



“The Whinnying of Harpies?": Humor in Jane Austen's Letters

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THE LETTERS THAT JANE AUSTEN INCLUDED in the novels are endlessly fascinating, from Darcy's explanation to Elizabeth to the splendid whining letter from Mary Musgrove to her sister Anne at Bath, the one in which she claims that “my sore-throats, you know, are always worse than anybody's” (*P* 164). On a number of occasions, JASNA has called for members to submit letters from the characters—and in doing so we are almost following in the footsteps of Austen's own niece Fanny Knight, who apparently wrote a letter to Jane Austen as though addressed to Georgiana Darcy, hoping to elicit a reply in character. Austen replied, “I cannot pretend to answer it. Even had I more time, I should not feel at all sure of the sort of Letter that Miss D. [arcy] would write” (24 May 1813).¹ We are all as readers, I think, a little overcome when Austen herself tells Fanny that she doesn't know what Georgiana would write. How can we possibly understand that statement? How can Austen not know?—she who gives the impression of knowing everything about her characters though telling us at best only half, she who makes us feel as though we know her characters intimately, more so than some of our acquaintances. If it is a joke, it eludes us.²

This moment of bafflement reading Jane Austen's *actual* letters reminds us of their frequent incomprehensibility to us, especially, I would argue, in their humor. I hope to make more legible, ultimately more pleasurable, some of the elliptical humor that can baffle so many of us so much. I would like to

unpack the humor in the letters as a way of trying to get at what it would be like to think like Austen—which means also, I think, to appreciate some of the humor in the novels better: their focus on our comical irrationalities, on our love of grievances and quarrels, our wish to depreciate others. And one way to do that is to look first at those who do not think as she does, who don't get some of the humor in the letters—particularly E. M. Forster, whose phrase “whinnying of harpies” I've used in my title. Forster offers us in this phrase the most famous uncomprehending disparagement of Austen's letters. Here it is in context:

her lapses of taste over carnality can be deplorable, no doubt because they arise from lack of feeling. She can write, for instance, and write it as a jolly joke, that “Mrs Hall of Sherborne was brought to bed yesterday of a dead child, some weeks before she expected, ow[e]ing to a fright. I suppose she happened unawares to look at her husband” [27 October 1798]. Did Cassandra laugh? Probably, but all that we catch at this distance is the whinnying of harpies. (184)

In hearing the whinnying of harpies, Forster alludes to mythological creatures originally described as powerful daughters of gods, personifying the “demonic force of storms” according to the *Oxford Classical Dictionary* (1996). In some early representations they are shown as beautiful winged women who act out the god Zeus's vengeance on the Thracian king Phineus by snatching his food. In later traditions, however, they became winged monsters, “said to have been feathered, with cocks' heads, wings, and human arms, with great claws; breasts, bellies, and female parts human” according to a second-century source.³ Thus harpies morphed from “natural forces”⁴ who served the gods' vengeance by taking food treats away from a king to monsters who fouled the food they left behind—thus depicted in Virgil's *Aeneid*: “Bird-bodied, girl-faced things they are; abominable their droppings, their hands are talons, their faces haggard with hunger insatiable.”⁵ That is, their monstrous female bodies—ugly, winged, taloned—became associated not just with deprivation but with excrement. Escalating fear of the female body could hardly be more perfectly summarized by any myth. In some versions, the harpies or their offspring give birth to horses, which perhaps inspired Forster to add a further monstrosity to his account—whinnying. This action makes harpies horse-like and may comprise an allusion to the uncontrolled sexuality often associated with horses.

I would argue that a main reason that Forster cannot appreciate Aus-

ten's humor here is that it is wholly comfortable with jokes about the body. Her comedy in the letters treats irreverently many topics that Forster, a rebellious Victorian but still a Victorian, held sacred. Motherhood is the most obvious. David Cecil pointed out years ago how far Austen's morality is from Victorian prudery: "she lived in a more outspoken age" than Forster did, according to Cecil (117), and we all can be grateful. Anyone who has read Forster's novels knows that Forster makes the birth of a child almost sacramental, worshipful—think of the babies in *Where Angels Fear to Tread* or in *Howards End*. So no wonder he hears the whinnying of harpies in Austen's very carnal, very irreverent line about a woman who has miscarried. The humor arises centrally, I think, from one word, "unawares": without it "I suppose she happened to look at her husband" would not be so funny. "Unawares" yokes the mind to the body. It implies—comically—that in this case the female body can be unsettled by the female mind's contemplation of the male body without adequate preparation. Sightings have to be fully conscious not to be frightful. Since wives can unfortunately scarcely avoid looking at husbands, particularly if they are to produce children, Austen's sentence implies that conception is only possible for the female body if the female mind is shrouded in darkness. It's hard, unpacking the word "unawares," not to conjure years of Mrs. Hall's summoning full consciousness, complete stolid preparation, for any glimpse of the conjugal body—so that at one careless, unprepared look all the hard, dark work of fertility is undone.

