encounter through Elinor's refusal to listen

further to Willoughby. In other words, rather than exit the encounter entirely, Elinor indicates that she will not continue to engage with Willoughby on his current subject. This threat of avoidance allows Elinor to direct the conversation according to her own wishes. Further, avoidance also plays a crucial role at this moment in the encounter because Willoughby's discussion of his previous intentions with Marianne stir emotion in Elinor, and she wishes "not . . . [to] be pained by hearing any thing more" of matters that will hurt her.

This encounter is characterized by evasions of emotion even to its end, as shown through its function in the end of Elinor and Willoughby's conversation. To a certain extent, avoidance of emotion characterizes both Elinor and Willoughby's behaviors as Willoughby reflects on a lost future with Marianne:

" . . . Marianne to be sure is lost to me for ever. Were I even by any blessed chance at liberty again"—

Elinor stopped him with a reproof.

"Well"—he replied—"once more good bye. I shall now go away and live in dread of one event. . . . Your sister's marriage."

"You are very wrong. She can never be more lost to you than she is now.

"But she will be gained by some one else. And if that some one should be the very he whom, of all others, I could least bear—But I will not stay to rob myself of all your compassionate good-will, by shewing that where I have most injured I can least forgive. Good bye,—God bless you!"

And with these words, he almost ran out of the room. (Austen 235-36)

At the beginning of this final moment of conversation, Willoughby attempts to engage Elinor in his meaningless dreams of marriage to Marianne, and, for an instant, Elinor avoids hearing more of Willoughby's fantasies and feelings by "[stopping] him with a reproof." Elinor's response is only effective in directing the discussion for this instant, however, as Willoughby returns again to his emotions with his remark on the "dread" he feels at the thought of Marianne's eventual marriage. Elinor's second disapproving remark presumably differs from her first in that it invokes Marianne. Elinor states that Marianne "can never be more lost to [Willoughby] than she is now," and in this moment, as in the encounter at the party, Elinor again protectively orients herself on behalf of Marianne and the preservation of her face. In dissuading Willoughby from thoughts of a future with Marianne, Elinor defends her emotionally vulnerable sister from additional pain through heartbreak.

In contrast to the protectiveness inherent in Elinor's answer here, Willoughby's response is characterized by defensiveness, or his desire to maintain face for himself rather than for another. This defensiveness is best illustrated by Willoughby's last response to Elinor, in which he interrupts himself, realizes that he should not "stay to rob [himself] of all [Elinor's] compassionate good-will," and flees the room and Cleveland alike. Here, Willoughby himself uses the avoidance process, but in contrast to Elinor's use of avoidance for the sakes of Marianne's face and emotional state, Willoughby uses the avoidance process upon realizing that his remarks may cause him to lose further face. The difference between Elinor's and Willoughby's uses for evasion here underscores and supports Johnson's claim that "it is [male] commonplace lapses toward women that render female manners so desperately important and so impossibly problematic" (58). In

other words, Willoughby's single-minded concern for his own face illustrates his "commonplace [lapse] toward women," while Elinor's sincere and determined focus on preserving Marianne throughout the novel shows the importance of behaviors as defenses for women.

While all of Elinor's encounters are characterized by her evasions of emotion, the effectiveness of her attempts at evasion varies. As shown in the climactic encounter between Elinor and Edward near the end of *Sense and Sensibility*, when intense feeling affects Elinor's behaviors, tactics for avoiding or repressing sentiment are attempted but ineffective, and uncontrollable expressions of emotion, rather than evasions of them, permeate the encounter. As soon as Elinor learns of Edward's apparent marriage to Lucy Steele and while she awaits further details of the wedding from Brandon, Edward arrives at Barton Cottage, and Elinor's behaviors show her struggle to control her emotions even before Edward enters:

. . . The figure of a man on horseback drew her eyes to the window. He stopt at their gate. It was a gentleman, it was Colonel Brandon himself. Now she should hear more; and she trembled in expectation of it. But—it was not Colonel Brandon—neither his air—nor his height. Were it possible, she should say it must be Edward. She looked again. He had just dismounted;—she could not be mistaken;—it *was* Edward. She moved away and sat down. "He comes from Mr. Pratt's purposely to see us. I *will* be calm; I *will* be mistress of myself."

. . . She would have given the world to be able to speak—and to make them [her family] understand that she hoped no coolness, no slight, would appear in their



behaviour to him;—but she had no utterance, and was obliged to leave all to their own discretion.

Not a syllable passed aloud. They all waited in silence for the appearance of their visitor. His footsteps were heard along the gravel path; in a moment he was in the passage; and in another, he was before them. (Austen 253)

Even when Elinor believes the visitor is Brandon with news of Edward and his marriage, she “[trembles] in expectation” of that news; here, the physical reaction Elinor experiences at the mere thought of Edward shows how emotionally vulnerable she is with respect to him and also implies the difficulties she experiences in avoiding her own emotion. Moreover, once she realizes that Edward, not Brandon, is the visitor, Elinor’s thoughts come in shorter, more urgent bursts, and she needs to move from standing near the window to sitting and attempting to gather herself. As her inner determination shows, Elinor desperately wants to “be calm” and “mistress of herself,” but it is that emotional desperation that prevents her from mustering even an “utterance” for her family to instruct them that “no coolness, no slight, [should] appear in their behaviour to [Edward].” Here, emotion directly prevents calm, polite manners.

Emotion is even more difficult to avoid once Edward enters the encounter because, like Elinor, he is full of feeling. Against such powerful emotions, Mrs. Dashwood’s efforts for avoidance or repression are unsuccessful:

His [Edward’s] countenance, as he entered the room, was not too happy, even for Elinor. His complexion was white with agitation, and he looked as if fearful of his reception, and conscious that he merited no kind one. Mrs. Dashwood, however, confirming, as she trusted, to the wishes of that daughter, by whom she then

meant in the warmth of her heart to be guided in everything, met him with a look of forced complacency, gave him her hand, and wished him joy.

He coloured, and stammered out an unintelligible reply. Elinor's lips had moved with her mother's, and when the moment of action was over, she wished that she had shaken hands with him too. But it was then too late, and with a countenance meaning to be open, she sat down again and talked of the weather.

. . . When Elinor had ceased to rejoice in the dryness of the season, a very awful pause took place. It was put an end to by Mrs. Dashwood, who felt obliged to hope that he had left Mrs. Ferrars very well. In an hurried manner, he replied in the affirmative.

Another pause. (Austen 253-54)

When he enters the room, Edward is visibly emotional: his "countenance . . . [is] not too happy," his "complexion [is] white with agitation," and he seems "fearful." Mrs. Dashwood's behaviors, including her "look of forced complacency," wish of "joy," offer of her hand, and polite inquiry after Edward's wife, seem intended to encourage less emotional behaviors, but fail to soothe Edward; he remains uncomfortable, "[colouring]" and "[stammering] out an unintelligible reply." Edward's behaviors show he is unable to control his feelings physically or verbally, and thus is equally unable evade the discomfort his emotions cause. Moreover, Elinor's own emotional state further heightens the tension in the encounter and prevents her from acting as "mistress of [herself]." Indeed, although Elinor "[wishes] that she had shaken hands with [Edward]" as her mother does, the stupefaction her emotions seem to cause, as illustrated in the soundless movement of her lips, prevents her from doing so. Similarly, Elinor attempts to engage in

small talk to repress her feelings and normalize her behaviors, but she rambles on “the dryness of the season” and leads the encounter into “a very awful pause.” The emotional tension in the encounter escalates as Elinor and Edward fail in efforts to avoid or repress their feelings.

Attempts to repress emotion become less and less effective the longer the conversation lasts. Elinor “[dares] not look up,” fidgets with “some work from the table” beside her, and “[fears] the sound of her own voice” when she asks Edward after the woman she believes is his wife (Austen 254). Though her avoidance of eye contact and her redirection of her attention to her sewing show her attempts at evasion and repression of emotion, these behaviors also show that “Elinor . . . [is] in such a state of agitation as [makes] her hardly know where she [is]” (254). In a similar manner, before the moment of realization, Edward “[colours]” and speaks in “a hurried voice”; moreover, the instant before he reveals that Lucy has married his brother, Edward “[rises] from his seat . . . [to] [take] up a pair of scissors . . . and [spoil] both them and their sheath by cutting the latter to pieces” in his anxiety (254). The physical and verbal behaviors that characterize the encounter to this point are highly and unavoidably emotional.

