The Challenge of Empathy: Comedy in Jane Austen

by

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What I cannot create, I do not understand.

-Richard Feynman
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Introduction

We must here lay out our methodology for writing this thesis. We desired, to some extent, to achieve an empirical understanding of comedy in Jane Austen—through the observation of various comedic moments, we attempted to build up a theory of comedic production. We attempted, that is, to discover a general formula for producing comedic scenes. As our readers will observe, however, this thesis that propounds empiricism rather appears to proceed in the mode of rationalist enquiry—and indeed it does. The presentation of an empirical study posed too many difficulties, so we chose rather to proceed in the form of deduction from axioms and propositions, albeit axioms and propositions somewhat of the kind that Jane Austen places at the beginning of Pride and Prejudice, or that Samuel Johnson employs in his Rambler essays. We imagined the thesis as a series of logical thought experiments in the form of rationalist enquiry as (we flatter ourselves in believing) that Austen or Johnson might have employed. We admit to taking creative license with the established rules of logic, and will attempt to pose no defense to any Math Professors who may be reading this paper.

Although this thesis began as a study of comedy in the works of Jane Austen, we quickly discovered that an understanding of her comedy requires studying more than just her comedic scenes. We discovered (or at least, believe we have discovered) that comedy is a challenge in empathy—which conclusion we reach by the final chapter. We state this in the introduction in order to give a guiding idea to the theme of the thesis, which, admittedly, perhaps attempts to touch upon too diverse subjects for its grasp.
Thus we will state immediately our guiding propositions that we will attempt to show over the course of this thesis:

The happiness of our friends is, as John Stuart Mill might claim, the purpose of our lives. We love our friends selflessly and we are willing to sacrifice ourselves (our pride, our bodies) for them. From Jane Austen and Samuel Johnson, we learn that when we love our friends selflessly, we can empathize with them more perfectly. Only once we empathize fully with our friends, and make their happiness the purpose of our lives, will we understand what makes them laugh.
Chapter One: The Happiness of Others as an Axiom

[1] In *Preface to Lyrical Ballads* (1800) William Wordsworth defines a poet:

“He is a man speaking to men” (Wordsworth, “Preface to Lyrical Ballads”). We interpret “speaking” literally to mean that poetry is a linguistic communication between two humans—it is like a spoken conversation from one person to another. Wordsworth’s invocation of real-time conversations suggests that poetry, as a conversation, is subject to the normative rules that govern spoken human interaction. In the first five lines of the *Preface*, he says that a poet literally speaks to his readers, with the single desire of imparting pleasure in the “real language of men” (Wordsworth). The poems were an attempt

To ascertain, how far, by fitting to metrical arrangement a selection of the real language of men in a state of vivid sensation, that sort of pleasure and that quantity of pleasure may be imparted, which a Poet may rationally endeavour to impart. (Wordsworth)

For Wordsworth, a poet is “a man speaking to men” in “the real language of men,” simply a person speaking to people in the way that people actually speak to each other in conversation. The pleasure to which he refers is that of the listener in the conversation, which, though it is a supremely one-sided conversation, still somehow (Wordsworth hopes) will impart pleasure. Indeed, Wordsworth tells us that the poet speaks *exclusively* to please the listener—his only desire in speaking is to impart “that sort of pleasure” that characterizes conversation. Using a literal interpretation of Wordsworth’s definition of a poet as a person who befriends people in conversation, we will study Austen’s craft of befriending and of pleasing her readers with conversation in the novels *Emma, Pride and Prejudice*, and *Persuasion*. More
specifically, we will study the pleasure of laughter between friends in conversation, as motivated by Malcolm Andrews’ “laughers’ coterie” theory (Andrews 9).

[2] Wordsworth suggests that the poet, by pleasing us with conversation, becomes our friend as though he were befriending us in real-life. He describes his own poems as “new friends” for the reader, and elsewhere writes, “the Poet, singing a song in which all human beings join with him, rejoices in the presence of truth as our visible friend and hourly companion” (Wordsworth). The “emotion recollected in tranquility” that he elsewhere defines as the center of poetry, may be interpreted as the pleasure of a “visible friend and hourly companion” (Wordsworth). The poet “is a man speaking to men,” and his speech imparts the pleasure of a “visible friend and hourly companion.” Wordsworth may well have had in mind English critic Samuel Johnson’s assertion: “Life has no pleasure higher or nobler than that of friendship” (Johnson Idler 23). If the highest pleasure in life is that of friendship, then naturally a poet should endeavor to impart that same pleasure. So we claim that poetry is a conversation, albeit a one-sided conversation, in which the author attempts to befriend the reader according to the same methods he would use in real-life; similarly, we claim that the poet then pleases the reader in the same way that a friend would please in real-life.

[3] We will use the relationship between conversation, laughter, and friendship proposed by Malcolm Andrews, that when we laugh with a person in conversation, we feel as though we are friends with that person. I will call this theory the “laughers’ coterie,” after Andrews’ own use of “coterie” in his book. Indeed, Andrews’ argument about readerly feelings of friendship towards the narrators of the
novels of Charles Dickens sparked my claim that Wordsworth pleases us as a friend in conversation. In *Dickensian Laughter*, Andrews argues that, in general, when we laugh with someone we feel united in friendship. He argues that Dickens befriends his readers with laughter, since laughing with people is the surest way to befriend. He quotes Henri Bergson on the “secret freemasonry” created by laughter:

‘Laughter always implies a kind of secret freemasonry, or even complicity, with other laughers, real or imaginary.’ Such a ‘freemasonry’ of laughers was encouraged in Boz’s ‘we’. Many, if not most of his Sketches of ‘Scenes’ and ‘Characters’ opened with ‘We…’ in the first or second sentences: e.g. ‘We have always entertained a particular attachment towards Monmouth-street’; ‘We shall never forget the mingled feelings.’ (Bergson qtd in Andrews 9)

When we read a book by Dickens or Austen, we join the collective “we” that forms their audience, and when we find Austen’s humor funny, we join the “secret freemasonry” of her fans. Indeed, my friend and devoted Austen fan, Jordan, gave me his own independently formed “freemasonry” theory: “when I laugh with Austen, I feel like she and I have a personal joke that’s just between us. I feel like it’s our special joke” (Friedland 28 Mar. 2016). Jordan feels an affectionate connection with Austen, and this connection is largely created in their shared jokes. When he and Austen laugh together, they become accomplices in Bergson’s “freemasonry.”

[4] But a “secret freemasonry” implies that there are people outside the freemasonry. Its impression of “secrecy” convinces us that there are people excluded, who do not laugh when we are laughing. When Austen, Jordan, and I share a secret joke, we are often laughing at someone outside our group—some ridiculous character—who necessarily remains outside of the knowledge necessary for understanding and laughing at the joke. For example, when we laugh at Mr. Collins’ obsequies, we feel united as an audience against him. He cannot be in our “secret
freemasonry,” because the whole fun of the joke is that he never realizes how ridiculous he appears. If he could see himself and perceive our laughter, he would stop acting that way, and we would lose our joke. Andrews elaborates on the feeling of “complicity” in the “we” that Dickens and Austen create with their readers:

‘We’ were all assumed to be pretty sophisticated folk, from middle-class backgrounds, out to be amused by the eccentricities of our picturesquely less decorous fellow-citizens…We are all on Boz’s (Dickens’) wavelength and, though not perhaps quite as sharp and funny as he could be, content to be part of his coterie. (Andrews 9)

The picture we have is of us (the readers) sitting around a living room or a restaurant booth with our “coterie,” of whom our “sharp and funny” friend Boz (or Austen) is the leading and most entertaining member. Our funny friend regales us with jokes about the people he has encountered that day, with old favorite stories of ours, and with witty remarks in general conversation. We share a “wavelength” (9)—interests and entertainment To highlight the point, Andrews quotes a review from The Satirist, “Boz is really an agreeable fellow…and whether he travels by himself or in association, enough is seen of him to give us a high relish for his company” (9).

Indeed, it is imperative that we think Boz and Austen “agreeable fellow(s)” if we are to share their company for hundreds of pages—many hours of our lives. Not only do we think of Austen as a friend, we think of her as a close friend. Her “company”—human friendliness—we can enjoy as much, or more than, that of a real-live friend.

[5] But before we go further we must address the difference between “the authors” Austen and Dickens, and “the real-live people” Austen and Dickens. We must determine the difference between befriending an author’s writings and befriending that same author in real-life. For this purpose we will compare Austen’s
opinions on friendship as espoused in her novels and as espoused by her real-life person which, because of the lack of information about Austen in real-life, we must also study her by analyzing her novels. We state our findings at the beginning, that Austen the real-life person favored “general benevolence, but not general friendship” (Austen “Emma” 251) while Austen the authorial persona favored the reverse, general friendship over general benevolence. (Benevolence in this context means a cooler level of conviviality than that of friendship).

[6] If we consider the universal popularity of Austen’s works, we may say immediately that Austen the novelist is universally friendly. When we do so, however, we realize a sad truth regarding our aforementioned “secret freemasonry,” or “coterie” of close friends—everyone is Austen’s close friend; everyone is in her close circle. What Andrews says of Dickens may be said equally of Austen, her “coterie of fellow-laughers was nationwide” (Andrews 10). Austen the author apparently has no problem with being friends with everyone, regardless of their morality, wealth, or social status. The exclusive elite who feel a special rapport with her in reality consists of everyone. Every kind of person, from high to low, can enjoy her work and feel included in the circle of friends that she endears to herself.

[7] To grasp Austen “the person’s” personal opinions on being universally friendly, however, we must turn to Sarah Baxter Emsley’s discussion of “benevolence and friendship” in Jane Austen’s Philosophy of Virtues. Emsley argues that Austen in real-life favored exclusiveness rather than universality in friendship. She points to Emma’s irritation before the ball at the Crown—irritation at Mr. Weston’s apparent valuing of other people’s opinions just as much as her own:
Emma perceived that her taste was not the only taste on which Mr. Weston depended, and felt, that to be the favourite and intimate of a man who had so many intimates and confidantes, was not the very first distinction in the scale of vanity. She liked his open manners, but a little less of open-heartedness would have made him a higher character.—General benevolence, but not general friendship, made a man what he ought to be.—She could fancy such a man. (Austen *Emma* 250-1)

Emma would prefer the gratification of her vanity with the “distinction” of being Mr. Weston’s only confidant. She feels that Mr. Weston should judge people more harshly when choosing his friends. Her gripe about Mr. Weston is exactly our readerly gripe about Austen befriending everyone as her best friend with indiscriminate open-heartedness. Emma, and we the readers, share a slight feeling of betrayal. In Emma’s case, however, she wishes Mr. Weston would judge her “taste” as better than everyone else’s, and that he would distinguish her from everyone else with special attention. She feels that less “open-heartedness” and less “general friendship”—*more* unfriendliness, is a mark of “a higher character.” From Emma’s valuing unfriendliness, and from the plot of the novel, Emsley argues that universal forgiveness of everyone’s faults is not consistent with Austen’s own opinions of friendship:

> Although her (Emma’s) vanity is hurt here, she is right to see the contradictions inherent in this way Mr. Weston has of treating everybody…It seems exclusive to gather a small group of friends, and leave the rest to chance and charity, and yet this is what Austen leaves us with at the end of the novel: a 'small band of true friends' who witness the wedding of Emma and Mr. Knightley. She does not say exactly who makes it into that category, but there is no question that it is an exclusive group. (Emsley 139)

Emsley’s argument about how Austen may have comported herself in real-life aligns perfectly with the opinions of Samuel Johnson (Austen’s favorite author) [cite source] on benevolence and friendship in real-life: “nor can the candour and frankness of that man be much esteemed, who spreads his arms to humankind, and makes every man,
without distinction, a denizen of his bosom” (Johnson *Rambler* 64). With nearly identical language and the same metaphor as Austen’s advocacy of being “less-openhearted,” Johnson expresses a preference for judgment and exclusion in personal interaction. Thus we find that friendships with Austen the novelist and with Austen the person cannot be identical. (This conclusion may already have been apparent to anyone reading this thesis.) Austen the person probably did not show the open-heartedness of character that her narrators evince. However we might wish it, we might not have been friends with Austen had we met her in person. More precisely, she might not have been friends with us. Our flaws and ignorance might have incited her contempt, and we might have been excluded from her real-life circle of companions.