It may seem extreme to get so much out of a single word, and of course it's not just "unawares" that does the job. The calmly casual "I suppose," the light "happened," the juxtaposition of "fright" at the end of one sentence with "husband" at the end of the next, all have their comic effect. And it's not only Forster who either doesn't get the joke or rejects it. The devoted Austen scholar R. W. Chapman bemusedly wrote that although surely the remark on Mrs. Hall's miscarriage is "ribaldry," is even "heartless," something that the older "Miss Jane Austen of Chawton would not have allowed herself to be amused by" (he is definitely wrong here), nevertheless when he presented the sentence to "an audience of young women" he found it "received, not with the pained silence I was prepared for, but with a shout of merriment" (106-07). What we have here is a classic example of how comic aggression works. If it attacks your own group, the one you identify yourself with, it's not funny—as Chapman felt and as Forster did as well, despite his otherwise exemplary sense of humor. Forster's allegiance to other men trumped his sexual identity here, outweighed his lack of allegiance to heterosexuality—hence his out-

raged reaction. On the other hand, if a joke attacks those who are not in your group, especially if they have power over you, then it is funny—as the young women felt. That’s why there can be no such thing as a universal joke—to someone, always, a joke’s aggression will not be funny. A non-Austen example will illustrate the point: a woman friend of mine saw a number of copies of a joke at a table. The joke was: “If a man speaks in a forest and there’s no woman to hear him, is he still wrong?” My friend laughed. The woman behind the table said, okay, you laughed, you can take a copy. She added, no man has ever taken one because no man has ever laughed. Again, there are no universal jokes.

To return to Austen: whether or not we find her joke about Mr. and Mrs. Hall funny, we can agree that Austen packs the word “unawares” with significance. It can be harder for some people, however, to accept that Jane Austen is so frank, so comfortable in this instance with the connection between the mind and body, so easy about sexuality and birth and death that she can joke about them, apparently offhand. Virginia Woolf, noticing the letters’ frankness, at first thought that they would reveal “why she failed to be much better than she was. Something to do with sex, I expect; the letters are full of hints already that she suppressed half of her in her novels—Now why? But I’ve only read 30 pages [of the letters].” That is, she found the letters more sexually candid than the novels, and according to a later comment, she apparently allowed this candor to revise her opinion of sex in the novels: she said that she had “often thought of writing an article on the coarseness of J.A. The people who talk of her as if she were a niminy priminy spinster always annoy me” (qtd. Southam 118). It is a loss to us that she never wrote the article, one that would have shown Austen herself to be carnal and sexual, just as some of the more recent work on Austen’s novels does—finding open bawdiness in the ha-ha into which Fanny fears Maria Rushworth will slip or in Mary Crawford’s pun on rears and vices in the Navy.⁶ Whether or not we accept these as bawdy allusions, I actually don’t think we need them to read the novels as focused on carnality. In the first essay I published on Austen, I contended that every page is full of sex as long as you don’t confine expression of sexuality to what we do and feel in bed, as long as you see sexual activity as it operates in public, in the verbal and physical maneuvers of social life, that is, in sexual attraction, flirtation, infatuation, and love.⁷

For me, then, the comedy of the Mrs. Hall remark gives us at least one important idea about how it would be to think like Jane Austen—apart from making us recognize, as ever, her complete mastery of language: we see that

her mind has an amused, easy relation to the complex interconnections between the mind and the body and to the indignities of sexuality. I'll review some of her more well-known remarks in the letters along these lines:

"I am proud to say that I have a very good eye at an Adultrous, for tho' repeatedly assured that another in the same party was the *She*, I fixed upon the right one from the first. . . . she was highly rouged, & looked rather quietly and contentedly silly than anything else" (12 May 1801). Notice Austen's sly dig at gossip, the way everyone is focused on the lady and everyone is wrong, pretending to know her when they do not. At the same ball, Austen enjoys the sight of a wife running "round the room after her drunken Husband.—His avoidance, & her pursuit, with the probable intoxication of both, was an amusing scene."

On arriving in London: "Here I am once more in this Scene of Dissipation & vice, and I begin already to find my Morals corrupted" (23 August 1796); and later, from London again, saying that if no one takes her home, "I should inevitably fall a Sacrifice to the arts of some fat Woman who would make me drunk with Small Beer" (18 September 1796). Austen alludes here to the conventional cautionary tale of young naive women seduced into prostitution by bawds wielding liquor. And in that same letter we have one of her more delightful references to the conditions and demands of the body: "What dreadful Hot weather we have! It keeps one in a continual state of Inelegance."

Mrs. Knight, Austen's good friend who is widowed, about 48, and also Edward's benefactor, has been sick but is now recovered; Austen writes: "I cannot think so ill of her however inspite of your insinuations as to suspect her of having lain-in. I do not think she would be betrayed beyond an *Accident* at the utmost" (22 January 1801). Austen jokes by projecting scandalous gossip onto Cassandra and then by making herself the even worse gossipier—for an "Accident" after all is another miscarriage joke. It claims a false distinction between the scandal of giving birth to an illegitimate child and the scandal of losing it—and in a sense, gossip about a miscarriage is worse: after all, how could it be disproved?