The moment Edward reveals that his brother, Robert Ferrars, has married Lucy, Elinor reacts with behaviors that are simultaneously great displays of emotion and complex attempts to evade it:

Elinor could sit no longer. She almost ran out of the room, and as soon as the door was closed, burst into tears of joy, which at first she thought would never cease. Edward, who had till then looked any where, rather than at her, saw her hurry away and perhaps saw—or even heard, her emotion, for immediately afterwards

he fell into a reverie, which no remarks, no inquiries, no affectionate address of Mrs. Dashwood could penetrate, and at last, without saying a word, quitted the room, and walked out towards the village. . . (Austen 254-55)

In Elinor's behaviors, overpowering emotion clashes with techniques for avoidance. Elinor's first impulse is to "almost [run] out of the room" and to withhold her "tears of joy" until "the door [is] closed behind her." In one sense, Elinor does avoid emotion in fending off her tears until she is out of the drawing room; however, in another, more pointed sense, the rushed and emotional nature of Elinor's exit is its own display of feeling. Moreover, Edward "perhaps [sees]—or even [hears] [Elinor's] emotion," and it causes him to retreat into a "reverie which no remarks, no inquiries, no affectionate address of Mrs. Dashwood could penetrate," and, eventually, to exit "without saying a word." Edward's unresponsiveness and unexplained, trance-like departure are different from Elinor's overemotional reaction, but are still definitive displays of the influence his feelings have on him in this moment. In this encounter, Elinor's dramatic reaction to her own feelings, even positive feelings, illustrates her aversion to emotional displays and emotional vulnerabilities of any sort.

In *Jane Austen: Women, Politics, and the Novel*, Johnson argues that "*Sense and Sensibility* . . . manifests everywhere [the concern] for the therapeutic care of the mind as it lives in time, buffeted by hope, fear, and disappointment" (64), and my analyses of the evasions of emotion that characterize Elinor's encounters in the novel support Johnson's point. These evasions function as filters of direct emotion that allow Elinor to defend herself, her face, and her feelings from the potential pain that encounters inherently bring. Moreover, these evasions also allow Elinor, from a protective orientation, to defend the

vulnerable Marianne in the same manner. The indirectness of the avoidance process and the behaviors it encourages preserve Elinor's mind from the "[buffeting]" to which Johnson refers, and the benefits of this indirectness enable Elinor to guard her sister as well, whether through additional implementations of the avoidance process or through control of an encounter with her lost lover.

Chapter II: Meta-Conversations in *Pride and Prejudice*

Near the beginning of *Pride and Prejudice*, while Elizabeth Bennet is at Netherfield Park nursing her ill sister, she is obliged to spend time with the then-loathed Fitzwilliam Darcy. While Caroline Bingley plays “a lively Scotch air” after dinner one evening, Darcy asks Elizabeth whether she feels “a great inclination . . . to seize such an opportunity of dancing a reel” (Austen 37). In response, Elizabeth “[smiles], but [makes] no answer,” and Darcy “[repeats] the question, with some surprise at her silence” (37). The encounter is characterized by Elizabeth’s physical behaviors in the previous moment as well as by her consequent verbal response:

“Oh!” said she, “I heard you before; but I could not immediately determine what to say in reply. You wanted me, I know, to say ‘Yes,’ that you might have the pleasure of despising my taste; but I always delight in overthrowing those kind of schemes, and cheating a person of their premeditated contempt. I have therefore made up my mind to tell you, that I do not want to dance a reel at all—and now despise me if you dare.” (37-38)

In order to remain in compliance with the conventions of the overarching social structure, Elizabeth cannot implement literally Goffman’s avoidance process in this encounter. While at Netherfield but not occupied with caring for Jane, Elizabeth is obligated to spend her evenings with the residents and other guests of the house, and this includes Darcy. Within the encounter, however, Elizabeth still uses methods for avoidance: a smile and an accompanying silence serve as means to avoid immediate and undesired engagement with Darcy, if only for a moment. When this technique fails and Darcy presses Elizabeth once more for an answer to his inquiry, she cannot ignore him without

causing an “incident,” or a notable loss of face for either or both of them (Goffman 17).

The encounter now forces Elizabeth both to be in company with Darcy and to answer his question, which is both significant and dangerous for her. Reflecting on her previous experience with Darcy at the ball at Meryton, at which Darcy rejects the simple notion of her as a suitable dance partner, Elizabeth fairly believes that Darcy, with “premeditated contempt,” suggests a dance now in order to mock her and her “taste.” To defend herself from that potential shame, Elizabeth begins to speak in meta-conversation.

Meta-conversation as means of simultaneous avoidance and defense characterizes several of Elizabeth’s encounters in *Pride and Prejudice*. In each of these encounters, Elizabeth is confronted with a potential loss of face during conversation, and she responds to that danger with deconstructions of the conversation itself, including the behaviors and logic used during it. This defensive orientation allows Elizabeth to distance the actual content of the conversation in which she is obliged to participate. In other words, through this pattern of behavior, Elizabeth avoids the very topic that threatens her. During these encounters, meta-conversation often functions within Goffman’s definition of the avoidance process, specifically with respect to a participant’s techniques for evasion when he or she cannot physically evade an encounter. In other encounters, however, Elizabeth’s use of meta-conversation fulfills elements of Goffman’s corrective process. Ultimately, meta-conversation functions as protection for Elizabeth’s social and emotional safety.

In her answer to Darcy, Elizabeth does not focus on her taste or distaste for Scottish reels, but rather proceeds to deconstruct and analyze Darcy’s own motivations for asking her of Scottish reels. Ultimately, when Elizabeth “[makes] up her mind” to

give Darcy an answer on her disinclination to dance, she does so in the context of her extensive examination of the question itself and the reasons it was asked, not as a response to the potential request to dance. Here, meta-conversation allows Elizabeth to anticipate and counter the malice she believes Darcy intends and thus to protect herself from it. The nature of her final remark, “despise me if you dare,” underscores her readiness to defend herself should Darcy pursue this threat to her face. When Darcy replies that “indeed [he] does not dare” to despise Elizabeth, his answer essentially serves as a verbal surrender (Austen 38). Thus in this encounter, meta-conversation allows Elizabeth to shift the entire trajectory of the conversation away from its potential threat to her. Moreover, meta-conversation functions as a means for Elizabeth to protect her feelings as well as her social status, and even to gain a certain conversational advantage over Darcy.

While each encounter between Elizabeth and Darcy contains layers of meaning, their dance at Netherfield later in the novel serves as one of their most valuable in terms of its characterization as meta-conversation. As James Thompson notes in “*Pride and Prejudice*, Goffman, and Strategic Interaction,” “the extraordinarily long and complex exchange that Elizabeth and Darcy have at the Netherfield Ball . . . exemplifies facework [sic], in that each speaker is both intensely self-conscious, and equally conscious of the effect his or her words have on the other” (109-110). In his analysis of this encounter, Thompson scrutinizes Elizabeth and Darcy’s behaviors during their dance with respect to their defiance of appropriate social conventions. In the analysis that follows, I draw on Thompson’s analyses of those behaviors and contribute to those conclusions when



relevant, but I focus particularly on the purpose and influences of meta-conversation in the encounter.

As Goffman notes in *Relations in Public*, a dance “begins at least a little before the dancing proper does and lasts at least a little longer than the music does” (qtd. in Thompson 110). As such and as Thompson fails to note, the encounter between Elizabeth and Darcy begins as Elizabeth “[finds] herself suddenly addressed by Mr. Darcy, who [takes] her so much by surprise in his application for her hand, that . . . she [accepts] him” (Austen 65). This achieved, Darcy, rather awkwardly, “[walks] away again immediately,” while Elizabeth “[frets] over her own want of presence of mind” (65). Although the shock he causes here seems to be unintentional, Darcy gains a certain advantage over Elizabeth, desired or otherwise, in inciting her uneasiness and self-doubt. Furthermore, when Darcy surprises Elizabeth with this request for a dance, he forces her “to be out of face,” or to respond without having adequate time to prepare herself (Goffman 8). As Elizabeth has been made to be both out of face and emotionally vulnerable, and as Darcy is the cause of both of these states, Elizabeth orients herself defensively when beginning the dance with Darcy; her determination to recover her face and to regain protection for her feelings and dignity influence her behaviors throughout the encounter, as shown through her use of meta-conversation.

As the narration shows, for Elizabeth, this encounter is immediately shaped by an internal resolution to disadvantage Darcy through strategic means:

They [Elizabeth and Darcy] stood for some time without speaking a word; and she began to imagine that their silence was to last through the two dances, and at first was resolved not to break it; till suddenly fancying that it would be the

greater punishment to her partner to oblige him to talk, she made some slight observation on the dance. He replied, and was again silent. After a pause of some minutes, she addressed him a second time with:—

“It is *your* turn to say something now, Mr. Darcy. *I* talked about the dance, and you ought to make some sort of remark on the size of the room, or the number of couples.”

He smiled, and assured her that whatever she wished him to say should be said.

“Very well.—That reply will do for the present.—Perhaps by and by I may observe that private balls are much pleasanter than public ones.—But *now* we may be silent.”

“Do you talk by rule, then, while you are dancing?”