[8] But intolerance and exclusivity are not compatible with the desires of an author who wishes universal friendship for her novels. The author who wants readers to feel intimate friendship with her works (as Austen’s works are loved by many) disadvantages herself by making “general benevolence” rather than “general friendship” the tone of her work. While “general benevolence” may inspire affection, the implied emotional distance may not inspire love. Indeed, Austen herself benefited enormously from the proximity with Johnson that his writings and biographies allow. Both scholars and novelists including Gloria Gross, Claudia Johnson, Robert Scholes, Sir Walter Scott, and C.S. Lewis, among others, have shown the deep affinity between Austen and Johnson stemming from her readings of his work (Claudia Johnson “Women, Politics, and the Novel” 177; Scholes “Dr. Johnson and Jane Austen” 380; Scott “Miss Austen’s Novels” 218; Lewis “A Note On Jane Austen”)
There is no question that Jane Austen read intently and deeply admired works by and about Johnson… As her brother and nephew declared in the early nineteenth century, she considered Johnson to be her “favourite author in prose” (H. Austen 7; Austen-Leigh 89), and in her own letters she refers to “my dear Dr. Johnson” and “my dear Mrs. Piozzi” (the former Mrs. Thrale) to convey more than just a preference for a chosen writer. It is rather like a feeling of imagined intimacy, together with the respect and affection accorded to someone held in high esteem… (Gross “Mentoring Jane Austen”)

While the people Austen and Johnson might have preferred “less-openhearted” social interactions with general people, we love the writers Austen and Johnson precisely because they are so “open-hearted.” Whatever their personal preferences for benevolence over friendship may have been, their authorial personalities prefer the opposite, friendship over benevolence. Regardless of our flaws as readers that the real-life Austen may have scorned, Austen the author never expresses intolerance or coolness towards us. Despite our flaws she is still our friend, our “intimate,” and our “confidante.” Anyone (probably) can pick up a copy of *Pride and Prejudice* and immediately feel befriended, welcomed, and entertained by Austen the writer.

[9] The difference between Austen’s person and her writings is therefore a kind of intentional deception—a lie, or immoral act. Before we continue, therefore, we must pause and attempt to explain how Austen, a famously devout Christian, rationalized lying to her readers. We will study the rationalization with justifications from Johnson, himself a devout Christian, who writes on the “fallacy and sophistication” generally inherent in authoring letters to one’s friends. We will consider Johnson’s conclusions about deceptions in letters as applicable to deceptions in novels, because a novel may be considered a kind of extended narrative letter composed for the reader. Johnson explains that letters are often dishonest rather than honest:
It has been so long said as to be commonly believed, that the true characters of men may be found in their letters, and that he who writes to his friend lays his heart open before him. But the truth is, that such were the simple friendships of the "Golden Age," and are now the friendships only of children...There is, indeed, no transaction which offers stronger temptations to fallacy and sophistication than epistolary intercourse. In the eagerness of conversation the first emotions of the mind often burst out before they are considered; in the tumult of business, interest and passion have their genuine effect; but a friendly letter is a calm and deliberate performance, in the cool of leisure, in the stillness of solitude, and surely no man sits down to depreciate by design his own character. (Johnson *Life of Pope*)

He believes that the “temptation” to misrepresent one’s own character in writing is so strong as to be unavoidable: “surely no man sits down to depreciate by design his own character.” If an author feels that a false representation of himself may cause his character to appear better than it really is, he may be tempted to perform such a deception. His remark distinguishing between the spontaneity of conversation and the premeditation of letters, however, requires immediate attention. We must admit that reading an author’s writing is not identically a “real time” conversation with that author because it allows the “first emotions of the mind” to “burst out before they are considered.” The spontaneity and lack of preparation in a real-life conversation allows “interest and passion have their genuine effect,” which Johnson believes may result in a “depreciation” of the interlocutor’s character, if their immediate and genuine reaction is disagreeable. But an author who desires general readership will diminish his audience if he adopts a disagreeable persona. More importantly, an author who desires to please in the capacity of a friend, as Wordsworth does, will reduce the pleasure that he imparts if his character seems disagreeable.

[10] So we must amend our definition of poetry slightly. We defined it as listening to the pleasing conversation of a friend in real-time. But a friend who speaks
in real time may have trouble maintaining the “sharp and funny” gaiety, “lively sensibility,” and “enthusiasm and tenderness” at the most pleasurable level—the honesty, the “genuine effect” of “passion” may “burst out” and cause a depreciation in the character, whether affability or open-heartedness, that may make the reader feel less close in friendship with the author (Wordsworth “Preface to Lyrical Ballads”; Johnson Life of Pope). Thus reading an author’s writing is instead conversing in real time with a version of that author, the appearance of which the author controls, finetunes, and distorts from reality beforehand. The authorial persona is a heightened version of the author, whose friendliness is elevated in “a calm and deliberate performance, in the cool of leisure, in the stillness of solitude.”

[11] Writing for one’s friends often entails an elevation of character “by design,” so we return to Johnson’s justification of this intentional (albeit pleasing) deception. Johnson writes about the premeditated lies of a “friendly letter”:

Friendship has no tendency to secure veracity; for by whom can a man so much wish to be thought better than he is, as by him whose kindness he desires to gain or keep?...a letter is addressed to a single mind, of which the prejudices and partialities are known, and must therefore please, if not by favouring them, by forbearing to oppose them. (Johnson Life of Pope)

The impulse to deceive comes from a desire for the “kindness” of a friend. In his view, we desire the kindness of our friends above the kindness of all others, and are willing to lie so that we may continue to receive that kindness. He implies that if one were to write with complete honesty without regard for the known “prejudices and partialities” of one’s friend, then pleasure would not be given and kindness would not be received. He also suggests that in writing a letter, one has an obligation to please: “must therefore please, if not by favouring them, by forbearing to oppose them.” That
is, pleasing and opposing one’s friends are not two compatible actions in writing. The use of “forbear,” with its connotation of Stoic suffering, suggests that in order to please, one must suffer, and that suffering is the conscious knowledge of telling a lie. Forbearing to oppose the “prejudices and partialities” of a friend may require a lie through the deceiving appearance of acquiescence. Johnson appears to believe that the necessity of pleasing one’s friends is an inviolable principle of behavior, even when that pleasure comes at the expense of one’s conscience. We desire the kindness of our friends, and we desire to please our friends, so we are willing to lie to achieve both desires.

[12] For an example of the amount of crafting and remaking inherent in the process of writing to please, we may simply look at one of Dickens’ manuscripts from the beginning of A Christmas Carol (Andrews 56). In the opening page alone, we see innumerable scratchings-out, additions, subtractions, and restructurings. A whole paragraph has been crossed out at the end. He edits the draft to make his writing more pleasing to the reader. In “the cool of leisure” and “the stillness of solitude” we see how he worked and reworked the appearance of his writing to be as pleasant as it could possibly be. An illustration of Johnson’s remarks on letter writing, the revision reveals Dickens using his time to make his deception as pleasing as possible. Indeed, we believe that in some ways, the best authors may simply be said to have the most control over how they appear in print. That is, they are the best at deceiving us because they can idealize their “friendly letters” with the most success.

[13] We return, however, to our question of how Austen and Johnson justify their deliberate readerly deception. On one level, we understand that the authorial
persona is not the author. It is a fiction created in the mind of the reader; it is not the author in person. Austen never claims that her novels are an attempt to portray her real-life character or beliefs. She makes no explicit claims of honesty. Any conclusions we make about Austen’s real-life character from her novels must be conclusions about our fictional version of Austen the novelist, not about Austen the person. As a fictional person, Austen the novelist is no more guilty of lying in real-life than Wickham. Because we never have access to Austen the real-life person we cannot justly make any claims about her character, whether or not it is misrepresented in her writings. So Austen the person is in some measure blameless. When she creates a forgiving, tolerant, universally friendly fictional persona, her readers should not deceive themselves that the persona and person are one in real-life.

[14] But Austen makes “not being deceived” as to the reality of her fictional persona quite difficult. The undeniable truth and wisdom of her narration invites us to believe that she writes from her own, real-life character. We cannot but believe that the persona and the person are the same. We believe, with Scott, that “characters more true to life have never been drawn.” The apparent truth of her narration in “the real language of men,” deceives us into believing that the narrator is a real person from real-life—Austen invites us to believe that her narrator and herself are the same person. We cannot tell which parts of her discourse are her honest feelings in real-life, and which are her deceptively crafted friendliness. An author of Austen’s awareness must have known her readers would be deceived as to her authorial character.

[15] Perhaps she deceives us for our own happiness. We claimed earlier that a poet attempts to befriend the reader—that is, that the poet views all readers of her
work as potential friends. As such she is like Johnson writing a friendly letter, endeavoring “to gain” the “kindness” of her potential friends “by forbearing to oppose them,” with the hope of pleasing. As Johnson suggests, were she to write with a more oppositional character, or with the coolness of benevolence, we would feel less kindness, and therefore less friendship towards her. That is, we would feel our pleasure diminished when reading her novels. So the “lie” that Austen tells us, that her real-life character is as good and generous as her narrator’s character, may be simply for our own readerly benefit—for our pleasure.

[16] Indeed, Austen often depicts sympathetic characters lying for the happiness of others, not only as though she condones that type of lie, but as though she encourages it. As Richard Scholes has shown in his essay Dr. Johnson and Jane Austen, "consideration for others and for society as a whole is opposed to consideration for self from the first of Jane Austen's novels to the last" (Scholes 384). In Persuasion, Austen even suggests that lying may be the best course of action when it involves improving another person’s happiness. Early in the novel, Mary languishes hypochondriacally ill, and peevishly criticizes Anne for not tending her more closely. Unlike Mary, Anne has been busy arranging the entire family’s moving plans, as her father and sister are too irresponsible and selfish to do so. Mary accuses Anne of pretending to be busy, just so she would not have to care for Mary in her illness: “Anne, I am so very unwell! It was quite unkind of you not to come on Thursday” (Austen Persuasion 36). When Anne says that she has been doing everyone else’s neglected work, Mary replies incredulously, “Dear me! What can you possibly have to do?” (36). Through the rest of the conversation Mary is selfish and self-centered,
while Anne remains patient and compassionate. Anne understands that the way to
cure Mary of her sick complaints is by pretending to be cheerful, despite Mary’s
irritating behavior: “A little farther perseverance in patience, and forced cheerfulness
on Anne’s side, produced nearly a cure on Mary’s. She could soon sit upright on the
sofa...Then, forgetting to think of it, she was at the other end of the room, beautifying
a nosegay; then, she ate her cold meat; and then she was well enough to propose a
little walk” (37). Austen depicts Anne using a lie, “forced cheerfulness,” to the
wonderful effect not only of curing Mary, but of making her happy as well. Anne
might have been more honest about her feelings, which Austen suggests were
unhappiness or annoyance, since the cheerfulness had to be forced. Had she been
more honest, however, Austen implies that Mary would not have recovered so
quickly or so well. Far from causing harm, the lie’s only effect was to better Mary’s
condition.