On a musical performance of Don Juan: "I must say that I have seen nobody on the stage that has been a more interesting Character than that compound of Cruelty & Lust" (16 September 1813).

When a new laundress is required: "John Steevens' wife undertakes our Purification; She does not look as if anything she touched would ever be clean, but who knows?" (27 October 1798); "Purification" implies all kinds of bodily fluids and functions, and the joke lies in not being able to purify any of them.

Earle Harwood, a neighbor's son, marries a young woman of bad reputation: "Earle & his wife live in the most private manner imaginable at Portsmouth, without keeping a servant of any kind.—What a prodigious innate love of virtue she must have, to marry under such circumstances!" (27 October 1798). The word "prodigious" wonderfully implies that anyone who prefers household chores to being kept as a prostitute is indeed a prodigy. A year later, Austen writes to Cassandra, "I cannot help thinking from your account of Mrs E[arle] H[arwood] that Earle's vanity has tempted him to invent the account of her former way of Life, that his triumph in securing her might be greater;—I dare say she was nothing but an innocent Country Girl in fact" (19 June 1799). The ironic notion that Earle boasted of marrying a fallen woman to bolster his own ego undercuts with splendid worldliness her culture's heavy emphasis on female chastity.

My favorite example of Austen's comfort with the carnal, however, lies in her comment to Cassandra about a visit to a fashionable ladies' boarding school in London: "It was full of all the modern Elegancies—& if it had not been for some naked Cupids over the Mantlepeice, which must be a fine study for Girls, one should never have Smelt Instruction" (20 May 1813). The words "study," "naked," and capitalized "Smelt" combine to pack this sentence with comedy. The explicit contrast between modern vacuous but elegant education and the nakedness of the cupids is perfect, and Austen shows her ease both with the body and with young girls' intense curiosity about male bodies with the wonderful word "Smelt": though it ostensibly refers to a visitor's being unable to detect anything like instruction in the schoolroom apart from the cupids, "Smelt" carries over to the girls' own bodies and their eager response to the male genitalia before them—as if they are sticking their noses right in there.

Austen's ease with the body can become impatience when motherhood is the topic, as many letters witness: she goes from joking about failed fertility in Mrs. Hall to outright desiring fewer pregnancies as she sees huge families multiply around her and loses two sisters-in-law to childbirth—Edward's wife Elizabeth in 1808 after the birth of her eleventh child in not quite seventeen years of marriage, and Fanny Palmer, her brother Charles's wife who married at seventeen and died before twenty-five, after giving birth to her fourth child. Austen's comments are initially funny on the topic: she wrote of Henry's partner's wife, Mrs. Tilson, "poor Woman! how can she be honestly breeding again?" (1 October 1808)—that is, Mrs. Tilson was pregnant with an eighth child in eleven years. Worse, Edward's sister-in-law Mrs.

Deedes had an eighteenth child in twenty-six years of marriage; she was about forty-five years old at the time. Austen wrote, “I wd recommend to her & Mr D[eedes] the simple regimen of separate rooms” (20 February 1817). That comment appeared in a letter to Fanny Knight during the last months of Austen’s life: at this time, she begins to express anger, not humor, at the costs to women of multiple pregnancies, in part because her niece Anna Austen Lefroy seemed to be pregnant with a third child after less than two and a half years of marriage. She wrote to Fanny: “[B]y not beginning the business of Mothering quite so early in life, you will be young in Constitution, spirits, figure & countenance, while Mrs Wm Hammond is growing old by confinements & nursing” (13 March 1817); “Anna has not a chance of escape . . . Poor Animal, she will be worn out before she is thirty.—I am very sorry for her.—Mrs Clement too is in that way again. I am quite tired of so many Children. Mrs Benn has a 13th” (23–25 March 1817).

“Poor Animal”—carnality can not go much farther.

But to return to humor in the letters—what else can it tell us about Austen’s thinking? It can only tell us anything when we unpack it, as with the words “unawares,” “Purification,” “Smelt,” or “Animal.” The humor and irony of the letters to Cassandra are especially elliptical, as many commentators have said. Austen never has to spell anything out to Cassandra; she condenses. We can see this minimalism whenever she tells the same story to Cassandra and to another family member. A good example occurs when she writes that her brother Henry heard a woman warmly praise *Pride and Prejudice* and promptly revealed his sister’s authorship. To Cassandra, Austen says merely, “He told her with as much satisfaction as if it were my wish” (15 September 1813). With great economy, this complex sentence balances Henry’s pride in his brilliant sister (and also in his privileged knowledge) with his disregard of her desire for anonymity: his affectionate vanity is set against her wishes. She needs to say no more—Cassandra will understand her affection for Henry, her recognition of his selfishness, and her embarrassed sense of exposure.