“Sometimes. One must speak a little, you know. It would look odd to be entirely silent for half an hour together; and yet for the advantage of some, conversation ought to be so arranged, as that they may have the trouble of saying as little as possible.” (Austen 65-66)

The tension between the dancers grows in the silence until Elizabeth decides to punish Darcy by “[obliging] him to talk.” Here, Elizabeth’s use of small talk functions not as a move in Goffman’s avoidance process, but rather as one in his corrective process; as Elizabeth has been disadvantaged in the encounter, she now attempts to equalize herself and Darcy in losses of face by forcing Darcy into the uncomfortably vulnerable task of conversing with her. When her use of small talk to torment Darcy seems to be ineffective, however, Elizabeth shifts from unobtrusive chat about the dancing itself to critical meta-conversation on Darcy’s behaviors while dancing. This transition to meta-conversation

allows Elizabeth the power to guide the direction of the exchange, and the judgmental nature of her assessment of Darcy's behaviors enables her to regain a certain amount of face as a skilled participant in the encounter.

When Darcy responds to the meta-conversation by smiling and answering that "whatever [Elizabeth] [wishes] him to say should be said," the deference in his behaviors underscores his contribution to Elizabeth's regaining lost face, or his decision to orient himself protectively. Despite the triumph Darcy's answer allows her, Elizabeth remains in a meta-conversational mode through additional critique of the very response Darcy gives, commenting that his "reply will do for the present" but then declaring that "*now* [they] may be silent." Here, Elizabeth controls the trajectory of the meta-conversation while Darcy can only respond to her, and the agency in these conversational roles and statuses enables Elizabeth to protect herself from future attacks. Moreover, when her authority in the meta-conversation is threatened through Darcy's inquiry into whether she "[talks] by rule . . . while [she] [is] dancing," Elizabeth removes herself from her answer through her use of "one" rather than "I," and then follows this with a remark on the importance of "constructing conversation" for certain helpless partners, partners like Darcy, "as they may have the trouble of saying as little as possible." Here, avoidance removes any mention of Elizabeth from her response, and this allows her to protect herself from potential losses of face. Furthermore, her direction of the meta-conversation toward deft or absent social skills allows Elizabeth to emphasize her own abilities as a conversationalist while simultaneously mocking Darcy's.

Later in the dance, Elizabeth's control of the meta-conversation is threatened as Darcy begins to engage with Elizabeth in the technique:

Recovering himself, however, shortly, he [Darcy] turned to his partner, and said, "Sir William's interruption has made me forget what we were talking of."

"I do not think we were speaking at all. Sir William could not have interrupted two people in the room who had less to say for themselves.—We have tried two or three subjects already without success, and what we are to talk of next I cannot imagine."

"What think you of books?" said he, smiling.

"Books—Oh! no.—I am sure we never read the same, or not with the same feelings."

"I am sorry you think so; but if that be the case, there can at least be no want of subject.—We may compare our different opinions."

"No—I cannot talk of books in a ball-room; my head is always full of something else." (Austen 67)

Here, Darcy remarks on the "interruption" of his conversation with Elizabeth and seems to make "what [they] were talking of" the new topic of conversation. His efforts, however, are in vain. Elizabeth's responses are characterized by skillful meta-conversation, but Darcy's are not, and the nature and control of her response illustrate this. Elizabeth continues to meta-converse, but while doing so, she announces the futility of the effort; as she tells Darcy, there are not "two people in the room who [have] less to say for themselves" than she and Darcy do. In furthering the meta-conversation with an assessment of their previous discourse, Elizabeth is able to respond to Darcy in a manner that rejects his attempts to engage her through discussion of that discourse itself. The

futility of attempting to interact with Elizabeth through meta-conversation also emphasizes its function as a defensive technique in the encounter.

Attempting to avoid Elizabeth's criticisms of their encounter, Darcy abandons meta-conversation and tries to begin small talk about books; this, however, proves to be a mistake in terms of maintaining "ritual equilibrium," or the balance of face between participants in an encounter, between Elizabeth and Darcy (Goffman 19). While Darcy attempts to forgo meta-conversation, Elizabeth maintains it and thereby supports her defensive orientation. Even as Darcy strives to coax Elizabeth into the discussion of books, she remains steadfastly opposed to his efforts, using meta-conversation in insisting that she "cannot talk of books in a ball-room" when, in reality, she simply refuses to do as much. Here, Thompson views Elizabeth as "[going] on the attack . . . aggressively" and Darcy as "[attempting] to rescue the dance and the conversation with some frivolous content" (113). The broader pattern of meta-conversation in Elizabeth's encounters when she risks a loss of face shows that what Thompson calls an attack is, in fact, a technique for defense.

Eventually, the manipulations of the conversations and the implications Darcy suffers with respect to Elizabeth's assault on his character cause Darcy to respond "coldly" and briefly to Elizabeth, and lead them to "[go] down the other dance and [part] in silence" (Austen 68). Darcy and Elizabeth's eventual return to silence without a loss of face on Elizabeth's part shows the effectiveness of her defensive techniques, but it also shows a return to the avoidance process. Pleasant, non-confrontational engagement with Elizabeth in this encounter is impossible, and her defensive orientation toward Darcy ensures that he is unable to connect with her even through a conversational technique as

meaningless as small talk, during their dance. Therefore each successfully adopts silence to avoid further engagement.

Like her encounters with Darcy, Elizabeth's disastrous encounter with Mr. Collins as he proposes marriage is also characterized by meta-conversation.<sup>2</sup> Meta-conversation functions as a defensive technique for Elizabeth, and she views Mr. Collins's proposal as a matter against which she requires defense. Moreover, both Elizabeth's encounters with Darcy and this encounter with Mr. Collins involve potential losses of face. While Elizabeth fears only for her own face when she converses with Darcy, however, she seems to see threats for her face as well as for Mr. Collins's in this encounter; the differences between Elizabeth's encounters with Darcy and her encounter with Mr. Collins require her to alter her behaviors somewhat, but her use of meta-conversation remains critical and significant to the exchange.

As in her encounter with Darcy, Elizabeth is forced to begin this encounter out of face. Moreover, as in that encounter, Elizabeth attempts and fails to implement the avoidance process to evade a private encounter with Mr. Collins:

On finding Mrs. Bennet, Elizabeth, and one of the younger girls together, soon after breakfast, he [Mr. Collins] addressed the mother in these words,  
 "May I hope, madam [Mrs. Bennet], for your interest with your fair daughter Elizabeth, when I solicit for the honour of a private audience with her in the course of this morning?"

---

<sup>2</sup> Comparisons of Mr. Collins's and Darcy's proposals to Elizabeth are illuminating and useful for a variety of reasons. Unfortunately, time and space do not allow me to examine Darcy's proposal in this chapter, but Thompson provides a thoughtful reading of that proposal in his book; in future, that reading may be worth considering alongside my analysis here of Mr. Collins's proposal and Elizabeth's behaviors during it.

Before Elizabeth had time for anything but a blush of surprise, Mrs. Bennet answered instantly,

“Oh dear!—yes—certainly. I am sure Lizzy will be very happy—I am sure she can have no objection. Come, Kitty, I want you up stairs.” And, gathering her work together, she was hastening away, when Elizabeth called out,

“Dear madam, do not go. I beg you will not go. Mr. Collins must excuse me. He can have nothing to say to me that anybody need not hear. I am going away myself.”

“No, no, nonsense, Lizzy. I desire you to stay where you are.” And upon Elizabeth’s seeming really, with vexed and embarrassed looks, about to escape, she added: “Lizzy, I *insist* upon your staying and hearing Mr. Collins.”

Elizabeth would not oppose such an injunction . . . and . . . she sat down again, and tried to conceal by incessant employment the feelings which were divided between distress and diversion. Mrs. Bennet and Kitty walked off, and as soon as they were gone, Mr. Collins began. (Austen 75-76)

As when Darcy shocks Elizabeth with his request for a dance, so Mr. Collins shocks her with his request for “the honour of a private audience,” forcing Elizabeth to be out of face in the moment and affording Mr. Collins a certain amount of immediate power. While Darcy solicits his dance from Elizabeth herself, thus affording her the chance to answer for herself, Mr. Collins directs his inquiry to Mrs. Bennet rather than to Elizabeth. In addition to being out of face, Elizabeth is also disadvantaged as a result of Mr. Collins’s linguistic behavior. Though his request concerns Elizabeth, she is not its object and therefore cannot respond while remaining polite. Moreover, Mrs. Bennet’s five

enthusiastic and immediate assurances of the meeting between Mr. Collins and Elizabeth weaken her all the more, and incite the need for a defensive orientation and the consequent restoration and preservation of her face.