[17] Therefore we infer that the happiness of another person, Mary’s
happiness, guides Anne’s ethical choices in this scene—not Christian dogma. The lie
is justified as being for the benefit of another person, but it is still a lie. Another
example of lying for the sake of others, this time with more explicit language of
deception, appears in *Pride and Prejudice*, when Mr. Bennet unknowingly causes
Elizabeth pain by teasing her about the rumour of Mr. Darcy’s coming proposal:

Elizabeth tried to join in her father’s pleasantry, but could only force one must
reluctant smile. Never had his wit been directed in a manner so little agreeable
to her.
‘Are you not diverted?’
‘Oh! Yes. Pray read on.’
[In the midst of his gaiety, Mr. Bennet notices that Elizabeth does not seem
happy] ‘Lizzy, you look as if you did not enjoy it.’
‘I am excessively diverted.’
Elizabeth had never been more at a loss to make her feelings appear what they were not. It was necessary to laugh, when she would rather have cried. (Austen *Pride and Prejudice* 278)

Austen again prioritizes lying for the happiness of another person over the honest expression of one’s feelings. Elizabeth must “make her feelings appear what they were not,” simply because she does not want to hurt her father. She values her father’s feelings over the truth in this moment. Further, she values her father’s feelings over her own. The narrator states the supreme importance of maintaining Mr. Bennet’s feelings: “It was necessary to laugh.” The line may be read in free indirect discourse or in the narrator’s third person, but both readings agree on the “necessary” course of action here—lie to protect the feelings of another. Elizabeth causes herself pain with her lie, “she would rather have cried,” and yet she sacrifices her feelings because it is unquestionably “necessary” to appear “excessively diverted” for her father’s sake.

[18] Thus Austen encourages her readers to lie in certain circumstances for the happiness of others. Following Emsley’s argument, we also suspect that she lies to us about herself—misrepresenting her own authorial character—for our readerly happiness. In both cases, however, she evinces a belief that the happiness of others takes precedence over honesty, and therefore over Christian ethics. While this attitude appears good-natured, it may undermine readerly trust in Austen as our intimate friend. Indeed, Austen herself argues (through her novels) that trust in a person’s integrity is requisite to friendship. If we cannot trust Austen always to tell us the truth, then perhaps we cannot trust her as our friend—or so our argument goes.
[19] But we must consider that Austen advocates lying, not for personal gain, but for the happiness of others. Indeed, in the cases of Anne and Elizabeth, both must “forbear” (to use Johnson’s term) at the expense of their own happiness and conscience, for the happiness of others. Far from lying for personal gain, Austen’s lies rather require self-sacrifice. Further, in the case of Austen’s own lies as an author, she appears to have sacrificed her own Christian conscience for the production of a pleasing authorial character. Mary, Mr. Bennet, and the reader, only receive pleasure and happiness from the lies, we never receive pain. By lying to promote our readerly happiness, Austen sacrifices her own virtue for the reader and evinces her commitment to the happiness of others. She would rather endanger their own soul by breaking the letter of the law—“do not lie,” in order to follow the spirit of the law—selflessly promote the happiness of others. (Indeed, my friend Jordan pointed out to me that Sense and Sensibility, and its title, is about this very question—what is “sense,” or the letter of the law, and what is “sensibility,” or the spirit of the law. I have never read Sense and Sensibility, but according to Jordan “Sense is the head,” and “sensibility is the heart” (Friedland 28 Mar. 2016).) If Elizabeth and Anne had both told the truth of their feelings, the outcome could only have been the discomfort of Mr. Bennet with no hope of immediate relief, the indulgence of Anne’s irritation, and the continuance of Mary’s illness. If Austen had written in her real-life, unaltered character, she might have used a tone of coolness and “benevolence” rather than of warmth and “friendship,” and may thus have provided less pleasure as a friend to her readers.
[20] Austen’s deceptions cause pain to the deceiver, and happiness to the deceived. The selfless morality that she thus promotes may be explained best by John Stuart Mill’s ethics as espoused in his autobiography: “happiness is the test of all rules of conduct, and the end of life” (Mill 145). The lies of Elizabeth, Mary, and Austen, though they fail the test of Christian doctrines, receive full justification in Mill’s ethics. Therefore when we discover that Austen practices dishonesty, far from that fact causing us to distrust her, on the contrary we feel gratified. We feel gratified that she is willing to sacrifice her own virtues for our happiness. As our friend, her code of ethics compels her to sacrifice her own happiness for the happiness of others.

[21] The priority placed on the happiness of others receives further explanation in Mill’s autobiography, and helps us to build a conceptual framework with which to understand Austen’s writerly ethics. Refining his earlier statement that “happiness is the test of all rules of conduct” Mill turns to Thomas Carlyle’s “anti-self-consciousness” theory, which Mill summarized as follows:

Those only are happy (I thought) who have their minds fixed on some object other than their own happiness; on the happiness of others, on the improvement of mankind, even on some art or pursuit, followed not as a means, but as itself an ideal end...The only chance is to treat, not happiness, but some end external to it, as the object of life. Let your self-consciousness, your scrutiny, your self-interrogation, exhaust themselves on that... (145-6)

Mill claims that one’s mind must be “fixed on some other object than [our] own happiness; on the happiness of others,” and we see in Austen a similar desire, to place the happiness of others even above her own virtue. He explains that if one desires to make other people happy, one must make everything else in one’s life subservient to that aim. He claims that if one chooses the happiness of others as one’s goal, then their happiness becomes as important as one’s own life: “The only chance is to treat,
not happiness, but some end external to it, as the purpose of life.” The “end external” to our own happiness is “the object of life”—not “one of the objects,” or “among the objects,” but “the object of life.” Thus when Austen lies for our readerly happiness, we claim that she acts in accordance with what could be termed Carlyle’s anti-self-consciousness theory, though of course she could never have known about it as such. Carlyle was still a student when Austen was publishing her novels.

[22] As we claimed in the beginning of this paper, the author may be compared to a person attempting to befriend other people with pleasing conversation, solely for the purpose of pleasing those people as a friend might. But pleasing others and acting with perfect Christian virtue are not always compatible, as Austen’s deceptions show us. Indeed, Johnson perspicaciously notes that making friends often requires a depreciation of one’s morality, solely for the happiness of one’s friends:

> It were happy if, in forming friendships, virtue could concur with pleasure; but the greatest part of human gratifications approach so nearly to vice that few who make the delight of others their rule of conduct can avoid disingenuous compliances; yet certainly he that suffers himself to be allured from virtue mistakes his own interest, since he gains succour by means, for which his friend, if ever he becomes wise, must scorn him, and for which at last he must scorn himself. (Johnson *Rambler* 160)

Johnson makes the connection that those who attempt “forming friendships” must make “the delight of others their rule of conduct.” His diction, “rule of conduct,” suggests an ethical code independent of explicit Christian values, and bears striking similarity to Mill’s and Carlyle’s anti-self-consciousness theory. Johnson adds, however, that prioritizing the happiness of others is requisite to establishing and maintaining friendship. Thus Elizabeth must cause pain to herself and damage to her virtue by lying to her father for the continuance of his happiness. Anne must bear
another’s selfishness and the guilt of a deception, albeit small, to cure Mary of her moody complaints. Austen herself must misrepresent her own character, in order to be a better friend to her readers. It appears that for a writer who wishes to befriend her readers, the happiness of her prospective friends must take precedence over all else in her conscience; it must even take precedence over her own virtue. We now restate our goal for this thesis, in light of Carlyle’s anti-self-consciousness theory: to study Jane Austen’s craft of befriending and of pleasing the reader with the conversation of friendship, specifically how she demonstrates her desire to prioritize our happiness above all other things, including her own Christian conscience, with her humor.
Chapter Two: It’s all About Us

[1] We recall Andrews’ “laughers’ coterie,” theory, that we use humor to
discover potential friends. We now claim that the teller of a well-crafted joke
demonstrates to us all of the qualities that Johnson requires in a good friend, through
the mechanism of Peter McGraw’s benign-violation theory. The two relevant
passages are Johnson’s definition of friendship and McGraw’s definition of a benign-
violation. We state them side by side, beginning with Johnson:

But friendship, compounded of esteem and love, derives from one its
tenderness, and its permanence from the other; and therefore, requires not
only that its candidates should gain the judgment, but that they should attract
the affections; that they should not only be firm in the day of distress, but gay
in the hour of jollity; not only useful in exigences, but pleasing in familiar life;
their presence should give cheerfulness as well as courage, and dispel alike
the gloom of fear and of melancholy. (Johnson Rambler 64)

We now state McGraw’s definition of humor caused by a benign-violation:

Humor occurs when and only when three conditions are satisfied: (1) a
situation is a violation, (2) the situation is benign, and (3) both perceptions
occur simultaneously. For example, play fighting and tickling, which produce
laughter in humans and other primates, are benign violations because they are
physically threatening but harmless attacks. The theory also explains why
humor sometimes fails – either because the violation involved does not seem
benign, or because it’s so benign there is no violation. For example, play
fighting and tickling cease to elicit laughter either when the attack stops
(strictly benign) or becomes too aggressive (malign violation). (McGraw,
Warner The Humor Code)

Johnson defines friendship as a balance of esteemable and of loveable qualities. His
definition implies that estimable qualities and loveable qualities somehow oppose,
and require, each other. Esteem entails impressive and excellent qualities—
“judgment,” being “firm in the day of distress,” and being “useful in exigences.” All
of these descriptions suggest strength and rationality. For a friend to “gain the
judgment” implies that our own judgment appraises their judgment, and determines it
to be sound, not irrational. Indeed, for one to be “firm in the day of distress” and
“useful in exigences,” one must be rational, as both situations imply a state of danger
in which irrationality would be detrimental.

[2] But Johnson’s implied opposition between “esteem” and “love” suggests
that the qualities that gain esteem do not also gain love. That one has great powers of
reason, that one is highly intelligent and physically strong, may “gain the judgment”
but will not always “attract the affections.” Indeed, he argues in an essay on the vital
importance of “good-humour”—the quality that will “gain a friend”—that
intellectual superiority alone is actually a threatening quality when it has nothing in it
to suggest kindness or friendship:

> Without good-humour, learning and bravery can only confer that superiority
> which swells the heart of the lion in the desert, where he roars without reply,
> and ravages without resistance. Without good-humour, virtue may awe by its
dignity, and amaze by its brightness; but must always be viewed at a distance,
and will scarcely gain a friend or attract an imitator. (Johnson *Rambler* 72)

Thus “learning and bravery,” which imply intellectual and physical superiority
respectively, are a literal threat in Johnson’s opinion; they are “a lion” that “roars”
and “ravages without resistance.” A lion is unpredictable, beastial, and dangerous. It
would be defined as a “threat” in McGraw’s “benign-violation” theory. Johnson
claims that the threatening lion will only “gain a friend,” that is, be deemed
trustworthy and therefore not dangerous, if it possesses good-humour. Good-humor
makes a friend of the lion, that is, it shows us that the lion is “threatening but
harmless.” Thus we see that it is equivalent to the “benign” quality that makes a threatening situation benign in McGraw’s benign-violation theory.

[3] We must define “good-humor,” equivalent in Johnson’s definition of friendship to the qualities of being “lovable” and able to “attract the affections,” and of being “pleasing in familiar life.” We claim that good-humor, or the ability to “please in familiar life,” implies the ability to forget one’s pride, and to be selfless, for the happiness of others. In defining good-humor precisely, Johnson opposes it to braggardry and pride as qualities with which it is incompatible:

Good-humour boasts no faculties which every one does not believe in his own power, and pleases principally by not offending. It is well known that the most certain way to give any man pleasure, is to persuade him that you receive pleasure from him, to encourage him to freedom and confidence, and to avoid any such appearance of superiority as may overbear and depress him.

(Johnson Rambler 72)

Firstly, good-humor does not “boast” superiority to anyone. It desires to lower itself to the same level as everyone else, at least in “appearance.” Good-humor does not desire to appear “superior” because it earnestly desires not to “overbear,” or to “depress” anyone. Here we see a similarity to Austen’s and Johnson’s authorial deceptions discussed earlier. Good-humor personified is willing to deceive its companions with an “appearance” of equality to avoid giving pain. That is, good-humor may be the quality in Austen and Johnson that causes them to lie to their readers, whether to appear less superior or to appear more friendly. When good-humor wishes not to appear proud, it wishes to avoid being a legitimate threat to another person’s happiness. Johnson may imply here that pride is seen sometimes as a threat. Later on in the essay he brings back the subject of threats and their relation to the affections, “We are most inclined to love when we have nothing to fear,” meaning
that to love qualities of superiority such as those intellectual or physical, they must convince us that we have “nothing to fear” from them—again, they are not threats.