To her brother Frank and his wife, however, Austen is much more discursive, and if we were at all in the dark about her feelings, she reveals them clearly. She writes, “what does he do in the warmth of his Brotherly vanity & Love, but immediately tell them who wrote it!—A Thing once set going in that way—one knows how it spreads!—and he, dear Creature, has set it going so much more than once. I know it is all done from affection & partiality—but at the same time, let me here again express to you & Mary my sense of the *superior* kindness which you have shewn on the occasion, in doing what

I wished" (25 September 1813), that is, by not revealing her authorship. Here, Austen clearly cites Henry's vanity and love, his affection and partiality (by which she means his favorable judgment of her work), contrasting that behavior with the more thoughtful, the much greater kindness of Frank and Mary in heeding her wishes. Yet Austen also calls Henry a "dear Creature," reminding them all that she loves him no matter what. She goes on, however, showing how much her anonymity meant to her: "—I am trying to harden myself.—After all, what a trifle it is in all its Bearings, to the really important points of one's existence even in this World!" That is, by mentioning this world, she evokes the next, requiring almost religious consolation as a way to lessen her chagrin at being a known author. She has to say none of this to Cassandra. Cassandra will read between the lines and know her unhappiness as well as her self-criticism and excuses for Henry, her disappointment as well as her love.

Here, for once, Austen has herself unpacked one of her own ironic sentences, taking one hundred fourteen words to express to Frank what she said in thirteen to Cassandra. I'd like to unpack some more segments of the letters (on some of my favorite topics), but now with the goal of comparing them to phrases in the novels. I hope to show that nothing is more compact than an Austen sentence in the novels—except, sometimes, an Austen sentence in the letters. For instance, we love the sentences in *Emma* about Mrs. Churchill's death: "Goldsmith tells us, that when lovely woman stoops to folly, she has nothing to do but to die; and when she stoops to be disagreeable, it is equally to be recommended as a clearer of ill-fame. Mrs. Churchill, after being disliked at least twenty-five years, was now spoken of with compassionate allowances" (387). Austen's allusion to Oliver Goldsmith's silly song about woman's powerlessness when she no longer meets patriarchal standards of chastity ("When lovely woman stoops to folly, / And finds too late that men betray" [133]) points out that all a seduced woman can do to get back at a man is to die, in which case he *might* repent. The matriarch Mrs. Churchill's death mocks the real powerlessness both of Highbury society's twenty-five years of ineffectual badmouthing gossip and of its equally ineffectual conventional fear of dispraising the dead: Mrs. Churchill has had the real power, Highbury (whether blaming or producing "compassionate allowances") has none. Beautifully done, but I like even better the sentences about the death of a haberdasher in Basingstoke. Austen writes, "The Neighbourhood have quite recovered the death of Mrs Rider—so much so, that I think they are rather rejoiced at it now; her Things were so very dear!—& Mrs Rogers is to be all

that is desirable. Not even Death itself can fix the friendship of the World" (22 January 1801). Austen skewers the fake mourning of the community, its quick transition to blaming the departed for her expensive goods, and its comfortable expectation that her successor will be an improvement. She then moves to the ironic generalization about fixing the friendship of the world through death. That wonderfully economical line strips away successive layers of hypocritical sentiment: ideas that the dead have any benefit from our friendship; that our friendship to the dead is ever stable or loyal enough to rise above considerations of money; that our opinions make up the world.

Or, one more example from *Emma*: consider the character of Mrs. Elton, her pride in her marriage and in her wedding finery, her pretenses of simplicity, her hypocrisies, all superbly rendered, and I could not bear to lose a single word. But consider the few short sentences in which the letters conjure and dismiss a similar character: "What an alarming Bride Mrs Coln Tilson must have been! Such a parade is one of the most immodest peices of Modesty that one can imagine. To *attract* notice could have been her only wish.—It augurs ill for his family—it announces not *great* sense, & therefore ensures boundless Influence" (18 January 1809), and indeed Mrs. Elton's influence over Mr. Elton is boundless.

The sentences I want to look at from the letters and the novels are those that allow Austen to treat humorously one of my favorite subjects, whining, and another, depreciating. I will contend that in her letters she can sometimes treat those topics even more comically and more complexly than in the novels. Now, of course Austen's treatment of a character like Mary Musgrove is brilliant: Mary is always whining about not getting enough attention, about not getting the best position, about having the worst sore throats in the universe, about being uniquely ill-used in general. I would contend, however, that Austen can be even more comical and complex in the letters than she can with Mary for two reasons. First, she has the perfect audience in Cassandra, to whom she can drastically condense her jokes. Second, she can set herself up in the letters as the supposed whiner, as the "I" who writes to Cassandra. Most of us have noticed how that "I" turns the whole process of letter writing into humorous complaint: letters are too long or too short, they come too often or not often enough, the "I" of the letters has too much to answer from Cassandra, too much or too little to say, and so forth. I will focus, however, on the way Austen permits her "I" in the letters to register, as I noted earlier, our love of grievances and quarrels, our wish to depreciate others. I will argue that certain words signal this complicated whining and depreciating—

among them “hopes” and “merit”—and that we need to unpack such words to enjoy her comedy fully. And I will compare her use of such words in the letters to some examples from the novels.