In order to allow her to reassemble her face and evade further harm to it, before the conversation with Mr. Collins begins, Elizabeth attempts to use the avoidance process. Rather than directly protest the audience with Mr. Collins, Elizabeth attempts to announce her own departure or, at least, to entice her mother to remain as a conversational deterrent or buffer. Elizabeth gives “vexed and embarrassed looks” and even makes an earnest attempt to flee and “escape” the encounter altogether. Through somatic and verbal expressions, Elizabeth tries to evade Mr. Collins. However, Mrs. Bennet’s vehement insistence that Elizabeth remain to speak with Mr. Collins and Elizabeth’s subsequent acceptance of this instruction show that the circumstances of the situation are too great to resist, and Elizabeth is forced to accept the encounter with Mr. Collins, albeit with a defensive orientation toward it.

Despite the absence of “feelings of diffidence to make [proposing] distressing to himself,” even Mr. Collins, if unwittingly, subjects himself to a potentially severe loss of face in deciding to propose, and this causes Elizabeth to adopt defensive as well as protective orientations during the encounter (Austen 75). As Goffman states, “refusal [of a proposal] on the part of the woman . . . is a serious reflection on the rejected suitor,” and, as a result, “refusing a proposal . . . is therefore a difficult operation” (qtd. in Thompson 116). As the rejection in the interaction is inevitable, the encounter becomes incredibly delicate and shows the use of Goffman’s corrective process for the preservations of faces.



When, in the midst of his babbling proposal, Elizabeth hears Mr. Collins utter the telling phrase “when we are married,” she shifts from determined silence—determined with respect to her restraint of her laughter—to responsive conversation (Austen 77). The encounter presents Elizabeth with a complex task: to minimize Mr. Collins’s loss of face, Elizabeth must reject him in a gentle manner and adopt a protective stance; but to address the fact that, as Claudia Johnson argues, “[Mr. Collins] expresses no wish to contribute to Elizabeth’s happiness but rather only a conviction that matrimony will add to his own” (82), Elizabeth must advocate for herself and adopt a defensive stance. With consideration for Mr. Collins’s inevitable loss of face, Elizabeth uses direct conversation in her response: “‘You are too hasty, Sir,’ she cried, ‘You forget that I have made no answer. Let me do it without farther loss of time. Accept my thanks for the compliment you are paying me. I am very sensible of the honour of your proposals, but it is impossible for me to do otherwise than decline them’” (77). Elizabeth acknowledges the topic of conversation, shows gratitude for Mr. Collins’s proposal, and declines said proposal with as much honor and politeness as possible.

When, time and again, Mr. Collins refuses Elizabeth’s clear rejections, the encounter shifts from conversation to meta-conversation:

. . . Rising . . . she [Elizabeth] would have quitted the room, had not Mr. Collins thus addressed her,

“When I do myself the honour of speaking to you next on this subject I shall hope to receive a more favourable answer than you have now given me . . . [A]nd perhaps you have even now said as much to encourage my suit as would be consistent with the true delicacy of the female character.”

“Really, Mr. Collins,” cried Elizabeth with some warmth, “you puzzle me exceedingly. If what I have hitherto said can appear to you in the form of encouragement, I know not how to express my refusal in such a way as may convince you of its being one.”

“You must give me leave to flatter myself, my dear cousin, that your refusal of my addresses are merely words of course. My reasons for believing it are briefly these . . . As I must therefore conclude that you are not serious in your rejection of me, I shall chuse to attribute it to your wish of increasing my love by suspense, according to the usual practice of elegant females.”

“I do assure you, Sir, that I have no pretension whatever to that kind of elegance which consists in tormenting a respectable man. . . . Can I speak plainer? Do not consider me now as an elegant female intending to plague you, but as a rational creature speaking to you from her heart.” (Austen 78-79)

At this point in the encounter, Elizabeth has done all she can both to save Mr. Collins’s face and to make him understand that she cannot accept his proposal; she has adopted a protective orientation in accordance with the social practice of preserving the faces of others. However, Mr. Collins persists in “wilful self-deception” with respect to Elizabeth’s rejections and refers to an invented social behavior in which women refuse their suitors only to tempt them further (79). In other words, Mr. Collins uses Elizabeth’s verbal responses as bases for believing that she plans to accept him at a later time.

The role of conversation in Mr. Collins’s delusion as well as Elizabeth’s own clear need for self-defense drive her to meta-conversation. Rather than continuing to address Mr. Collins’s proposal, Elizabeth reflects on the impossibility of her previous

rejections seeming to be “encouragement” and confesses her inability to “express [her] refusal in such a way as may convince [Mr. Collins] of its being one.” This shift from conversation to meta-conversation allows Elizabeth to gain a modicum of control in the encounter and to defend herself from being viewed as one of Mr. Collins’s “elegant females.” As long as Mr. Collins persists in believing Elizabeth insincere in her rejections, he is able to continue to project his own perceptions of her feelings onto her, leaving her vulnerable to his misbeliefs. Therefore, in order to protect herself and her face, Elizabeth is forced to transition from conversation to meta-conversation and to approach Mr. Collins’s argument from that perspective. It is interesting to note that while Mr. Collins seems to follow Elizabeth in meta-conversation, he continues to draw his evidence from behaviors that do not exist, and this underscores his inability to converse with Elizabeth in either conversation or meta-conversation.

Ultimately, meta-conversation is ineffective in convincing Mr. Collins that Elizabeth does not want to marry him. Meta-conversation does serve, however, as a means for Elizabeth to regain a sense of agency in an encounter that trivializes her feelings and wishes, and the failure of meta-conversation shows Elizabeth that she has little choice but to end the encounter entirely. When Mr. Collins cries that Elizabeth is “uniformly charming” in her meta-conversational rejection of him and his beliefs, Elizabeth “[makes] no reply, and immediately and in silence [withdraws]” from the parlor (Austen 79). Termination of the static encounter is the strongest method of personal protection available to Elizabeth in this moment.

In stark and meaningful contrast to her encounters with Darcy and Mr. Collins, Elizabeth’s final encounter with Lady Catherine de Bourgh presents one of the most

blatant and unapologetic threats to her face both in a conversation and in society within the novel. In response to Lady Catherine's intent to insult and demean her, Elizabeth adopts a defensive orientation in the encounter, and her uses of meta-conversation as means, by turns, to avoid and to punish Lady Catherine show Elizabeth's skill and determination in protecting herself from attacks on her emotions, status, and face.

As in past encounters, Elizabeth is out of face at the beginning of this encounter because Lady Catherine arrives at Longbourn unannounced and without immediate explanation. Once Elizabeth understands the reasons for Lady Catherine's presence at Longbourn, however, she gains power through her shift into meta-conversation and immediately begins to protect herself against the impending assault on her face and her feelings through her use of this defensive technique:

As soon as they entered the copse, Lady Catherine began in the following manner—

“You can be at no loss, Miss Bennet, to understand the reason of my journey hither. Your own heart, your own conscience, must tell you why I come.”

Elizabeth looked with unaffected astonishment.

“Indeed, you are mistaken, Madam. I have not been at all able to account for the honour of seeing you here.”

“Miss Bennet,” replied her ladyship, in an angry tone, “you ought to know, that I am not to be trifled with. . . . A report of a most alarming nature reached me two days ago. I was told, that not only your sister was on the point of being most advantageously married, but that you, that Miss Elizabeth Bennet, would, in all likelihood, be soon afterwards united to my nephew, my own nephew, Mr. Darcy.

Though I *know* it must be a scandalous falsehood, though I would not injure him so much as to suppose the truth of it possible, I instantly resolved on setting off for this place, that I might make my sentiments known to you.”

“If you believed it impossible to be true,” said Elizabeth, colouring with astonishment and disdain, “I wonder you took the trouble of coming so far. What could your ladyship propose by it?”

“At once to insist upon having such a report universally contradicted.”

“Your coming to Longbourn, to see me and my family,” said Elizabeth coolly, “will be rather a confirmation of it; if, indeed, such a report is in existence.”

“If! Do you then pretend to be ignorant of it? Has it not been industriously circulated by yourselves? Do you not know that such a report is spread abroad?”

“I never heard that it was.”

“And can you likewise declare, that there is no *foundation* for it?”

“I do not pretend to possess equal frankness with your ladyship. *You* may ask questions, which *I* shall not choose to answer.”

“This is not to be borne. Miss Bennet, I insist on being satisfied. Has he, has my nephew, made you an offer of marriage?”

“Your ladyship has declared it to be impossible.” (Austen 241-42)

Elizabeth gives a direct answer of “unaffected astonishment,” “I have not been at all able to account for the honour of seeing you here,” before she realizes that Lady Catherine is at Longbourn to ensure that Elizabeth and Darcy are not engaged. Once she sees these motivations and understands that the impending conversation will target her greatest vulnerability, or her feelings for Darcy, Elizabeth transitions swiftly from direct

conversation to meta-conversation. Rather than answer Lady Catherine's questions or render her invectives powerful by countering them, Elizabeth responds with assessments of the flaws in Lady Catherine's reason and the meanings of her behaviors both within and beyond the encounter. Elizabeth shows that Lady Catherine cannot claim Elizabeth's engagement to Darcy is "impossible" when Lady Catherine has "taken the trouble of coming so far" with the express purpose of ensuring that the engagement does not exist. Here, meta-conversation allows Elizabeth to evade discussion of her personal concerns, to defend herself from severe losses of face, and to gain substantial influence in the encounter. Meta-conversation and an inability to engage in it prevents Lady Catherine from receiving answers from Elizabeth, and this visibly frustrates Lady Catherine further which, in turn, illustrates Elizabeth's advantage.