[4] We will now show that the opposition between “good-humor” and “learning,” that is, the opposition between the lovable and the estimable qualities in a friend, possesses much in common with the opposition between “heart humor” and “head humor” in Thomas Carlyle’s definition of “true humor,” espoused by Andrews as the defining characteristic of Dickens’ comedy:

> It was Carlyle who elevated the status of humor as part of a humane sensibility. ‘True humor,’ he wrote in his essay on Jean Paul Richter, ‘Springs not more from the head than from the heart; it is not contempt, its essence is love.’ (Carlyle qtd in Andrews 22)

Andrews argues that the universal appeal of Dickens’ comedy proceeds mainly from his “humane sensibility.” We must clarify, however, what Carlyle means by humor of the “head” and of the “heart.” By humor of the “head,” we interpret Carlyle to mean comedy produced by the intellect without influence from the heart, i.e. influence from love or compassion. Carlyle suggests that merriment without love tends towards “contempt.” Indeed, Andrews clarifies that this sort of heartless humor is generally an attempt to “cut” or “crush” the ridiculed object (Andrews 22). It is in line with the traditional definition of wit, which he says was variously “caustic,” “segregating,” and “elitist” (22). Without the softening influence of the heart, comedy will destroy, will burn like caustic acid, will segregate groups against each other, and will cause those few who get the joke to feel elite and superior to others. “Head humor” is dangerous because it has the power to hurt and to destroy. But despite these potentially malevolent qualities, it is necessary to “true humor” in Carlyle’s
definition. “Head humor,” with its hurtful potential, produces the “violation” part of McGraw’s benign-violation theory.

[5] For an explanation of how, exactly, “head humor” produces the “violation” part of McGraw’s benign-violation theory, we turn to William Hazlitt. In an essay on the genius of the 18th century painter William Hogarth, Hazlitt argues that the comedic power of his paintings came from his “passion for the ridiculous,” (emphasis his) literally his passion for ridiculing (Hazlitt 298). Hazlitt compares the satiric comedy of Hogarth with the “indifferent, unimpassioned descriptions of human nature” that characterize the works of another painter, David Wilkie (298). Hazlitt claims that Wilkie lacks interesting subjects. Hogarth, on the contrary, created highly entertaining and comedic works because his primary aim was “to shew vice her own feature, scorn her own image” and that he “never looks at any object but to find out a moral or ludicrous effect” (298-9). Hogarth possesses the caustic quality of “wit,” whose spirit is “contempt,” as defined by Andrews above. But it is this contempt that makes his works interesting and entertaining. Without wit, or a desire (possibly malicious) “to shew vice her own feature, scorn her own image,” his paintings would be boring. Without a violation, a benign-violation is just benign, and therefore boring.

[6] But Carlyle requires that comedy must proceed equally from “heart humor,” and that the essence of “true humor” is “love.” Using Johnson’s term, true humor must proceed from “good-humor.” Andrews terms “love” the “benign faculty,” and again quotes Carlyle for clarification of the “benign faculty”: a “warm, tender fellow-feeling with all forms of existence” (Carlyle qtd in Andrews 22). The
“benign faculty” saves wit from becoming caustic. We wonder at the coincidence of the name “benign faculty”—that which saves humor from devolving into harshness and contempt, with the name “benign-violation.” Andrews stresses that wit that can “cut” or “crush” its objects, so in “benign-violation” theory, it is a threatening violation that thus requires the identically named “benign faculty” to render it harmless. We feel that Samuel Taylor Coleridge, also describing the genius of Hogarth, best accounts for the dual necessity of threatening violations and the “benign faculty.” He writes that the comedic genius possesses:

A spirit of reconciliation and human kindness; and, even when the attention is no longer consciously directed to the cause of this feeling, still blends its tenderness with our laughter: and thus prevents the instructive merriment at the whims of nature or the foibles or humours of our fellow-men from degenerating into the heart-poison of contempt or hatred. (Coleridge Biographia Literaria)

We see a similar repetition of the need for benign influence to soften the harshness of “instructive merriment,” or “caustic wit.” He gives the direst injunction to a comedian, the need to remember that we are all fellows to each other, and that we all deserve to be treated with “a spirit of reconciliation and human kindness,” because we are all humans—we are all fellows to each other. Therefore even if we see or wish to see contemptible (or hateable) “foibles” in our “fellow-men,” if we wish to aspire to the kind of comedic genius that Coleridge here describes, we must approach these “foibles” with “reconciliation and human kindness.” If we do not aspire to such tenderness, we kill our hearts with “heart-poison”—we no longer feel “merriment” but “hatred.” While intellectual perspicacity is “estimable” it may “degenerate” into self-destructive “hatred” without the “spirit of reconciliation” that reminds us we are equal fellows with our “fellow men” (Johnson Rambler 60; Coleridge Biographia
Thus he explicitly warns that attempts “to shew vice her own feature, scorn her own image,” may become overly threatening violations if not made benign by “tenderness” and “reconciliation” for the “whims...of our fellow-men.”

[7] Coleridge and Carlyle emphasize the same things in their definitions of great comedy: on one side the necessity of “warm, tender fellow-feeling with all forms of existence” or “a spirit of reconciliation and human kindness...at the whims of nature or the foibles or humours of our fellow-men”; and on the other side, the injunction never to “contempt” (or “hate”) one’s fellow humans. They warn that one should never feel “contempt” or “hatred” as the guiding spirit when writing comedy. Indeed, Coleridge implies that hatred causes a “degeneration” of the comedic genius, and is self-destructive “heart-poison.” The importance that both place on “fellow-feeling” with one’s “fellow-men” implies that a comedian must understand he is simply a person among people. His fellows are those with whom he laughs, and those at whom he laughs. The comedian, in other words, cannot feel elevated, more important, or more virtuous than others, because he must remember that the “foibles” and “vices” of others are equally his own.

[8] Johnson laments that people with the power to please, possessed of intellectual excellences such as wit and learning, may be overcome by pride and selfishness: “It is by some unfortunate mistake that almost all those who have any claim to esteem or love, press their pretensions with too little consideration of others” (Johnson *Rambler* 72). Objectively superior qualities merit “esteem or love,” but they may only be deserved when one considers others—that is, considers how others feel. As we have previously shown, the employment of the “benign faculty” and “fellow-
“feeling” requires the “consideration of others,” meaning that one must consider the feelings of others because they are one’s fellows, and therefore essentially the same as oneself. In other words, understanding how to make a violation benign requires the “consideration of others” and “warm, tender fellow-feeling.” This connotation of the “benign faculty,” to consider other’s feelings if they were one’s own, has the same charitable spirit as Johnson’s explicit definition of “good-humour.” He defines good-humour as “a state between gaiety and unconcern; the act or emanation of a mind at leisure to regard the gratification of another” (Johnson Rambler 72). It is, in Johnson’s definition, the act of thinking about how to make other people happy.

Good-humour balances the threatening qualities of “learning and bravery,” or of “caustic wit,” so we find that the consideration of others’ feelings, as if they were one’s own, is the defining trait that allows one to make violations benign, and to attract friends and love. The phrase “regarding the gratification of another” recalls the sentiment behind Mill’s description of the practice of anti-self-consciousness, “have [one’s] mind fixed on some object other than [one’s] own happiness; on the happiness of others.” So the practice of anti-self-consciousness and the practice of good-humor have the similar aims of considering the happiness of others. We sum up our findings at this juncture: the construction of Carlyle’s “true-humor” requires the same elements as the construction of a benign-violation: intellectually excellent “wit” (possibly hateful or contemting) that perceives sources of ridicule, softened with a “spirit of reconciliation and human kindness,” that considers the feelings and happiness of one’s fellows as if they were one’s own—in the mode of anti-self-consciousness.
We now consider a scene in which Austen demonstrates her capacity for considering the feelings of others as if they were her own, while simultaneously evincing a mastery of “wit” and perception of the ridiculous, as that lauded in Hogarth by Hazlitt. When Emma hears that the newly wealthy Coles are hosting a dinner party, she scorns the possibility of their sending invitations to the landed upper class—Hartfield, Donwell, and Randalls. She exercises supreme snobbery by imagining to herself the lesson she must teach the Coles in her rejection of their invitation—“they ought to be taught that it was not for them to arrange the terms on which the superior families would visit them” (Austen *Emma* 163). The only problem with her elitist scheme is that the letter never arrives—“Donwell and Randalls had received their invitation, and none had come for her father and herself” (163). The comedic turn begins at this point—the very families with whom Emma feels herself united in both friendship and class have been invited, but she herself has not. She refers to the invitations as “their invitations,” which expresses a possessive feeling about them, and opens the subtle possibility that she feels a desire to possess her own. There is also some forlornness in her next remark, “and none had come for her father and herself;” the conjunction “and,” rather than a new sentence, indicates her feeling of a connection with Donwell and Randalls; she thinks of those houses and her own as a unit, so she feels left out of a group in which she is usually included.

We recall our earlier claim that Austen prioritizes the reader’s happiness and the reader’s feelings as if she were our real-life friend, so we will study the ways in which Austen entertains the reader in this scene with regards to our happiness. Using our claim from the beginning of the chapter, the comedy of the scene may be
described as acting via a benign-violation. First Emma seems to value snobbery and elitism over friendship, which causes her to appear narrow-minded and dislikable. Were she to seriously hold to such warped values, we might view her with the same dislike that we have for Lady Catherine. Indeed, Emma threatens to turn into someone as proud and irritating, which danger creates the “violation” of the scene. Through free indirect discourse, Emma attempts to rise above the common Coles, above her own friends, (“she had little hope of Mr. Knightley, and none of Mr. Weston” teaching them of their low place (163)), and even out of the reader’s affections: “The Coles were very respectable in their way, but they ought to be taught that it was not for them to arrange the terms on which the superior families would visit them” (163). The patronizing tone with which she judges the Cole’s “respectability” and asserts her own superiority, would be unbearable as a permanent trait in our protagonist. With the “heart-poison” of her elitism, she would become the object of our “contempt and hatred”—so we see the need for Coleridge’s and Carlyle’s “benign faculty.”

Austen renders the scene benign by incrementally revealing to us, over the course of the next paragraph, that Emma’s professed elitism is a self-deception—she reveals a painful and pitiable need for friendship, and a fear of being left out of a fun event. Her pathetic forlornness with which the reader can sympathize evoke our “tenderness,” and our “fellow-feeling” for her. By depicting her in a recognizable and common state of suffering, Austen employs the “spirit of reconciliation” that renders Emma’s initial violations benign. She receives the reader’s sympathy:

As the idea of the party to be assembled there, consisting precisely of those whose society was dearest to her, occurred again and again, she did not know
that she might not have been tempted to accept. Harriet was to be there in the evening, and the Bateses. They had been speaking of it as they walked about Highbury the day before, and Frank Churchill had most earnestly lamented her absence. Might not the evening end in a dance? had been a question of his. The bare possibility of it acted as a further irritation on her spirits; and her being left in solitary grandeur, even supposing the omission to be intended as a compliment, was but poor comfort. (163)

This is an important moment for the benign-violation, because if Austen does not succeed in making Emma’s elitism (the violation) somehow benign, then the scene will lose its comic power—Emma will remain narrow-minded, less complex and less human, and less enjoyable of a character. Two of the “benign” moments have directly corresponding “violation” moments. When Emma proudly says “nothing should tempt her to go,” the emphasis denoted by the italics suggests her pride in her lone elevation by elitist standards. The corresponding “benign” line is, “she did not know that she might not have been tempted to accept.” She says the exact opposite thing in this second line, even with the same verb of “tempt.” Further, the tones of the two are opposite each other—first a tone of self-assurance with the superlative “nothing” and the force of the italicized pronoun, then the corresponding self-doubt with the convolutedly worded double-negative and lack of firm opinion, “she did not know that she might not have.” With Emma’s diffident diction in the “benign” line, Austen employs a technique of gaining affections laid out by Johnson: "Diffidence... conciliates the proud, and softens the severe; averts envy from excellence, and censure from miscarriage” (Johnson Rambler 159). The “severity” that we might be feeling towards Emma becomes “softened” when we see her earnest self-doubt.