To begin with the simpler one, “merit”: Austen writes, “I do not like the Miss Blackstones; indeed I was always determined not to like them, so there is the less merit in it” (9 January 1799). The line presents disliking people, depreciating them, as meritorious, though if you are determined in advance against liking people, actually disliking them is the less praiseworthy. Spontaneous dislike, spontaneous denigration of others, is the assumed virtue: Austen loves the way we tend to be proud of our faults, our prejudices, our foolish hasty judgments. She offers to us here in one sentence a condensation of the whole comedy of *Pride and Prejudice*, but we see the humor of claiming inappropriate merit in various sentences from some of the novels. In *Northanger Abbey*, Catherine keeps watching the weather, hoping it will clear so that she can walk with the Tilneys; it only begins to do so “when Catherine’s anxious attention to the weather was over, and she could no longer claim any merit from its amendment” (83). The narrator implies that Catherine is comically like the insane astronomer in Samuel Johnson’s *Rasselas* who thinks that he controls the weather—and like all of us to an extent when we take an umbrella to ensure that it will not rain. False attributions of power or virtue abound in the novels. For instance, Louisa Musgrove in *Persuasion* wants to go to Lyme and sees herself as meritorious for achieving it: “being now armed with the idea of merit in maintaining her own way, [she] bore down all the wishes of her father and mother for putting it off till summer” (94)—“armed” is the word, and indeed, having our own way can become a kind of armor. In *Emma*, however, Mr. Knightley actually points out the absurdity of such false attributions of merit; when Emma prides herself on matchmaking for Mrs. Weston, he trenchantly remarks, “where is your merit?—what are you proud of?—you made a lucky guess; and *that* is all that can be said” (13).

A more interesting use of the word appears in the letters when Austen writes that Cassandra’s plan to accompany Harriot Bridges to Goodneston was “only too much applauded as an act of virtue on your part. I said all I could to lessen your merit” (24 August 1805). In these lines, Austen conjures her social world in which everyone talks of the doings of everyone else. But here the social voice in approving of Cassandra’s visit with Harriot is rather like the voice of Highbury taking Frank Churchill’s merits on faith, being proud of him. Austen’s joke here is to go further and imagine how that social approval is irksome: she ironically makes *herself* the one who is displeased at

praise for another, who works instead to depreciate the merits of a sister. We see precisely this sort of comic move in *Sense and Sensibility*. Marianne Dashwood does away with any positive reading of her sister Elinor's self-control when Edward leaves them after an unsatisfactory visit: "Such behaviour as this, so exactly the reverse of her own, appeared no more meritorious to Marianne, than her own had seemed faulty to her. The business of self-command she settled very easily;—with strong affections it was impossible, with calm ones it could have no merit" (104). Marianne, in short, thinks all she can do to lessen her sister's merit, but Austen in her letter to *her* sister ironically asserts that she *says* all she can do so. Behind those few words in the letter to Cassandra lies a world of comic acknowledgment of our pleasure in depreciating others along with Austen's delight in presenting herself as the comic butt, the gossiping delighter in dispraise.

Austen is even funnier in the letters on hopes, or rather what I will call perverse hopes, whining hopes, than on merit. These whining hopes are often connected in with travel, since travelling is a necessary condition of writing to Cassandra. On a trip to Bath, Austen must part from her luggage. How does she express this anxious state to Cassandra? Not in the ordinary ways likely to be taken up by most of us, with irritation (As usual, my baggage was a problem) or with fear (With luck, my baggage will arrive). Austen writes, from much deeper sources, "I have some hopes of being plagued about my Trunk" (17 May 1799). Her remark undercuts superficial irritation and fear to arrive at our profound love of a grievance. And her style elucidates this contradictory motive: it juxtaposes "hopes" with "plagued," all issuing in the prosaic thump of the word "Trunk." As Austen sees it, we hope for difficulties, we seek them out—and of course the "I" makes herself the object of laughter. She laughs at herself, in short, at Cassandra, and at all of us together for our perverse delight in whines. As Austen writes of her difficult aunt Mrs. Leigh-Perrot, she "looks about with great diligence & success for Inconvenience & Evil" (20 November 1808). We find pleasure in unpleasure, as Freud might say. Many sentences in the letters ironically refer to similarly perverse hopes:

"We reached Staines . . . without suffering so much from the Heat as I had **hoped** to do" (23 August 1796; my emphasis).

"I am not yet able to acknowledge the receipt of any parcel from London, which I suppose will not occasion you much surprise.—I was a little disappointed to day, but not more than is perfectly agreeable; & I **hope** to be disappointed again tomorrow, as only one coach comes down on sundays" (25 October 1800).

“I go tomorrow [to Bookham], & **hope** for some delays & adventures” (23 June 1814).