Throughout the encounter, meta-conversation continues to function as an effective means for revealing and emphasizing the flaws in Lady Catherine's arguments or evading Lady Catherine's questions. Even when Lady Catherine attempts to use her status to exercise authority over Elizabeth in the conversation, Elizabeth is able to counter with meta-conversation. When Lady Catherine insists that, as Darcy's "nearest relation," she is "entitled to know all his dearest concerns," Elizabeth does not answer the question about the potential engagement but instead uses Lady Catherine's lacking logic to show that she is "not entitled to know *mine* [*Elizabeth's* concerns], nor will such behaviour as this, ever induce [her] to be explicit" (Austen 242). Elizabeth underscores the unreasonableness of Lady Catherine's demands, shames her for her behavior, and avoids answering her question with a single meta-conversational response.

Ultimately, the power of meta-conversation as a defensive technique during a real threat to both face and feeling is best illustrated through Elizabeth's final extensive response in the encounter. After deconstructing the irrationality of Lady Catherine's demand that Elizabeth promise never to become engaged to Darcy, Elizabeth returns to meta-conversation for her final insults to Lady Catherine's wanting conversational skills:

. . . . 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 illjudged. You have widely mistaken my character, if you think I can be worked on by such persuasions as these. How far your nephew might approve of your interference in his affairs, I cannot tell; but you have certainly no right to concern yourself in mine. I must beg, therefore, to be importuned no farther on the subject. (Austen 244)

Here, in stating that "the arguments with which [Lady Catherine] [has] supported this extraordinary application have been as frivolous as the application [is] illjudged," Elizabeth connects Lady Catherine's weak arguments to her complete lack of reason. Thus meta-conversation enables Elizabeth to link comments on conversation to severe deficiencies in the intellect of her abusive and forceful opponent. Elizabeth's last real remark on the matter as a whole is also interesting in terms of both word choice and connection to conversation. Elizabeth claims she "must beg, therefore, to be importuned no farther on the subject," but her use of the verb "beg" is a mere formality. Having dominated the encounter through her use of meta-conversation, Elizabeth now uses this final meta-conversational statement to prepare a foundation for implementing the avoidance process for the remainder of the encounter. Even as Lady Catherine "[talks] on

. . . till they [are] at the door of [her] carriage,” Elizabeth refuses to reengage on the topic of a potential marriage to Darcy, stating, in a paradoxically forward use of the avoidance process, that she “[has] nothing further to say” and that Lady Catherine “[knows] her sentiments” (244).

In her encounters with Darcy, Mr. Collins, and Lady Catherine, Elizabeth perceives or receives significant threats of losses of face, to her character, and her very self. In all of these encounters and despite their varied circumstances and participants, meta-conversation functions as a means for Elizabeth to avoid, defend, and even counter her opponents for the sake of self-protection. In each of these encounters, through the indirectness of meta-conversation, Elizabeth is able to repair losses of face, equalize conversations, and even, despite the odds, gain advantages against her fellow participant; in this manner, while meta-conversation functions primarily as a defensive filter against assault to emotion, it also serves as a method for gaining power against those who intend to assault.



Chapter III: Interpretations of Hints in *Persuasion*

Early in *Persuasion*, Captain Frederick Wentworth returns to Somerset County and, as a result, to the neighborhood and social circles of Anne Elliot and her family. As Anne ponders the ultimately inevitable encounter with her lost fiancé, she muses that “she would [like] to know how [Wentworth] felt as to a meeting” (Austen 42). Soon, Charles and Mary Musgrove attend a dinner at which Wentworth is present, and relate to Anne the nature of Wentworth’s plans for visiting them all at Uppercross; through this communication, Anne draws a conclusion about Wentworth’s feelings on meeting her:

. . . He [Wentworth] was coming the very next morning to shoot with Charles. He was to come to breakfast, not at the Cottage, though that had been proposed at first; but then he had been pressed to come to the Great House instead, and seemed afraid of being in Mrs. Charles Musgrove’s way, on account of the child; and therefore, somehow, they hardly knew how, it, ended in Charles’s being to meet him to breakfast at his father’s.

Anne understood it. He wished to avoid seeing her. He had enquired after her, she found, slightly, as might suit a former slight acquaintance, seeming to acknowledge such as she had acknowledged, actuated, perhaps, by the same view of escaping introduction when they were to meet. (43)

According to the confused relay of the conversation by Charles and Mary, Wentworth seems to have had the opportunity to breakfast at Uppercross Cottage, Anne’s current place of residence; however, either Wentworth proposes or—it is not clear—readily accepts a proposition to meet at Uppercross House rather than Cottage, and provides for himself an additional excuse to avoid the Cottage in invoking Mary’s injured child. Thus,

plainly, Wentworth agrees to breakfast at Uppercross House rather than Cottage and avoids seeing Anne in the process.

The language of “hint”, or “the language of innuendo, ambiguities, well-placed pauses, carefully worded jokes, and so on,” serves a critical function in this encounter and in Anne’s encounters throughout *Persuasion* (Goffman 30). In these encounters, information is relayed through the insinuations and hints of both verbal and non-verbal behaviors. Overhearing or hearing second-hand but not participating in a conversation between other parties, for instance, serves as a critical means of indirect verbal communication for Anne and others within these encounters. Similarly, the non-verbal behaviors that typify these encounters, the absences of explanations of such behaviors, and the interpretations such behaviors require by necessity also serve as indirect means of communication. While such behaviors protect Anne from potential losses of face before Wentworth, they also complicate the process of communicating meaning in the encounters.

Anne views Wentworth’s avoidance of the Cottage as intentional, or hinted, and this interpretation leads her to the conclusion that Wentworth “[wishes] to avoid seeing her.” The supposed manner of Wentworth’s inquiry about Anne as relayed by Charles and Mary serves as additional evidence. Wentworth’s apparent treatment of Anne as a “former slight acquaintance” is interpreted as another hint that he does not wish to meet, although, as Anne realizes, so too could her “escaping introduction when they were to meet” at the dinner earlier. Here, in addition to the function of hint, communications and behaviors are filtered through other characters, and conclusions are drawn with spoken transcripts of events functioning as certain pieces of evidence; consequently, these

conclusions influence future communications and behaviors, and actions or inactions during encounters are justified using assumptions as proof.

A miscommunication leads Anne and Wentworth into an encounter together later in *Persuasion*. This encounter provides Anne and Wentworth with the chance for direct verbal communication, but they cannot use it effectively:

One morning, very soon after the dinner at the Musgroves, at which Anne had not been present, Captain Wentworth walked into the drawing-room at the Cottage, where were only herself and the little invalid Charles, who was lying on the sofa. The surprise of finding himself almost alone with Anne Elliot, deprived his manners of their usual composure; he started, and could only say, "I thought the Miss Musgroves had been here—Mrs. Musgrove told me I should find them here," before he walked to the window to recollect himself and feel how he ought to behave.

"They are up stairs with my sister—they will be down in a few moments, I dare say,"—had been Anne's reply, in all the confusion that was natural; and if the child had not called her to come and do something for him, she would have been out of the room the next moment, and released Captain Wentworth as well as herself.

He continued at the window; and after calmly and politely saying, "I hope the little boy is better," was silent. (Austen 57)

The fact that Wentworth and Anne are "almost alone" in the room together seems to demand direct engagement, but the discomfort Wentworth displays "[deprives] his manners of their usual composure" and causes intense awkwardness. Wentworth's excuse

and his subsequent retreat “to the window to recollect himself and feel how he ought to behave” provide the opportunity for him to save, from the awkwardness of the encounter, both his face and Anne’s. That is, the directness that the encounter demands in this moment disorients and flusters Wentworth; both physically and verbally, he is unable to function directly with Anne, and he withdraws to the window to avoid facing or speaking with her more than he absolutely must.

Similarly, Anne “[is] obliged to kneel down by the sofa, and remain there to satisfy her patient; and thus they continued a few minutes” (Austen 57). Wentworth’s defensive behaviors function as hints to Anne to refrain from any attempts to interact directly with him. Indeed, Wentworth’s removal to the window and Anne’s attention to little Charles provide each character the excuse he or she needs to avoid directness in this encounter; Wentworth has the window to face, while Anne has the child to nurse. The addition of a new participant sparks fresh discomfort through the awkwardness of a direct encounter between himself and Wentworth:

... To her very great satisfaction, she [Anne] heard some other person crossing the little vestibule. She hoped, on turning her head, to see the master of the house; but it proved to be one much less calculated for making matters easy—Charles Hayter, probably not at all better pleased by the sight of Captain Wentworth, than Captain Wentworth had been by the sight of Anne.