[12] The next “violation” comes from Emma’s apparent desire to pain the Coles: “she regretted that her father’s known habits would be giving her refusal less meaning than she could wish” (Austen Emma 163). That her father often refuses
invitations because of his health, might cause the Coles to interpret Emma’s refusal as regretful—as though she would have gone if her father were able. Instead, she wishes the Coles to feel the cut of her elitist lesson, “that it was not for them to arrange the terms on which the superior families would visit them.” In other words, rather than generously exercising kindness and allowing “her father’s known habits” to be a good excuse, she “wishes” the power to humiliate and pain the Coles with more “meaning” in her refusal—the word “mean” here may have malicious connotations, i.e. Emma wishes “meanness,” or unkindness, towards the Coles. But the “benign” moment comes when, instead of seeing her unjustly humiliating the “friendly, liberal, and unpretending Coles” who deserve no such pain, we rather see her experiencing pitiful (and sympathetic) humiliation because of her lovable need for friendship. Her need for friendship overrules her elitism: “as the idea of the party to be assembled there, consisting precisely of those whose society was dearest to her, occurred again and again, she did not know that she might not have been tempted to accept.” The greatest temptation to abandon her professed snobbery is the idea of a party with “those whose society was dearest to her.” The idea of a party with her “dearest” friends is so important to her that she cannot stop thinking about it—the thought “occurred again and again.” Indeed, she finally confesses that, compared to a party with her “dearest” friends, “solitary grandeur...was but poor comfort.” Despite what she may have said initially about class divisions, she reveals under a test that the “solitary grandeur” of elitism is “poor” compared to a party “with those whose society was dearest to her.” Of course she only admits that such “elitism” is “poor,” not that it is “worthless.” Thus we do not receive full benign exoneration of her initial malicious desire.
Thus Austen balances the initially isolating and unsympathetic snobbery with corresponding sympathetic and appealing forlornness. Further, the feeling of exclusion must be depicted in a universal and recognizable way, so that every reader will pity and forgive Emma. Austen shows her capacity for “fellow-feeling” by noticing the worst pains that anyone would experience in being excluded from a fun event. She traces each recognizable bad feeling, and its source. First Emma cannot stop thinking about the party, “as the idea” occurs “again and again.” She recalls that her friends Harriet and Frank Churchill will also be there, without her. But Austen shows her mastery of compassionate “fellow-feeling” with the next two sources of pain: hearing one’s friends talk about how fun the event will be—“they had been speaking of it as they walked about Highbury the day before,” and imagining the fun activities that they will be enjoying together—“might not the evening end in a dance?” Austen, somehow, knows that these final two “irritations on [one’s] spirits” will be the worst and most universally sympathetic. We also notice, with regard to her readerly empathy, that she carefully balances both sides of the “benign-violation.” Had she illustrated Emma’s elitist snobbery with less irritating superciliousness, the violation would not have been threatening or strong enough for the corresponding benign pathos. The reader would rather have pitied her than laughed at her. With a less morally censurable initial “violation” (recalling Hazlitt), the pathos might have become tragic because the reader would have felt as though an innocent person’s hopes for happiness at a party was being crushed.
Chapter Three: The Raising and Lowering Action of Benign-Violations, Threatening Intelligence and Lovable Humility

[1] In the scene analyzed at the end of the previous chapter, there is a benign-violation on the part of the narrator herself. The action of this type of benign-violation demonstrates superior (threatening) qualities to a friend and subsequently avows good-humored equality (making the threat benign) with that friend. We will study this raising and lowering action in this chapter. To begin with, we will study the scene analyzed in the previous chapter. There Austen evinces enormous powers of intellect—she has worked out a universally common emotion, discovered its universal sources, and depicted it in a delightful way. The “estimable” genius she shows here threatens to “overbear and depress” us, because of the brilliant discernment she evinces in discovering the universal causes of Emma’s pain (Johnson Rambler 60; Rambler 72). She “gains the judgment,” but she also proceeds to “attract the affections” because the perfect detail of exclusionary pain that she relates seems as though it could only have been discovered from personal experience. Many of the emotionally weighted lines use pronouns rather than proper nouns, whose generalizability allows them to be conceptually reapplied to any other person without loss of accuracy: regarding the invitations—“none had come for her father and herself;” then “the idea of the party to be assembled there, consisting precisely of those whose society was dearest to her, occurred again and again,” then “they had been speaking of it as they walked about.” Thus the lines may be reapplied anywhere, even to the narrator herself. In allowing such generalizability, she opens up the suggestion to the reader that she herself has been in this situation before, and experienced its pain and humiliation. By allowing herself to be identified with
Emma’s awful state, she lowers herself in this moment to a common level with Emma and with the reader. She is not too proud to admit that she may have felt such pain before, and in this admission she renders herself sympathetic to the reader. That is, she uses good-humor to bring herself down to our level so that she does not “depress” us, and thus evinces her compassionate “fellow-feeling” in not wishing us to feel pained at her genius. Even so, we remain awed by her genius of wit, or “head humor.”

[2] We now claim that the demonstration of superior rational (threatening) qualities to a friend and subsequently demonstrating one’s good-humored equality and selflessness (making the threat benign) with that friend, defines the punch-line of a well-crafted joke. First we claim that because good-humor implies an absence of pride, it implies rationality. Johnson defines pride in his dictionary as “inordinate and unreasonable self-esteem” (Johnson Dictionary 1568). We also reference Pope’s attribution of all irrationality and incorrect reason to pride, “In pride, in reasoning pride, our error lies;” and “From pride, from pride, our very reasoning springs; Account for moral, as for natural things” (Pope Essay on Man). Pope and Johnson point to the universally apparent effects of pride, so when we see a proud person, on some level we must register that their pride indicates unreasonable self-esteem, or just unreasonableness in general. We see that they value themselves without reason, so when we witness a person acting proudly we see a proof of their irrationality of their self-opinion. Because Johnson requires that our friends must have reasonable judgment that will be “useful in exigences,” we have trouble befriending those who so obviously demonstrate their irrational judgment of themselves.
Thus pride indicates irrational self-valuation and selfishness, which promote superior pretensions, which may appear as a threat. So pride and good-humor (selflessness and rationality) are opposed—pride is a threat, and good-humor is an assurance of safety. Perhaps this opposition is why self-deprecation is a prevalent technique in comedy, both in Austen and Johnson’s time, and today. When someone self-deprecates, they attempt to lower themselves to a humiliated (i.e. without pride, as defined in Johnson’s dictionary) state. In showing themselves to be without pride, they demonstrate rationality and an opinion of their own value that is no higher than our own. Johnson describes the process of using good-humor to lower oneself to the level of one’s interlocutors as the process of showing that one is not a threat:

The darlings of the world will, indeed, be generally found such as excite neither jealousy nor fear, and are not considered as candidates for any eminent degree of reputation, but content themselves with common accomplishments, and endeavour rather to solicit kindness than to raise esteem. (Johnson *Rambler* 72)

When one self-deprecates, one attempts to show one’s interlocutors that they should feel “neither jealousy nor fear.” Despite one’s threatening accomplishments of “learning and bravery,” self-deprecation attempts to show one’s interlocutors that one possesses only “common accomplishments,” and should be “considered as [a] candidate for any eminent degree of reputation.” In benign-violation theory, “learning and bravery” are the threat, and the self-deprecation an attempt to show one’s harmlessness. Johnson remarks on the necessity of self-deprecation among those possessed of threateningly superior accomplishments:

I question whether some abatement of character is not necessary to general acceptance. Few spend their time with much satisfaction under the eye of uncontestable superiority; and therefore, among those whose presence is
courted at assemblies of jollity, there are seldom found men eminently distinguished for powers or acquisitions. The wit whose vivacity condemns slower tongues to silence, the scholar whose knowledge allows no man to fancy that he instructs him, the critick who suffers no fallacy to pass undetected, and the reasoner who condemns the idle to thought, and the negligent to attention, are generally praised and feared, reverenced and avoided. (Johnson Rambler 188)

Good-humor attempts to convince us not only that a superior person is not a threat, but that they are not in fact superior at all. Our own irrational self-esteem allows us to be deceived by the successful self-deprecator. Perhaps self-deprecation’s power of convincing us of the friendliness of our interlocutor explains why Johnson chose to name his essay series with the humiliating titles of The Rambler and The Idler.

[4] But a well-crafted joke that demonstrates good-humor with generous selflessness and rationality in the punch-line is more than just self-deprecation. The punch-line of a well-crafted joke must also demonstrate selflessness and rationality. We recall that because good-humor implies an absence of pride, it therefore implies rationality. We also recall the similarity between Johnson’s definition of good-humor and John Stuart Mill’s definition of anti-self-consciousness. Good humor “regards the gratification of another” and anti-self-consciousness “fixes the mind...on the happiness of others.” So a good punchline should demonstrate rationality and a mind fixed on the happiness of others, because according to Johnson these are the two qualities that friendship requires, “not only that its candidates should gain the judgment, but that they should attract the affections” respectively and simultaneously.

[5] Thus a punchline must: show one’s rational ability to perceive the truth, show that one’s abilities are not a threat—that they carry no danger of scorning or hurting one’s friends, and show, conversely, that one values the happiness of the “joke hearer” above one’s own. Opposite to posing a threat to one’s safety, one’s
rational superiority as a selfless friend must rather affirm that one’s rationality will be a boon to a friend in danger, “firm in the day of distress” and “useful in exigences.”

We must define, however, the way that one demonstrates rational abilities with a joke. We will here find helpful the definition of “wit” from Johnson’s dictionary—a quote from John Locke:

> Wit lying most in the assemblage of ideas, and putting those together with quickness and variety, wherein can by found any resemblance, or congruity, thereby to make up pleasant pictures in the fancy. (Locke qtd in Johnson Dictionary 2286)

The 18th century moralist and philosopher Joseph Addison refines Locke’s definition of wit for a more accurate description:

> I shall only add to it, by way of Explanation, That every Resemblance of Ideas is not that which we call Wit, unless it be such an one that gives Delight and Surprise to the Reader: These two Properties seem essential to Wit, more particularly the last of them. (Locke qtd. in Addison Spectator 62)

The most important part of wit is that the “assemblage of ideas” produces “delight and surprise to the reader.” I claim that the skill in discovering such a “resemblance, or congruity” in “an the assemblage of ideas” is a proof of one’s humility and reasoning abilities, which please our friends both because of the secrets they discover to us in our own irrationality, and because the proof of humility reaffirms our friends’ good-humor.

[6] Accordingly, Johnson describes the defining trait of the wit that his friend Richard Savage evinced in exactly these terms:

> [He] formed a happy combination of topics, which any other man would have thought it very difficult to connect in one view, but which he has united in such a manner, that the relation between them appears natural; and it may be justly said, that what no other man would have thought on, it now appears scarcely possible for any man to miss. (Johnson Life of Savage 289)
Savage had the problem-solving ability to discover truths “hidden in plain sight,” to paraphrase Johnson with an idiom. Somehow Savage could comprehend and connect concepts in a way that everyone could immediately understand as obvious, but that no one could have discovered before. From Johnson’s praise of his friend’s wit, we infer that he derived happiness from learning how to reason with the benefit of Savage’s insights.