“You depend upon finding all your plants dead, I **hope**” (24 January 1809). This usage is slightly different. In the other cases we could substitute “fear” or “expect” for hope and get a straightforward sentence that many of us could write, such as “I didn’t suffer as much from the heat as I expected or feared.” But here, the substitution creates “You depend upon finding all your plants dead I fear,” so that the word “depend” puts the perverse hope for dead plants in the other person’s court just as “hope” puts it in the writer’s too. That is, the other person is also hoping for the worst, so that there is a little community of two searching with diligence and success for inconvenience and evil.

Do we find these sort of ironic or perverse hopes in the novels? Not exactly, at least not using the word “hope.” The ironies of hoping take a different direction in the novels—and are differently gendered. Edward Ferrars, who resists his mother’s and sister’s desire for him to be in public life, comments ironically that he has “no wish to be distinguished; and I have every reason to hope I never shall” (SS 90-91). It is as if becoming distinguished has nothing to do with him; his ironic hope is not an irrational wish for displeasure but a determination to avoid pleasing his family. Similarly, at the end of *Persuasion*, Captain Wentworth says of Lady Russell that “there are hopes of her being forgiven in time” (247), as if his pardoning Lady Russell has nothing to do with him. The ironic joke in both instances is that the male speaker has intentions that are disguised by using the word “hope.” “Hope” ironically asserts a false powerlessness. We see this use of “hope” to disguise power when Henry Crawford says to Fanny at Portsmouth that “as to any partnership in Thornton Lacey, as Edmund Bertram once good-humouredly proposed, I hope I foresee two objections, two fair, excellent, irresistible objections to that plan” (MP 405). He is alluding to his wish to marry Fanny and to Edmund’s wish to marry Mary in his hoping to “foresee” their marriages, and, as is conventional in courtship, he ascribes power to women—they are “irresistible” and Henry hopes Fanny will not continue to resist him. But in using the word “foresee” Henry Crawford slips so easily from hoping for into *expecting* Mary’s and Fanny’s compliance that he effectively disavows the powerlessness that “hope” might otherwise express.

That is, when men hope ironically in the novels, doing so barely disguises their sense of their own power, their own entitlement—an entitlement most blatantly asserted when Darcy bitterly asks whether he is expected in

proposing to Elizabeth to congratulate himself on the hope of relations whose condition in life is so decidedly beneath his own. Darcy is shocked and undermined by Elizabeth's unexpected rejection of his proposal—again, the one time in male-female relations in which a woman is supposed to have power. Outrage at being expected to “hope” for relations so horrible as hers is one of the many ways in which Darcy tries to seize back power and status after his humiliating rejection. Though his behavior is unpleasant and ungentlemanly, he is not whining: he is too direct, too openly angry. I have analyzed elsewhere the way men's whines—particularly those of Mr. Woodhouse, Sir Walter Elliot, and John Knightley—get more consideration in Austen's novels than women's whines, particularly Mary Musgrove's.⁸ Here, however, it is not that the novels present men's ironic hopes as better treated than women's; it is simply that men's hopes, however ironical, assert a more privileged stance.

Women's ironical hopes in the novels are a good deal less powerful: Elizabeth Bennet hopes she never ridicules “what is wise or good” (*PP* 57), and on the whole she does not, but her statement is defensive; it does not have the certainty of Edward Ferrars's hope—his determination—not to distinguish himself. When Elizabeth parts from Wickham after he has tried to probe her knowledge of his duplicity by saying, “Do not let us quarrel about the past. In future, I hope we shall be always of one mind” (*PP* 327), she *is* ironically announcing her determination—not a mere hope—to be of different mind from Wickham. But she also expresses a wish to avoid any explanation, any open confrontation. She has a grievance, a complaint, against Wickham but politeness dictates that it must remain unstated. Her ironic hope is constrained. When Mary Crawford, who *does* sometimes wish to ridicule what is wise or good, says that she “had very little hope of” alarming Edmund by sitting down outside in November, but that she thinks she “had a right to alarm” her sister (*MP* 212), she is making a joke not about our liking our own grievances but our hoping to demonstrate our value by causing others to worry—by causing grievance to others. That is, in the novels, the women's ironical hopes seem to depend more on others' responses; the men's are more self-sufficient. We see here, as everywhere, evidence of Austen's realistic grasp of how gender works within her culture. But that said, the very different use of ironic hope in the novels, however gendered, should make us appreciate much more fully how much the letters allow Austen to express her supreme consciousness of human pleasure in complaint. The letters allow her to trumpet mock grievances and to laugh at doing so. When Austen writes of her hopes of being plagued about her trunk or about any other perverse

hopes, she is asserting a right to the utterance of grievances at the same time that she is undercutting them by pointing out how ridiculously fond of them we are. Our fondness is vain, a vanity, in every sense.