She only attempted to say, “How do you do? Will you not sit down? The others will be here presently.”

Captain Wentworth, however, came from his window, apparently not ill-disposed for conversation; but Charles Hayter soon put an end to his attempts, by seating

himself near the table, and taking up the newspaper; and Captain Wentworth returned to his window. (57)

The entrance and behaviors of Charles Hayter, who believes Wentworth to be his rival for the affections of Henrietta Musgrove, reveal further aversions to direct communication in the encounter and complicate the avoidances of direct communication already in place. Originally, Wentworth turns to the window to avoid direct discussion or contact with Anne, but now, he turns from the window to engage Hayter and provide himself with relief for the discomfort he feels with respect to Anne's presence. Hayter, however, does not want to engage directly with Wentworth as Wentworth does not want to engage directly with Anne, and the newspaper functions as a hinting device for Hayter to avoid discussion or contact with Wentworth. Wentworth returns to the window, and Anne continues with little Charles; the encounter demands that all three characters have distractions or occupations to avoid directness with one another.

The entrance and behaviors of Walter Musgrove soon allow Anne and Wentworth to interact effectively and significantly in a non-verbal, indirect manner:

Another minute brought another addition. The younger boy, a remarkably stout, forward child, of two years old . . . made his determined appearance among them, and went straight to the sofa to see what was going on, and put his claim to any good thing that might be giving away.

There being nothing to eat, he could only have some play; and as his aunt would not let him tease his sick brother, he began to fasten himself upon her, as she knelt, in such a way that, busy as she was about Charles, she could not shake him off. She spoke to him—ordered, intreated, and insisted in vain. Once she did

contrive to push him away, but the boy had the greater pleasure in getting upon her back again directly.

“Walter,” said she, “get down this moment. You are extremely troublesome. I am very angry with you.

. . . But not a bit did Walter stir.

In another moment, however, she found herself in the state of being released from him; some one was taking him from her, though he had been bent down her head so much, that his little sturdy hands were unfastened from around her neck, and he was resolutely borne away, before she knew that Captain Wentworth had done it.

Her sensations on the discovery made her perfectly speechless. She could not even thank him. She could only hang over little Charles, with most disordered feelings. (Austen 57-58)

When Walter enters the room, climbs onto Anne, and refuses to climb off once more, an attempt to use direct verbal communication is made as Anne tries to free herself of the child; however, she “[orders], [intreats], and [insists] in vain,” which underscores the ineffectiveness of direct verbal communication even with a child in such encounters as these. Only physical action can free Anne of Walter, and Wentworth, who, moments earlier, was both unable and unwilling to engage in direct conversation with Anne, enacts the non-verbal behavior that aids her. Thus, this particular encounter is characterized not by direct verbal communication, but by unexplained—indeed, almost unacknowledged—non-verbal action and characters’ interpretations of such action.

When confronted with Wentworth’s action, Anne is “perfectly speechless” and “[cannot] even thank him”; her failure to construct a simple, direct verbal communication

further underscores its uselessness in these encounters. The nature of the encounter requires that Anne internally attempt to understand the meaning of Wentworth's behaviors. However, Anne struggles to derive definitive information and knowledge on Wentworth's feelings:

His kindness in stepping forward to her relief—the manner—the silence in which it had passed—the little particulars of the circumstance—with the conviction soon forced on her by the noise he was studiously making with the child, that he meant to avoid hearing her thanks, and rather sought to testify that conversation was the last of his wants, produced such a confusion of varying, but very painful agitation, as she could not recover from, till enabled by the entrance of Mary and the Miss Musgroves to make over her little patient to their cares, and leave the room. She could not stay. (Austen 58)

Wentworth's action is one of "kindness," but his "silence" in that moment as well as "the little particulars of the circumstance" and "the noise he [is] studiously making with the child" all complicate the meanings of his behaviors and Anne's ability to interpret them. To Anne, it seems that the noise of Wentworth's play with Walter is intended to "avoid hearing her thanks" and to hint that "conversation [is] the last of his wants"; the discomfort and avoidance of directness that characterized the encounter earlier complicate the meaning of Wentworth's non-verbal gesture of kindness now. Wentworth's conflicting behaviors fluster Anne so much that she must "leave the room" and, in later chapters, continue to attempt to interpret Wentworth's intentions and meanings. Ultimately, this encounter is characterized by both aversions to direct means of communication and reliance on indirect means.

Indirect communications, both verbal and non-verbal, are also critical to Anne and Wentworth's encounter at the concert in Bath; however, in this encounter, indirect communications are more effective in relaying meaning than in the last instance. Non-verbal physical behaviors and their meanings characterize the encounter from the outset; when Anne sees Wentworth walk into the concert, she "[makes] yet a little advance" toward him and "[brings] him out of the straight line to stand near her, and make enquiries" (Austen 128). Anne's movement forward functions as a hint to Wentworth and draws him closer to her, enabling them to exchange pleasantries and to begin talking.

Once Anne and Wentworth are speaking, non-verbal physical behaviors are exchanged for indirect verbal communications, and direct communication is avoided or, when it is invoked, corrected. When Wentworth begins to discuss and assess the engagement between Captain Benwick and Louisa Musgrove, to whom Wentworth himself had appeared to be attached earlier in the novel, he shifts from indirect, to direct, to indirect verbal communication once more as he converses:

" . . . With all my soul I wish them happy, and rejoice over every circumstance in favour of it. They have no difficulties to contend with at home, no opposition, no caprice, no delays.—The Musgroves are behaving like themselves, most honourably and kindly, only anxious with true parental hearts to promote their daughter's comfort. All this is much, very much in favour of their happiness; more than perhaps—"

He stopped. A sudden recollection seemed to occur, and to give him some taste of that emotion which was reddening Anne's cheeks and fixing her eyes on the ground.—After clearing his throat, however, he proceeded thus,



“I confess that I do think there is a disparity, too great a disparity, and in a point no less essential than mind.—I regard Louisa Musgrove as a very amiable, sweet-tempered girl, and not deficient in understanding; but Benwick is something more . . . and I confess that I do consider his attaching himself to her, with some surprise. . . . Fanny Harville was a very superior creature; and his attachment to her was indeed attachment. A man does not recover from such devotion of the heart to such a woman!—He ought not—he does not.” (Austen 128-29)

In the initial evaluation of the connection between Benwick and Louisa, Wentworth seems to shift from assessing their engagement to remembering his former engagement to Anne, and he begins to speak directly and aloud of that reflection before he interrupts himself. The influence of the potential direct verbal communication here is obvious; it incites a blush and an averted gaze in Anne, and a clearing of the throat in Wentworth as each flinches from the thought of open conversation on the matter. Instead, once again, directness is exchanged for indirectness; Wentworth remarks that Louisa is lacking in certain critical qualities and that true, passionate attachment, such as Benwick’s to his lost wife, is not easily overcome. Through the hints meanings in these comments, Wentworth shows that he does not retain affection for Louisa and that love, whether Benwick’s or his own, lasts far longer than is sometimes apparent. The effectiveness of the hint is immediately visible: Anne “[begins] to breathe very quick, and [to] feel an hundred things in a moment” even as she recognizes that “it [is] impossible for her to enter on such a subject” (129). The indirect meanings of Wentworth’s conversation and behaviors, “his choice of subjects, his expressions, and still more his manner and look,” act as proof to Anne that “he must love her” (131). In this way, hinted communication

reveals critical and accurate intelligence on the feelings of one conversational partner to another.

Soon after the end of this conversation, Anne and Wentworth are parted for the concert, but they continue to use non-verbal indirect communication at intermissions in the performance. During the first pause, Anne “[distinguishes] Captain Wentworth, standing among a cluster of men at a little distance,” and “as her eyes [fall] on him, his [seem] to be withdrawn from her” (Austen 133). Anne and Wentworth seek one another out through eye contact. This glance, however, leads Wentworth to notice Anne in conversation with Mr. William Elliot, and to change his behaviors toward her. When Anne, having shifted herself to the end of her bench in hopes of engaging Wentworth, does, at last, make eye contact with him once more, he is much colder than he had been in their earlier conversation:

Such was her situation [on the bench], with a vacant space [for a person to sit] at hand, when Captain Wentworth was again in sight. She saw him not far off. He saw her too; yet he looked grave, and seemed irresolute, and only by very slow degrees came at last near enough to speak to her. She felt that something must be the matter. The change was indubitable. The difference between his present air and what it had been in the octagon room was strikingly great.—Why was it? She thought of her father—of Lady Russell. Could there have been any unpleasant glances? (134)

As he had indicated his interest earlier, Wentworth now reveals his discontent using indirect methods: his countenance is “grave”; he hesitates to move toward Anne; and, when he does choose to engage Anne, he approaches her with obviously slow

movements. Moreover, as Anne had interpreted Wentworth's hints in their earlier conversation, so too does she recognize his dejection now. Instead of seeking a direct explanation from Wentworth for his abrupt change in mood, however, Anne instead inquires after Wentworth's feelings on the concert; Wentworth then "[confesses] that he should not be sorry when it [the concert] [is] over," Anne "[speaks] in defence of the performance . . . yet in allowance for his feelings," and soon, "[Wentworth's] countenance [improves]" and "he even [looks] down towards the bench, as if he [sees] a place on it well worth occupying" (134). The discussion of the concert functions as a filter for Anne and Wentworth to address and safely resolve Wentworth's sudden coldness toward Anne.