[7] Richard Steele makes a similar remark in a late *Spectator* eulogizing his friend Richard Estcourt: “He had so exquisite a Discerning of what was defective in any Object before him, that in an Instant he could shew you the ridiculous Side of what would pass for beautiful and just, even to Men of no ill Judgment, before he had pointed at the Failure” (Steele *Spectator* 468). Steele extols Estcourt’s “exquisite” powers of discernment, that could discover hidden flaws and ridiculous sides of objects even to “Men of no ill Judgment.” The quality of being secretly “ridiculous” or “defective” though appearing “beautiful and just” to “Men of no ill Judgment” suggests that some secret irrationalities or flaws require more than just judgment to discover them.

Finally, we note that Johnson himself receives similar praise to that he gave Savage, and that Steele gave Estcourt. Johnson’s dear friend and biographer Hester Thrale praises Johnson: “No man so acutely discerned the reason of every fact, the motive of every action, the end of every design” (Gross *Mentoring Jane Austen*). In each quoted example, we see a friend admiring—with apparent consternation—the genius of discernment evinced by their friend in conversation. As testified to by Mrs. Thrale and any perusal of their works, Johnson and Steele are certainly “Men of no ill
Judgment.” Yet they both had friends whose discerning powers impressed them, about which they express admiration.

Modern day humor theorists would describe the discernment of Savage, Estcourt, and Johnson as exceptional “pattern recognition,” a theory of humor propounded by Alastair Clarke that has commonalities with the definition of wit given by Locke and Addison:

The theory is an evolutionary and cognitive explanation of how and why any individual finds anything funny. Effectively it explains that humour occurs when the brain recognizes a pattern that surprises it, and that recognition of this sort is rewarded with the experience of the humorous response, an element of which is broadcast as laughter...An ability to recognize patterns instantly and unconsciously has proved a fundamental weapon in the cognitive arsenal of human beings. The humorous reward has encouraged the development of such faculties, leading to the unique perceptual and intellectual abilities of our species...stand-up comedy regularly features what we might call the It's so true form of humour. The brain recognizes a two-term pattern of repetition between the comedian's depiction and its retained mental image, and if the recognition is surprising, it will be found amusing. (Clarke The Pattern Recognition Theory of Humour).

That is, Savage, Estcourt, and Johnson all demonstrated their value to their friends with their ability to “recognize patterns instantly and unconsciously,” which ability, “a fundamental weapon in the cognitive arsenal of human beings,” reassures their friends that they will be “useful in exigences” and “firm in the day of distress.” But this demonstration of superior “pattern recognition” also requires good-humor to make it non-threatening.

[8] We will use the humor theory above to study the comedy of a scene in Emma, in which she threatens to achieve superior moral character to the reader by practicing continuous charity towards Jane Fairfax. Her initial moral superiority and rational self-awareness, if continued successfully, threaten to turn Emma into a new perfect Jane—thereby robbing the reader of our sympathetically flawed protagonist.
The threat of Emma becoming a new Jane is roughly opposite to the threat analyzed in the previous chapter, of Emma becoming a new Lady Catherine. The comedic moment occurs when Emma fails in her attempt at good-will and “every thing relapses much into its usual state” to the reader’s relief (Austen *Emma* 132). She shows that she cannot change her moral character any more easily than the reader, and so remains on our level of virtue.

[9] Austen begins the scene’s comedic action by showing Emma’s rationality and self-awareness. She begins with a question in indirect discourse: “Why she did not like Jane Fairfax might be a difficult question to answer” (130). We immediately discover, however, that the question is not difficult to answer:

Mr. Knightley had once told her it was because she saw in her the really accomplished young woman, which she wanted to be thought herself; and though the accusation had been eagerly refuted at the time, there were moments of self-examination in which her conscience could not quite acquit her. (130)

That is, Emma dislikes Jane for the petty reason that Emma feels envious of her. She sees in her a reproach of her own inconstant application to self-improvement, although the reproach comes entirely from her own projections. That Emma’s “conscience could not quite acquit her” of Mr. Knightley’s suggestion is equivalent to saying that her conscience finds her guilty of his suggestion—Emma’s conscience knows the true reasons, but Emma herself only understands the truth at “moments,” rather than constantly. She further demonstrates rationality and self-awareness by recognizing her own irrationality: she confesses through indirect discourse that “it was a dislike so little just—every imputed fault was so magnified by fancy, that she never saw Jane Fairfax the first time after any considerable absence, without feeling that she had injured her” (131). Emma describes her dislike towards Jane as “so little
just,” and “so magnified by fancy.” She understands the lack of fairness, of “justness,” that she exercises towards Jane. She also perceives that her “fancy” is to blame for her unfair dislike. As the “fancy” and the “reason” are traditionally opposed, we understand the implication that Emma recognizes her reason to be at fault. Indeed, she feels guilty with the conscious knowledge of unjust, unfair action towards Jane when she feels as though “she had injured her.” By recognizing her own unfairness, Emma demonstrates estimable self-awareness and rationality.

[10] But Emma’s recognition of her unfairness does not yet threaten to outclass the reader’s own character. The next step in the comedic build-up, Emma’s resolution to “render justice” to Jane and “dislike her no longer,” performs that action. Emma experiences remorse for her unfair attitude towards Jane during her first visit to the Bates’ house, and finds it “impossible to feel anything but compassion and respect” towards her. She then leaves “with such softened, charitable feelings, as made her look around in walking home, and lament that Highbury afforded no young man worthy of giving her independence; nobody that she could wish to scheme about for her” (132). Austen denotes the apparent moral breakthrough with all the words of loving religion that Emma uses through indirect discourse to describe her new feelings towards Jane, “dislike her no longer,” “compassion,” “respect,” “softened, charitable feelings,” “pitiable,” “honourable,” “purest of motives,” and “lament” for her neighbour’s misfortune.” The overpowering goodwill, if rendered a permanent in Emma’s character, would make her as proper and boring as Jane Fairfax herself. We begin to feel our own character somewhat degraded in comparison with Emma’s newfound charity. Further, the redundancy of
words of generous feeling that Emma uses begins, by the end of the series, to chagrin the reader somewhat with sanctimony or self-righteousness—(not unlike how any readers of this thesis may feel towards its author).

[11] Thus Austen builds a readerly expectation that Emma will become a new person, will forgive Jane Fairfax, and overcome all of her own jealousies and pettiness. In doing so she will lose the ability to be so entertaining with her foibles, and the novel will lose its main comedic player. But renders the threat to our virtue and to our pleasure “benign” with the simple line, “these were charming feelings—but not lasting” (132). We realize that, rather than having actually become a new and perfectly charitable person, Emma rather was “charmed” by her sentiments—she was under a brief spell that changed the way she felt regardless of her actual inclinations. The second half of the sentence, “—but not lasting,” relieves our fears that have been building for the last page and a half. In a flash we see that she is not actually in danger of becoming a new Jane, rather the whole feeling of charity was another illustration of Emma’s sympathetic fault earlier noticed by Mr. Knightley, “will never submit to any thing requiring industry and patience” (30). The curtness with which the narrator describes Emma’s relapse to her old aversion, three short words, feels like a perfectly punching punchline, in part because its length contrasts with the preceding page and a half of charitable thoughts.

[12] The threat that Emma poses to the reader, of outclassing his own virtue by comparison, is brought crashing down (satisfyingly) to the reader’s comfortable level. We see Emma exhibit impatience, irrational anger, and malicious suspicion towards Jane where moments before we saw nothing but perfect charity and good-
will. Now that we know the fact that Emma fails in her attempt at self-elevation, we must see her failure in action (angry thoughts) that render her threatening charity benign. The angry thoughts that we see are the necessary counterparts to the earlier charitable thoughts—each irritant that angers her corresponds in a generally symmetrical way to her earlier forgiving love. Briefly, “former provocations re-appeared” corresponds to “she would dislike her no longer”; the “aunt was as tiresome as ever; more tiresome, because anxiety for her health was now added to admiration of her powers” corresponds to “it seemed impossible to feel any thing but compassion and respect”; the next two correspond to the same charitable feeling, “Emma was obliged to play; and the thanks and praise which necessarily followed appeared to her an affectation of candour, an air of greatness, meaning only to shew off in higher style her own very superior performance,” and “Her caution was thrown away. Emma saw its artifice, and returned to her first surmises” to “Emma was very willing now to acquit her of having seduced Mr. Dixon's actions from his wife or of any thing mischievous which her imagination had suggested at first” (132-3). The irrationality of her behavior is evident to us because we are not involved, and our own pride is not threatened by Jane’s superiority.

[13] But the scene takes another comedic turn. In her irrational anger (motivated by competitiveness and pride) towards Jane, we see Emma becoming almost too irrational. When she refers to Jane’s reservation, (as yet unillustrated by any direct quotes in the text) she claims that she “saw its artifice, and returned to her first surmises…” and proceeds to give delusional and unfounded claims that appear so “magnified by fancy” as to appear almost like madness. Here we begin to feel
threatened by Emma’s apparently irrational anger, and another “benign violation” begins. The violation is our belief that Emma is getting irrationally angry at Jane’s supposed reservation. We feel that she cannot truly be all *that* reserved. But then we hear her speak for the first time, and realize our mistake:

‘Was he handsome?’—‘She believed he was reckoned a very fine young man.’ ‘Was he agreeable?’—‘He was generally thought so.’ ‘Did he appear a sensible young man; a young man of information?’—‘At a watering-place, or in a common London acquaintance, it was difficult to decide on such points. Manners were all that could be safely judged of, under a much longer knowledge than they had yet had of Mr. Churchill. She believed everybody found his manners pleasing.’ (133)

We side with Emma, and through the three part build of Jane’s impossibly cold and reserved comments, the threat of Emma’s anger is made benign by the realization that Jane is truly as reserved as Emma says. Finally, the line “Emma could not forgive her” returns us to a feeling of friendship and equality with Emma. We are united as friends in perception of Jane’s threatening coldness. Our corroboration with Emma makes us feel safer against Jane’s “violation,” which renders it benign.

[14] We will now study the comedy of irrationality in the scene in which Harriet confesses to saving trinkets that have some relation to Mr. Elton, and subsequently throws them in the fire (264-7). The way Austen structures this scene builds up immense expectation before the revelation of—rubbish. But the pattern suggesting an important reveal, and its termination with rubbish, only partially describes the comedic action of the scene. Most of our laughter comes from the revelation that Harriet’s irrational behavior is our own. Crucially, Austen discovers our irrationality to us with forgiving good-humor. Austen uses a pattern of melodramatic suggestions of information withheld to build our expectation of an
important reveal: “There was a seriousness in Harriet’s manner which prepared her, quite as much as her words, for something more than ordinary,” the initial mention of “a sort of confession,” the inscription on top of her parcel “Most precious treasures,” Harriet’s stuttering hesitation in speaking that draws out the moment of revelation, and the sympathetic focalization through Emma with the line, “her curiosity was greatly excited. Harriet unfolded the parcel, and she looked on with impatience.”

Austen builds the reader’s expectations for a dramatic something with the pattern of importantly connotated words: “more than ordinary,” “precious treasures,” “curiosity was greatly excited,” etc. When the reveal comes, the surprise of the rubbish certainly causes amusement. More important, Austen reveals to us, the readers, our own irrational behavior. The sharpened contrast between Emma’s and Harriet’s feelings about the rubbish reveal to us the true, objective value of trinkets kept because of one’s cherished crush: worthless. Austen shows us the irrational importance that Harriet places on the objects, and the rational disregard that Emma shows for them. The alternating presentations of irrationality and rationality heighten the contrast and make the irrational appear all the more irrational. (We determine rationality from Emma’s reactions to the objects, disappointedly plain descriptions that reveal their objective value: “only a piece of court plaister,” and “the end of an old pencil,—the part without any lead.”) The joy we feel in the recognition of Harriet’s irrationality is the joy of resolving our own irrationalities into rational views imbued with truth from our friend Austen.