Austen's exploration in the letters of the vain pleasures of a grievance is not confined to her citing of perverse hopes, of course. She writes of her younger brother's unfulfilled wish to transfer to a larger ship as, "I am sorry that our dear Charles begins to feel the Dignity of Ill-usage" (18 December 1798). A sentence that one of us might write would say more directly that Charles begins to suffer the indignity of ill-usage. So what Austen has achieved here is reversal: ill-usage is juxtaposed with dignity or worthiness; ill-usage becomes a dignified state, a state of merit unrewarded, something to be vain of, or at least something to minister to vanity. Certainly Mary Musgrove's sense of ill-usage ministers to her vanity in this way even though she is also anxious to extort from others the sort of attention and deference whose absence leads to her whines of ill-usage. At the White Hart, for instance, Anne has to find Mary's keys and sort her trinkets, while "trying to convince her that she was not ill used by any body; which Mary, well amused as she generally was in her station at a window overlooking the entrance to the pump-room, could not but have her moments of imagining" (*P* 221). As moderns, we see abusive treatment as making us feel unworthy—that when we think we are are treated badly, we feel we deserve it—and Mary Musgrove certainly has been a neglected, less valued child in comparison to her older sisters. But though Austen sees as clearly as we do that connection (in other words, that being ill treated undermines our sense of worth), she also sees the way it can perversely make us vain. For her, the ego is more resilient perhaps, more all-absorbing in its activities than we consider it to be—therefore more comical.

Other examples of pleasures in grievances: she writes of the Debaries, especially trying neighbors (they inspired the comment, "I was as civil to them as their bad breath would allow me" [20 November 1800]), that they "persist in being afflicted at the death of their Uncle, of whom they now say they saw a great deal in London" (1 November 1800). The word "persist" suggests the posing involved in this affliction, the working it up.

Apparently Anne Sharp, a former governess at Godmersham, was very fond of a whine. Austen wrote, "I have also a letter from Miss Sharp, quite one of her Letters;—she has been again obliged to exert herself—more than ever—in a more distressing, more harassed state—& has met with another excellent old Physician & his Wife, with every virtue under Heaven, who

takes to her & cures her from pure Love and Benevolence" (8 September 1816). That is, in Miss Sharp, a love of grievance is complemented by a fantasy of being taken care of.

I can't find a statement in the novels that is quite like any of these—though some of the most difficult characters come closest. For instance, Mrs. Norris looking around for evil at the parsonage dining table sounds a bit like Mrs. Leigh-Perrot looking successfully for evil and inconvenience: "Mrs. Norris . . . could never behold either the wide table or the number of dishes on it with patience, and . . . did always contrive to experience some evil from the passing of the servants behind her chair, and to bring away some fresh conviction of its being impossible among so many dishes but that some must be cold" (*MP* 239). Mrs. Norris, in fact, is associated with the word "grievance" more than any other Austen character—finding the presence of Susan Price at Mansfield a grievance (*MP* 448) and being unable to "speak with any temper of such grievances" as Mrs. Grant's paying her cook high wages and allowing a huge consumption of butter and eggs (*MP* 31). And Miss Sharp's having "to exert herself—more than ever—in a more distressing, more harassed state" sounds a little like Diana Parker in *Sanditon* who is "suffering under a more severe attack than usual of my old grievance, Spasmodic Bile & hardly able to crawl from my Bed to the Sofa" (*MW* 386).⁹

But of course in the novels, Austen is busy depicting complex characters; in the letters, she doesn't have to do so. The characters are all known. Thus in the letters the jokes can be got to immediately—no lead up is necessary—and the favorite jokes are those in which Jane Austen and her sister Cassandra are laughing at themselves together. So what do we make of the condensed, elliptical comedy that results, in which Austen delights in making herself the carnally minded gossip, the whiner, the depreciator, the lover of a grievance—and sometimes makes Cassandra one as well? We do not, like Forster, conclude that we are hearing the whinnying of harpies.

But if we turn to those who have tried to analyze comedy and laughter, we don't get very far. Like Forster, most male analysts of comedy find aggression and hostility. Thomas Hobbes in his *Leviathan* analyzed laughter as "sudden glory" and in those two words we get two important elements, suddenness (or the unexpected) and glory (or the sense of superiority—as when we laugh when someone else falls, slips on a banana peel). Sigmund Freud analyzes the unconscious release of tension and aggression in jokes; one example that he considers is when a joke is triangulated, as when two men make a sexual joke about a woman, bonding over her humiliation.¹⁰ And certainly we can