No sooner does Wentworth consider sitting with Anne than Elliot returns and interrupts the encounter; Elliot's interference forces a shift in the encounter:

. . . At that moment, a touch on her shoulder obliged Anne to turn round.—It came from Mr. Elliot. He begged her pardon, but she must be applied to, to explain Italian again. . . . Anne could not refuse; but never had she sacrificed to politeness with a more suffering spirit.

A few minutes, though as few as possible, were inevitably consumed, and when her own mistress again, when able to turn and look as she had done before, she found herself accosted by Captain Wentworth, in a reserved yet hurried sort of farewell. "He must wish her good night. He was going—he should get home as fast as he could."

"Is not this song worth staying for?" said Anne, suddenly struck by an idea which made her yet more anxious to be encouraging.

“No!” he replied impressively, “there is nothing worth my staying for;” and he was gone directly. (Austen 134)

Before Anne and Wentworth are interrupted, their encounter is characterized by pleasant indirect verbal communication that implies a mutual interest between them. Elliot’s interruption, however, causes Wentworth to rush to leave both the concert and Anne. Indeed, Wentworth “[accosts]” Anne in his haste to depart, and his farewell is “reserved yet hurried”; Wentworth’s instinct for avoidance here connects directly to Elliot’s interruption of the encounter, and Anne seems to realize this through her interpretation of these moments. However, the matter cannot be clarified with a direct verbal statement and a consequent potential risk of face. Instead, Anne instead asks Wentworth if “this song [is] worth staying for.” While, in this question, Anne directly asks Wentworth if the music cannot entice him to remain, she hintingly asks if she, Anne, cannot entice him to remain. Wentworth’s answer is also indirect; he declares that “there is nothing worth [his] staying for,” and nothing includes Anne herself.

After Wentworth departs, Anne assesses his behaviors and conversations for meaning, and draws a conclusion based on the implications she discovers:

Jealousy of Mr. Elliot! It was the only intelligible motive. Captain Wentworth jealous of her affection! Could she have believed it a week ago—three hours ago! For a moment the gratification was exquisite. But alas! there were very different thoughts to succeed. How was such jealousy to be quieted? How was the truth to reach him? How, in all the peculiar disadvantages of their respective situations, would he ever learn her real sentiments? It was misery to think of Mr. Elliot’s attentions.—Their evil was incalculable. (Austen 135)

Wentworth's indirect communications during their encounters allow Anne to discover that Wentworth is jealous of the connection he perceives, through his own assessment of Anne's indirect communications, between Anne and Elliot. "For a moment," Anne feels "exquisite . . . gratification," but less hopeful thoughts soon dawn on her, and her concerns revolve around the issue of the uses of direct and indirect communication within her encounters. Anne cannot see means for soothing Wentworth's jealousy and rekindling their love by revealing "her real sentiments" to him, and her inability to perceive or uncover such means stems from the dangers and failures of direct verbal communications with respect to information on emotion within these encounters.

Indirect communication characterizes Anne's encounters almost until the end of *Persuasion*, even as the use of direct communications appears increasingly more effective and practical. In their climactic encounter near the end of the novel, Anne and Wentworth reveal their feelings for one another through indirect communication: Anne through veiled, indirect conversation with another person and the chance that Wentworth will hear her, and Wentworth through the love letter he writes and indicates to Anne before fleeing the encounter altogether. While the indirectness of this encounter carries with it the risk of feelings left undiscovered, it shields both Anne and Wentworth from the pain of feelings unreturned and the losses of face that accompany such an occurrence. The confessional encounter begins when Anne and Wentworth meet at the White Hart, the Harvilles' residence in Bath:

When she [Anne] reached the White Hart, and made her way to the proper apartment, she found herself neither arriving quite in time, nor the first to arrive. . . . Two minutes after her entering the room, Captain Wentworth said,

“We will write the letter we were talking of, Harville, now, if you will give me the materials.”

Materials were all at hand, on a separate table; he went to it, and nearly turning his back on them all, was engrossed in his writing. (Austen 162)

Here, as in the encounter at Uppercross, Wentworth’s use of a non-verbal behavior seems to indicate that he does not wish to engage Anne. Wentworth’s removal from the conversations of those in the room is directly connected to Anne’s arrival there, and his positioning of his back to the group shows that he is “engrossed in his writing.”

While Anne sits in silence and Wentworth writes his letter, Mrs. Musgrove and Mrs. Croft discuss the disadvantages of prolonged engagements within earshot of both Anne and Wentworth:

. . . “Oh! dear Mrs. Croft,” cried Mrs. Musgrove, unable to let her finish her speech, “there is nothing I so abominate for young people as a long engagement. It is what I always protested against for my children. It is all very well, I used to say, for young people to be engaged, if there is a certainty of their being able to marry in six months, or even in twelve, but a long engagement!”

“Yes, dear ma’am,” said Mrs. Croft, “or an uncertain engagement; an engagement which may be long. To begin without knowing that at such a time there will be the means of marrying, I hold to be very unsafe and unwise, and what, I think, all parents should prevent as far as they can.”

Anne found an unexpected interest here. She felt its application to herself, felt it in a nervous thrill all over her, and at the same moment that her eyes instinctively glanced towards the distant table, Captain Wentworth’s pen ceased to move, his

head was raised, pausing, listening, and he turned round the next instant to give a look—one quick, conscious look at her. (Austen 163)

Here, the matter of conversation between two characters and the overhearing of that conversation by both Anne and Wentworth combine to create the foundation for a non-verbal communication between Anne and Wentworth. As Anne perceives the relevance of the discourse between Mrs. Musgrove and Mrs. Croft, she shifts her gaze toward Wentworth; similarly, as Wentworth perceives the same thing at the same moment, he stops writing and “[turns] round the next instant to give a look—one quick, conscious look at [Anne].” The deliberate eye contact in this instant in the encounter represents a concurrence of feeling, simultaneous recognitions of that feeling, and non-verbal acknowledgements of that feeling, as opposed to previous moments in past encounters that have been characterized by avoidance, misinterpretation, or interruption. Moreover, Anne and Wentworth’s eye contact here allows them to form an intimate, hidden connection that stands apart from the larger group of people in the room.

The indirect communications in this encounter intensify all the more as Anne moves closer to the table at which Wentworth writes and as she shifts from listener to participant in a significant conversation that he overhears. Captain Harville “[looks] at [Anne] with a smile, and a little motion of the head, which [expresses], ‘Come to me, I have something to say,’” and Anne crosses the room to “the window at which he [stands] . . . nearer to Captain Wentworth’s table” (Austen 164). Harville mentions Benwick and his lost first wife, Fanny; claims that Fanny “would not have forgotten him so soon”; and engages Anne in a debate over which gender loves longer, men or women. Anne argues that women love longer, while Harville argues that men do. During the discussion, Anne

becomes impassioned in one of her final rebuttals, and, although Anne does not then realize, Wentworth hears this:

“Your feelings may be the strongest,” replied Anne [to Harville], “but the same spirit of analogy will authorise me to assert that ours are the most tender. Man is more robust than woman, but he is not longer-lived; which exactly explains my view of the nature of their attachments. Nay, it would be too hard on you, if it were otherwise. . . . Neither time, nor health, nor life, to be called your own. It would be too hard indeed” (with a faltering voice) “if woman’s feelings were added to all of this.”

“We shall never agree upon this question”—Captain Harville was beginning to say, when a slight noise called their attention to Captain Wentworth’s hitherto perfectly quiet division of the room. It was nothing more than that his pen had fallen down, but Anne was startled at finding him nearer than she had supposed, and half inclined to suspect that the pen had only fallen, because he had been occupied by them, striving to catch sounds, which yet she did not think he could have caught. (165)

Anne delivers her opinion sans specifics from her experience, but she speaks plainly and directly to Harville about her belief that female feelings, that her own feelings, last longer than male ones. Despite her direction of her thoughts to Harville rather than Wentworth, and despite the absence of personal examples connecting her opinion to her own feelings, Anne’s speech here is as close to direct communication as she dares to give in this encounter. At this moment, the “slight noise” of Wentworth dropping his pen indicates, for Anne, that he has been “striving to catch sounds” of the conversation, but it is also



possible, particularly when considered in the context of his letter moments from this point, that Wentworth drops his pen with the shock he feels as he hears Anne speak. In either case, through this indirect communication between Anne and Wentworth, critical proof of Anne's lingering love for Wentworth is transferred from one to the other; Anne's conversation with Harville essentially functions as her confession of love to Wentworth.