[15] The funniest line (in my opinion) of the whole scene comes when Harriet tells the story of how she acquired the “small piece of court plaister.” She carefully
works through the intricate details leading up to and surrounding the scene with an incredible memory:

A very few days before I had my sore throat—just before Mr. and Mrs. John Knightley came—I think the very evening.—Do not you remember his cutting his finger with your new pen-knife, and your recommending court plaister?—But as you had none about you, and knew I had, you desired me to supply him; so I took mine out and cut him a piece; but it was a great deal too large, and he cut it smaller, and kept playing some time with what was left, before he gave it back to me. And so then, in my nonsense, I could not help making a treasure of it—so I put it by never to be used, and looked at it now and then as a great treat” (266).

The highest laugh of the story is in its conclusion, when she reverentially describes herself worshipping the worthless object. The laugh comes from a multitude of factors, the most important of which is the realization, in our own minds, of the irrationality with which we have reverenced trinkets from crushes—trinkets that our crushes discarded as worthless. Austen has noticed the irrational contradiction in our behavior, and rectifies the mistake for us with good-humor, never scorn or contempt [Carlyle, Andrews, Coleridge Benign Faculty]. We laugh when we realize a contradiction being resolved for our minds. The other important detail of the scene is our knowledge that Harriet no longer receives real pain from the objects, and regards them now with more rational—if not yet completely rational—understanding. She does not seem deranged by love, and even describes her own behavior as “nonsense” and as an attempt to show Emma “how rational [she has] grown.” But she still exhibits some irrationality; when she describes the court plaister as a “great treat” she still seems to love it dearly. In this way Harriet herself performs a benign-violation.

We must also consider the endearing good-humor with which Austen paints this scene, not as one contemptuously shoving our foolishness in our faces, but as one remarking with good-natured embarrassment, never judgment, at our actions. She
accomplishes this first by refraining from including any narratorial opinions on the scene, or Harriet’s actions. Almost the entire scene takes place in dialogue, with Austen providing the most modest description possible of each object. Had she described the objects with adjectives of laughter or scorn, we feel that we may have felt her wit slightly too sharply.
Chapter Four: Empathy Gives New Perspectives, and Not Just Comedic Ones

[1] We will now turn to a discussion of the universally likable characters that Austen depicts in *Emma*, and to the qualities that make them so likable. We will attempt to determine possible opinions that Austen herself may have held regarding attracting and pleasing one’s friends. Most prominent among universally liked characters in the world of *Emma* is Miss Bates, “a woman whom no one named without good-will” and “very much to the taste of every body” (17, 69). The narrator tells us of the universal popularity that Miss Bates possesses:

> It was her own universal good-will and contented temper which worked such wonders. She loved every body, was interested in every body’s happiness, quicksighted to every body’s merits...The simplicity and cheerfulness of her nature, her contented and grateful spirit, were a recommendation to every body, and a mine of felicity to herself. (17-8)

Austen unambiguously informs us that these qualities allow Miss Bates to be a “woman whom no one named without good-will”—a search for Austen’s opinions on how to please people and gain universal popularity would end here, were these the qualities of universal friendship rather than universal good-will. Miss Bates possesses undeniably lovable qualities, but we wonder whether she also has qualities to “gain the judgment” and the “esteem,” to use Johnson’s definition. Indeed, the “simplicity” and “contented temper” which are “a recommendation to every body” recall Johnson’s characterizations of good-humour as “content...with common accomplishments,” “endeavour[ing] rather to solicit kindness than to raise esteem,” and without “any such appearance of superiority as may overbear and depress.” That is, Austen may here suggest that it is partially because Miss Bates lacks “superior” qualities—“neither young, handsome, rich, nor married” and with “no intellectual superiority”—when coupled with her “simplicity” and “contented” spirit, that she is
“a recommendation to every body.” The “cheerfulness of her nature” despite her low and unfortunate state in life may simply help other people to feel good about themselves.

[2] But Miss Bates possesses more than a satisfyingly depreciated-yet-cheerful position in life. She also possesses “universal good-will”: “she love[s] every body,” is “interested in every body’s happiness, quicksighted to every body’s merits.” Indeed, Emma feels that she loves rather too indiscriminately and criticizes her to Harriet for being “so undistinguishing and unfastidious” (68). Although without “intellectual superiority” or “fastidiousness,” yet she is “quicksighted to every body’s merits.” That she “loves every body,” is “quicksighted to every body’s merits” suggests that she may rather look for qualities that she likes about people and in which she can take happiness, rather than than for faults. Indeed, Emma’s accusation that she is “so undistinguishing and unfastidious” indicates an opinion that Miss Bates should rather find more to dislike in people, and should not love so blindly and indiscriminately. We see a comparison here to Emma herself, who when she first meets Mrs. Elton, “she did not really like her. She would not be in a hurry to find fault, but...[she goes on to find faults with fastidiousness]” (211). Indeed, we find a pattern in Emma that some kinds of love actually prevent characters from seeing faults in their loved ones, or at least can cause them to overlook these faults. We see examples of this in the love that Isabella has for “those she doated on, full of their merits, blind to their faults,” and in the love Mrs. Weston has for Emma, “such an affection for her as could never find fault” (111, 6). We see a dramatic case of this love in that which Emma, “really loved extremely” by Harriet, receives from her (210). Upon learning
that Emma has manipulated her and caused her pain, Harriet’s “extreme” love prevents her from feeling any wrong from Emma, or any injury to herself: “you, who have been the best friend I ever had in my life...I care for nobody as I do for you! Oh! Miss Woodhouse, how ungrateful I have been!” (210) Her selfless love causes her to attribute an imagined blame to herself, rather than to “find fault” with Emma.

[3] Love appears to imply a refusal to find fault in those whom we love, which may help explain Miss Bates’ universal popularity. Because she “loves every body,” and is “quicksighted to every body’s merits,” she cannot find fault with anyone. As Emma notes, “nobody is afraid of her: that is a great charm” (69). Perhaps nobody fears Miss Bates because nobody fears she will find fault with them. Indeed, far from finding fault with anyone, she is guaranteed to be “quicksighted to every body’s merits.” We may trust Miss Bates, in her “simplicity and cheerfulness,” always to be “interested in our happiness.”

[4] But Austen suggests that our love for others may do more than simply cause us to overlook other people’s faults. In some cases in *Emma* and *Pride and Prejudice*, love for others may allow for more accurate empathy with other people, even to the point of feeling for them more sensitively than they feel for themselves. In *Pride and Prejudice* one of the first illustrations that we see of Elizabeth’s character is that her love for Jane gives her empathetic accuracy. At the first dance at Netherfield, “the evening altogether passed off pleasantly to the whole family”—“Jane was as much gratified” by dancing with Bingley twice, and in being “distinguished by his sisters” (*Pride and Prejudice* 8). When Austen describes the characteristic pleasures that each Bennet family member feels, a device she uses to
give us early glimpses of their characters, of the novel’s protagonist she merely says that “Elizabeth felt Jane's pleasure” (*Pride and Prejudice* 8). Elizabeth, in her selfless affection and compassion for Jane, achieves an apparently selfless empathy. The statement’s lack of modifiers or qualifiers, simply “Elizabeth felt Jane’s pleasure,” may imply that through love Elizabeth achieves perfectly accurate empathy with her sister, and feels Jane’s pleasure as if she were Jane.

[5] We find another example of such sisterly love producing accurate empathy in Emma’s love for Isabella. Regarding the irritation that John Knightley sometimes shows towards his wife, Emma “was quick in feeling the little injuries to Isabella, which Isabella never felt herself” (*Emma* 75). Here Isabella, a “worshipping wife,” is blind to the small wrongs of her husband that her sister, in her loving empathy, feels with more sensitivity (75). Love for others may also produce empathetic perception apparently disproportionate to one’s usual powers of perception. Regarding the love that Isabella feels for her children, we discover that she “was no very quick observer; yet if Harriet had not been equal to playing with the children, it would not have escaped her” (364). Harriet might have been distracted by lovesickness for Mr. Knightley, which would have made her not “equal to playing with the children,”—an omission that the narrator implies would be tantamount to a detriment to the children, in Isabella’s eyes. Despite her general perceptive powers, “slow,” and without “clearness of head (30; 210) regarding the feelings of her beloved children Isabella has powers of perception that nothing escapes.

[6] Thus it seems that when a character loves another, they are more able to overlook their faults, more interested in their happiness, and more able to empathize
accurately. As we saw above in the case of Harriet’s love for Emma, Austen suggests that love at its extremes may compel a character to sacrifice themselves for the happiness of the beloved. One implication of this may be that the love one feels for another creates such empathetic feeling that pain to another may be worse than pain to oneself. The most dramatic example of such loving self-sacrifice comes from Miss Bates during the Box Hill trip. As we recall, she “love[s] every body” and is “interested in every body's happiness.” When Emma insults her, we discover intrinsic self-sacrificing generosity in her character: “when [Emma’s meaning] burst on her, it could not anger, though a slight blush shewed that it could pain her” (291). When she realizes the insult, that is, she immediately blames herself rather than feeling “anger”: “I must make myself very disagreeable, or she would not have said such a thing to an old friend” (291). She blames herself, and further, she empathizes against herself with Emma. She humiliates herself in order to empathize, and acknowledges that Emma must feel her to be “very disagreeable.” We do not learn exactly why Emma’s insult “could not anger,” but Austen seems to suggest that because Miss Bates loves every body, and is “interested in every body's happiness,” her empathy for Emma means she would rather blame herself than cause Emma pain with any anger.

[7] We see possible further evidence for this when Mr. Knightley reproaches Emma for being so hurtful to her, and informs her that while “she felt [Emma’s] full meaning,” yet she spoke of the insult with “candour and generosity”: “I wish you could have heard her honouring your forbearance, in being able to pay her such attentions, as she was for ever receiving from yourself and your father, when her society must be so irksome” (294-5). Again, in her interest for Emma’s happiness,
Miss Bates humilates herself to empathize against herself with Emma, who indeed feels that “her society” is “so irksome.” That Mr. Knightley attributes “candour” to Miss Bates’ self-blame and to her crediting forbearance to Emma, suggests that she may actually believe herself at fault.

[8] Thus even when directly confronted with malice, Miss Bates’ love for everybody, her universal empathy, and her interest in everybody’s happiness, compel her to blame herself rather than to feel “anger” at Emma. The generosity of good-will that Emma scorned as “so undistinguishing and unfastidious” here causes Miss Bates to love and empathize with Emma herself, even after being hurt by her. Put simply, here we discover that Miss Bates possesses, exemplifies, and perhaps even surpasses, the “spirit of reconciliation and human kindness” towards the “foibles or humours of our fellow-men” that Coleridge defines as the soul of “true genius.” She does not feel the “heart-poison of contempt or hatred,” and indeed the phrasing of her reaction to the insult, “it could not anger,” suggests that her “spirit of reconciliation and human kindness” makes such anger, contempt, or hatred impossible. We also see that Miss Bates abides (perhaps consciously) by Carlyle’s anti-self-consciousness theory—she has such a selfless desire for the happiness of others that she would rather humiliate herself and empathize against herself with Emma, rather than become angry with her.

[9] But we wonder, now, at the contradiction in Miss Bates’ character: “too silly,” she “ha[s] no intellectual superiority” and “never boasted...cleverness,” yet she possesses, according to Coleridge’s definition, “true genius”—a “spirit of reconciliation and kindness” (Austen 68, 17). Silly, pedestrian, never clever Miss Bates possesses the genius of an unfathomable empathetic capacity. She can leave her
own pride and humiliate herself, in order to empathize with Emma—an empathy she
performs accurately, realizing exactly the cause of her annoyance to Emma’s feelings.
That is, her “spirit of reconciliation and kindness” can discover the empathetic side of
any person, even when that person has shown contempt for her. When we recall
Carlyle’s definition that “true humour...is not contempt, its essence is love” (where
love here means a “warm, tender fellow-feeling with all forms of existence,”) we
discover that Miss Bates also possesses the soul of “true humour.” Her love for
everyone makes it impossible for her to show contempt for anyone. Her soul of “true
humour” allows her a “tender fellow-feeling” even with one who maligns her—
though achieving this fellow-feeling requires miserable self-humiliation on her own
part.