see some of this aggression and hostility in Austen's humor, both in the novels and in the letters. Cassandra and Austen are united together in laughing over the frightful Mr. Hall of Sherborne, or over their unpleasant aunt. And we can also see in the letters what Freud calls humor, distinguishing it from jokes: humor discharges pain rather than hostility.¹¹ It is a coping strategy, a distancing strategy: instead of getting angry at what is causing pain, the humorist finds something to laugh at, which sounds very like what I've been calling Austen's perverse hopes, her delight in taking pleasure in displeasure. And some analysts of comedy from the Greeks onward focus on its celebration of community and fertility—its conclusion with marriage, its alignment with demands that, as Benedick in Shakespeare's *Much Ado about Nothing* puts it, "the world must be peopled."¹² I don't see this sort of community in the humor of Austen's letters; I see instead the community of two, generally between Austen and Cassandra, laughing together at the absurdity of their social world. Whether their humor is discharging aggression or distancing pain, or even more, whether it allows them to laugh at themselves and one another, it depends on their deep connection, their full understanding of each other (and of other people) and cements that connection and understanding, that complete intimacy. For me, that's what humor and laughter do, especially the kinds that circle back on ourselves: not the whinnying of harpies but the whining of fully-conscious, self-aware human beings, in touch with our own absurdities. Humor and laughter in Austen's letters connect us to her and to one another, as whiners, as depreciators, as gossipers, as well as lovers of the way words make us laugh—and especially so when those words are Jane Austen's.

NOTES

1. Le Faye writes in her notes that on Friday 21 May "Fanny Knight had written to JA as Miss Darcy, evidently hoping that her aunt would answer in character."
2. My friend Hazel Holt has offered an explanation. As an author herself (of detective novels), she thinks the important phrase is "Even had I more time." Austen is in London, keeping Henry company after his wife's death, socializing, going to exhibits, shopping for herself and others, visiting Windsor . . . very busy, in short. Hazel Holt avers that nothing is more irritating to novelists than others' assumption that, because they are writers, they can sit down anytime and write to order—ignoring all the other things that writers have to do like feed the cat, get supper, etc.
3. Hyginus, *Fabulae* 4, cited by the *Theoi Project: A Guide to Greek Gods, Spirits & Monsters*, site created by Aaron Atsma, 2000-2005: <http://www.theoi.com/Pontios/Harpyiai.html> (August 26, 2005).

4. Richard Hunter in his definitive study *The Argonautica of Apollonius* (Cambridge: Cambridge UP, 1993) notes that for Homer, the harpies are “gusts of wind which snatch mortals away, causing them to disappear without trace,” and that later Apollonius portrays them “as a natural force” (81). I am grateful to my colleague Barbara Pavlock for calling Hunter’s work to my attention.
5. *Theoi Project*, citing Virgil, *Aeneid* 3.209.
6. The most prominent scholar to do so is Jill Heydt-Stevenson, *Austen’s Unbecoming Conjunctions: Subversive Laughter, Embodied History* (New York and Houndmills: Palgrave Macmillan, 2005).
7. See Jan Fergus, “Sex and Social Life in Jane Austen’s Novels,” in *Jane Austen in a Social Context*. Ed. David Monaghan. Totowa, NJ: Barnes and Noble, 1981, 66-85.
8. See Jan Fergus, “My sore throats, you know, are always worse than anybody’s’: Mary Musgrove and Jane Austen’s Art of Whining,” in *Persuasions* 15 (1993), 138-47. For men’s whining, see Fergus, “Male Whiners in Jane Austen’s Novels,” in *Persuasions* 18 (1996), 98-108.
9. Perhaps Austen’s tone in responding to Anne Sharp’s letter may be even more like that in “Plan of a Novel, according to hints from various quarters,” in which the heroine is “continually cheated & defrauded of her hire, worn down to a Skeleton, & now and then starved to death” (*MW* 430) and “all the Good will be unexceptionable in every respect—and there will be no foibles or weaknesses but with the Wicked, who will be completely depraved & infamous, hardly a resemblance of Humanity left in them” (*MW* 429).
10. See Freud’s *Jokes and Their Relation to the Unconscious* (New York: Norton, 1960).
11. See Freud’s 1928 essay “Humor,” *International Journal of Psychoanalysis* 9:1-6.
12. Feminist scholars have offered some revisions of Hobbesian, Freudian, and classical accounts of laughter and comedy in two collections edited by Regina Barreca, *Last Laughs: Perspectives on Women and Comedy* (New York: Gordon and Breach, 1988) and *New Perspectives on Women and Comedy* (New York: Gordon and Breach, 1992), in Audrey Bilger’s *Laughing Feminism: Subversive Comedy in Frances Burney, Maria Edgeworth, and Jane Austen* (Detroit: Wayne State UP, 1998), and Judy Little’s *Comedy and the Woman Writer: Woolf, Spark, and Feminism* (Lincoln: U Nebraska P, 1983). For me the most interesting views are those of Judith Wilt, “The Laughter of Maidens, the Cackle of Matriarchs: Notes on the Collision between Comedy and Feminism,” *Women and Literature* 1 (1980): 173-96, which analyzes the rather scary “maiden laughter” of heroines like Emma, thus retaining ideas of comedy as hostile, and Eileen Gillooly, *Smile of Discontent: Humor, Gender, and Nineteenth-Century British Fiction* (Chicago: U Chicago P, 1999), who—in opposition to Wilt—sees the humor of writers like Austen and George Eliot as providing “maternal protection” to their characters, particularly one like Fanny Price.

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