Not long after the end of the conversation between Anne and Harville, Wentworth finishes his letter, and he and Harville prepare to leave. Wentworth does not depart, however, without a frenzied series of behaviors used to deliver his letter to Anne:

. . . Captain Wentworth, having sealed his letter with great rapidity, was indeed ready [to depart], and had even a hurried, agitated air, which shewed impatience to be gone. Anne knew not how to understand it. She had the kindest "Good morning, God bless you," from Captain Harville, but from him not one word, nor a look. He had passed out of the room without a look!

She had only time, however, to move closer to the table where he had been writing, when footsteps were heard returning; the door opened; it was himself. He begged their pardon, but he had forgotten his gloves, and instantly crossing the room to the writing table, and standing with his back towards Mrs. Musgrove, he drew out a letter from under the scattered paper, placed it before Anne with eyes of glowing entreaty fixed on her for a moment, and hastily collecting his gloves, was again out of the room, almost before Mrs. Musgrove was aware of his being in it—the work of an instant! (Austen 167)

At first, Wentworth's "hurried, agitated air," his inattention to a farewell of any kind to Anne, and his abrupt exit seem to reflect his earliest indirect communications, which, at

the time, were used to avoid Anne. Now, however, Wentworth's series of non-verbal communications upon his quick return illustrate an uplifting and a distinguishing of Anne. Wentworth uses his body to block the rest of the room from Anne and himself, and creates an intimate, if fleeting, space in the process; Wentworth also reveals his letter to Anne with "eyes of glowing entreated fixed on her" before he leaves once more. In this instant, neither Wentworth nor Anne speaks either directly or indirectly, but the encounter is charged with the meanings of his non-verbal communications, and this charge allows Anne to comprehend the significance of the letter even before she reads it.

Like Anne's conversation with Harville, the letter itself is the most direct form of communication Wentworth allows himself when interacting with Anne, and, like Anne's conversation with Harville, the letter is still indirect in means, if not in content. Critic John Pikoulis examines these means in his article "Reading and Writing in *Persuasion*," asking, "But why write? Why does Wentworth not speak to Anne, if not now then later?" (35). Pikoulis soon answers his own question, claiming that the letter "represents, in essence, a miniature epistolary novel in which the act of letter writing is converted into a symbol of creativity" (35). While Pikoulis may be correct in his view of Wentworth's letter as a symbol of creativity, it is also clear from the examinations of these encounters that Wentworth is unwilling or unable to his feelings for Anne with verbal directness. Wentworth writes a letter to avoid the directness of an encounter without weakening his sentiments. Furthermore, the content of the letter itself underscores all the more the role of indirect communication in Wentworth's encounters with Anne; he writes that he "must speak to [Anne] by such means as are within his reach," and throughout *Persuasion* these means are coded or overheard conversations, non-verbal behaviors, and other such

indirect methods and hints (Austen 167). Indeed, in his letter alone, Wentworth acknowledges the value of indirect communication: he shows that he has overheard Anne's conversation with Harville; that he has expected Anne to interpret his behaviors and understand his desires as a result; and that one "word" or "look" will deliver all the information he needs to comprehend her feelings for him (168).

Perhaps the most significant indication of the value of indirect communication in these encounters, however, is the complete absence in the text of the direct conversation that, presumably, Anne and Wentworth have after she reads his letter and finds him while she walks home. Rather than relate the details of this conversation, Austen only describes it, stating that "they [exchange] again those feelings and those promises which had once before seemed to secure every thing, but which had been followed by so many, many years of division and estrangement" (170). Contrasted with the intense emotional details and relations of the indirectly communicative encounters throughout the novel, this anticipated direct conversation seems insignificant, and the form in which it is presented emphasizes this. At this point in the novel, Anne and Wentworth have each been assured of the other's mutual feelings through the indirect communicativeness of their encounters, and, therefore, there is little risk or interest in the conversation between them and left unheard by readers. Ultimately, the indirectness that characterizes these encounters allows Anne and Wentworth to uncover again their love for one another in, if not a quick, than an emotionally and socially safe manner. Thus, the indirectness that characterizes Anne's encounters with Wentworth is critically important as well as deeply meaningful.

## Conclusion

Throughout *Jane Austen: Women, Politics, and the Novel*, Claudia Johnson examines the moments in Austen's novels in which women defy the conventions imposed upon their gender. In her discussion of the specific behaviors of these female characters, Johnson argues that "in Austen's novels . . . as in most others, women simply do not have 'the advantage of choice'":

They [the women in Austen's novels] can only wait for proposals. They can scrutinize their suitors' gestures, review their every word, differentiate acts of civility from acts of particular affection, and form all manner of conjectures about the likelihood of receiving proposals. But finally they can only wait. As bold as they are in every other respect, even Emma and Elizabeth Bennet can only wait. And of course waiting is practically all that Fanny Price and Anne Elliot ever do. Because their passivity makes them more vulnerable to the anxieties of hope and disappointment, women must be careful not to dream too much too soon. (59; 59)

Johnson contends that the behaviors of the women in Austen's novels are characterized by "passivity." As evidence, Johnson claims that interpretations of gestures and language are only means of passing time for Austen's women while "they . . . wait for proposals." While Johnson acknowledges the differences in the behaviors of Elizabeth and Anne, for instance, she ultimately seems to state that waiting is the central occupation of all women in Austen novels.

As I have shown in this thesis, the sorts of behaviors that Johnson describes here are neither so passive nor so meaningless as to constitute little more than "waiting." Interpretations of gestures, examinations of language, and other such patterns of behavior

may not be direct, but this does not mean that such patterns are uninfluential or lacking in agency. Indeed, evasions, meta-conversations, hints, and the other nuanced means of indirect communication in Austen's novels are critically important to the social encounters scrutinized in this thesis and, I suggest, to social encounters omitted from this thesis. Furthermore, these filters against directness provide the sort of protection from overpowering emotion that Johnson sees is necessary when she mentions the "the anxieties of hope and disappointment" women in Austen endure.

Ultimately, like Johnson, I want to interpret and scrutinize Austen and her female characters in a manner that empowers them, and, again like Johnson, I recognize that this is often a difficult task. My analyses of the behaviors of Austen's heroines, however, present fresh motivations, freedoms, and depths for these characters that stand in stark contrast to the limits and restrictions Johnson sees for these women. Reading the behaviors of Elinor Dashwood, Elizabeth Bennet, and Anne Elliot not as waiting but as observing, evaluating, and responding emphasizes the intelligence and agency that have been in these characters all along, even in a social system that constricts and disempowers them. Indeed, the indirect communications that Austen's heroines use are their means of acting with agency in such a system, and the very indirectness of their communications allows them the freedom to gain emotional protection.

## Works Cited

- Austen, Jane. *Persuasion*. Edited by Patricia Meyer Spacks, W. W. Norton, 2013.
- . *Pride and Prejudice*. Edited by Donald Gray and Mary A. Favret, W. W. Norton, 2016.
- . *Sense and Sensibility*. Edited by Claudia L. Johnson, W. W. Norton, 2002.
- Brontë, Charlotte. *The Letters of Charlotte Brontë: With a Selection of Letters by Family and Friends, Volume II: 1848-1851*. Edited by Margaret Smith, Oxford UP, 2000.
- Goffman, Erving. *Interaction Ritual: Essays in Face to Face Behavior*. Transaction Publishers, 1967.
- Johnson, Claudia. *Jane Austen: Women, Politics, and the Novel*. Chicago UP, 1988.
- Morini, Massimiliano. *Jane Austen's Narrative Techniques: A Stylistic and Pragmatic Analysis*. Ashgate, 2009.
- Pikoulis, John. "Reading and Writing in *Persuasion*." *The Modern Language Review*, vol. 100, no. 1, 2005, pp. 20-36, [www.jstor.org/stable/3738052](http://www.jstor.org/stable/3738052). Accessed 15 Apr. 2017.
- Tandon, Bharat. *Jane Austen and the Morality of Conversation*. Anthem Press, 2003.
- Tanner, Tony. "Knowledge and Opinion: *Pride and Prejudice*." *Jane Austen: Bloom's Modern Critical Views*, edited by Harold Bloom, Chelsea House Publishers, 2004, pp. 123-156.
- Thompson, James. *Jane Austen and Modernization*. Palgrave Macmillan, 2015.