[10] Miss Bates loves everyone and therefore overlooks their faults without
exception. She would, and does, destroy her own pride to empathize with Emma
rather than feel any anger or contempt towards her. She has Coleridge’s “true
genius,” the essence of Carlyle’s “true humour,” and her willingness to self-humiliate
in order to empathize with Emma rather than pain her, exemplifies the self-sacrificing
spirit of anti-self-consciousness. She possesses, in short, all the qualities that we
might attribute to Austen herself. We wonder, therefore, what Miss Bates lacks that,
although she has “universal good-will,” deprives her of universal friendship of the
kind that Austen’s narrators win in her readers. We recall Johnson’s definition of
friendship, “friendship, compounded of esteem and love...requires not only that its
candidates should gain the judgment, but that they should attract the affections.” Miss
Bates succeeds, perhaps better than any other character in *Emma,* at “attracting the
affections” and the gaining the “love” of others. But, according to Johnson, she must also “gain the judgment” and the “esteem.”

[11] As we began this discussion in an attempt to determine what qualities Austen may have considered requisite to universal likability, we will now attempt to determine her possible opinions on “judgment” and “esteem.” In *Emma* she suggests that judgment, or reason, is a self-preservational quality directed towards perceiving dangers to the self or others. Further, in the climactic denouement of *Emma*, she appears to oppose judgment and reason as encouraging selfishness, with empathetic feelings that encourage self-sacrifice. When Mr. Knightley proposes to Emma, she must choose between rejecting him in a selfless sacrifice for her friend Harriet, or accepting him in a selfish act:

As to any of that heroism of sentiment which might have prompted her to entreat him to transfer his affection from herself to Harriet, as infinitely the most worthy of the two—or even the more simple sublimity of resolving to refuse him at once and for ever, without vouchsafing any motive, because he could not marry them both, Emma had it not. She felt for Harriet, with pain and with contrition; but no flight of generosity run mad, opposing all that could be probable or reasonable, entered her brain. She had led her friend astray, and it would be a reproach to her for ever; but her judgment was as strong as her feelings, and as strong as it had ever been before, in reprobating any such alliance for him, as most unequal and degrading. (338)

Emma “felt for Harriet, with pain and with contrition,”—the juxtaposition of this fact with the possibility of the “heroism of sentiment” implies that her uncomfortable empathy may encourage the “heroism of sentiment.” “Heroism” suggests self-sacrifice for the good of others, and “heroism of sentiment” indicates that empathetic feelings prompted the self-sacrifice. Further, the empathetic feelings that prompt self-sacrifice, the “pain” that she “felt for Harriet,” might encourage her to a “flight of generosity run mad.” The “sentiment,” that is, may cause one to act with a generosity
which, taken too far, is madness. Thus Austen aligns empathetic feelings and generous self-sacrifice with a lack of reason—madness. The “flight of generosity run mad, oppos[es] all that could be probable or reasonable.” The “reasonable” literally “opposes” selfless “generosity” and self-sacrifice, which may imply that reason encourages one to be selfish.

[12] We look for further evidence of a conflict between selfish reason and generous madness in the following line, “she had led her friend astray, and it would be a reproach to her for ever; but her judgment was as strong as her feelings...” That is, the judgment and the feelings may be thought to conflict because of the strength that both sides possess in her mind. The “judgment,” a faculty of “reason,” opposes the empathetic feelings that would prompt generosity. Thus the “judgment” also encourages selfishness. Further, as the “judgment...reprobates any such alliance for him, as most unequal and degrading,” we may say that the judgment self-servingly favors Emma. Indeed, the juxtaposition of the empathetically charged clause “it would be a reproach to her for ever” with the following line, “but her judgment was as strong as her feelings,” suggests that the judgment curbs the feelings, and prevents them from moving empathetically towards the self-sacrificial “heroism of sentiment,” and “generosity run mad.” That is, her judgment is the impulse of self-preservation, while her empathetic feeling is the impulse of self-sacrifice. Working in her selfish interests, her judgment discovers the dangers to her beloved Mr. Knightley, that a marriage with Harriet would be “most unequal and degrading.” Thus “judgment” and reason seem primarily concerned with discovering dangers to the self—they seem, therefore, to encourage selfishness. Opposed to these self-preserving qualities are the
“mad” selfless terms “heroism of sentiment,” empathetic “feeling,” and “generosity.”

The implication may be that if Emma had less judgment, if “her judgment were not as
strong as her feelings,” she might have been more generous, more empathetic to
Harriet’s pain, and more heroically selfless.

[13] Judgment and reason thus appear to involve the ability to discover threats
to oneself or to others. By implication, then, Mr. Knightley’s statement that “John
loves Emma with a reasonable and therefore not a blind affection” suggests that his
reason shows him potentially threatening qualities in Emma, and so prevents him
from feeling too much love for her. Self-interested “reason” appears to oppose
inclinations to love too much and too blindly by discovering faults in others that
might be threats to the self. Thus we may have a partial explanation for the “great
charm” that allows Miss Bates to be “very much to the taste of every body”: “nobody
is afraid of her.” The most discerning judgment, that is, could not discover a potential
threat in Miss Bates, because she loves everyone, and honestly wishes everyone’s
happiness. We recall Richard Steele’s praise of his friend Richard Estcourt: “He had
so exquisite a Discerning of what was defective in any Object before him, that in an
Instant he could shew you the ridiculous Side of what would pass for beautiful and
just, even to Men of no ill Judgment, before he had pointed at the Failure” (Steele
Spectator 468). With our new Austenian interpretation of the “judgment” as that
which discovers potentially threatening qualities, we may say therefore that Estcourt
had rather the ability of pointing out hidden threats to his friends. This ability,
although not explicitly named as such, yet may help in gaining friends’ “esteem”—
one who can discover imperceptible threats such as hidden contradictions and
irrationalities, will likely appear a boon to a friend in danger, “firm in the day of distress” and “useful in exigences.”

[14] But Steele tells us that Estcourt could discover certain hidden flaws and ridiculous sides of things even to “Men of no ill Judgment.” The discovery of some kinds of hidden flaws and failures appears to require more than mere judgment. We recall that the entire purpose of discovering faults is to please others, and to show them we are their friends. Further, we recall that judgment, at least in Emma’s case, prompts her to perceive a threat to herself from Harriet, and a self-serving threat to Mr. Knightley, also from Harriet. That is, judgment helps Emma discover threats specific to herself, and threats whose discovery can only benefit herself. We conjecture, therefore, that judgment by itself works to benefit the self (selfishly) and may even, as Emma does to Harriet, threaten and harm one’s friends in the process.

[15] The perception of certain hidden threats whose discovery benefits and gratifies our friends requires beginning from a place of selfless love and empathy for our friends, as Austen shows us in an example with Mrs. Weston. In their conversation early in *Emma*, Mrs. Weston and Mr. Knightley argue about Emma’s new friendship with Harriet. Mr. Knightley “think[s] it is a bad thing,” and tells Mrs. Weston that he will get the agreement of Isabella and his brother, who, as we know, “loves Emma with a reasonable and therefore not a blind affection”—John can find fault with Emma, so Mr. Knightley is “sure of having their opinions with [him]” (29, 32). But here Mrs. Weston, “beloved friend” to Emma, perceives several dangers to her, each of which she states with unparalleled tact: “I know that you all love her really too well to be unjust or unkind…” (32). The first is, that she fears Mr.
Knightley, John, and Isabella may allow their reason (opposed to generous feelings of empathy) to make them act in an “unjust or unkind” way to Emma when informing her of her faults. Mrs. Weston reminds Mr. Knightley that those who claim to love Emma must recall their duty to her happiness, and must first exercise empathy with her. If performed correctly, the exercise of empathy will, she states, prevent them from being “unjust or unkind.”

[16] Mrs. Weston begins from a place of love and empathy for Emma, as she has always been “interested in [her], in every pleasure,” and “had such an affection for her as could never find fault” (6). She loves Emma as Elizabeth loves Jane, and is interested in her every pleasure. But in some ways, she also loves Emma as a mother—she tells Mr. Knightley, “I consider myself, you know, as having somewhat of the privilege of speech that Emma's mother might have had” (32). Possessed of this love, Mrs. Weston empathizes accurately with Emma in order to discover reasons to convince Mr. Knightley not to bully her. That is, beginning from a place of love and empathy for Emma, Mrs. Weston may achieve a perspective on the argument that is inaccessible by selfish judgment alone. Once her empathy allows her to enter accurately into Emma’s feelings, she then brings to bear her own judgment and reason, that is her own “good sense” (a compliment paid by Mr. Knightley), in order to perceive threats and dangers to her friend from this expanded perspective (117). And indeed, through her empathetic identification with Emma she succeeds in discovering a fault in Mr. Knightley’s argument that he cannot contradict: “it cannot be expected that Emma, accountable to nobody but her father, who perfectly approves the acquaintance, should put an end to it, so long as it is a source of pleasure to
herself” (32). Mrs. Weston’s understanding of Emma’s character may here proceed from her long acquaintance with her, but such understanding still requires accurate empathetic identification with that character. In her empathy Mrs. Weston feels all the respect that Emma bears for her father, and all her obstinacy in continuing “a source of pleasure to herself.” Ironically, in using her reason to protect Emma and find fault with Mr. Knightley’s argument, Mrs. Weston simultaneously discovers two faults in Emma.

[17] We further discover, therefore, that for Mrs. Weston to empathize fully with Emma and to enter accurately into her feelings, she must relinquish some of the pride she feels for Emma as her friend and pupil with whom she “could never find fault” (6). That is, Mrs. Weston may have to suffer by relinquishing her biases for Emma in order to discover real faults in her—that she is “accountable to nobody but her father,” and will never stop with anything “so long as it is a source of pleasure to herself.” Somehow Mrs. Weston, “who ha[s] such an affection for her as could never find fault,” now overcomes her biases and finds faults. What is more, she who could never before see faults now immediately discovers those which are most pernicious.

As we discovered above, Miss Bates empathizes with the side against herself in a self-humiliating process in order to discover exactly the fault that is “irksome” and “disagreeable” to Emma. In a similar way we witness what may be Mrs. Weston empathizing with the side against her own (though it requires leaving her biases behind) in order to gain another perspective from which to discover faults in Mr. Knightley’s argument. Indeed, it appears that when simultaneously empathizing with Mr. Knightley’s side and Emma’s side, Mrs. Weston discovers a hidden bias of Mr.
Knightley’s. When she says that “it cannot be expected that Emma, accountable to nobody but her father…should put an end to it,” she may be pointing out to Mr. Knightley his own proud expectation that Emma will be “accountable” to him. Crucially, however, when Mrs. Weston performs this apparently pernicious fault-finding, she does it exclusively in the office of a “useful, gentle,” and selflessly loving friend, who “love[s] her” (that is, empathizes with her and desires her happiness) “really too well to be unjust or unkind” (6, 32).

[18] We return, then, to the Estcourt question of how one may discover flaws and ridiculous sides of things hidden even to “Men of no ill Judgment.” One who only uses judgment, with its implied encouragement to selfish, self-serving discoveries of faults in others, may never discover the faults and threats of the kind that Mrs. Weston perceives. That is, Mrs. Weston, with a Miss Batesian love for Emma (and possibly for Mr. Knightley), which allows her to overlook her faults and to empathize with her completely, gains access to new perspectives from which to discover threats to her friend. Importantly, however, she may only empathize with Mr. Knightley and so discover the useful flaws in his argument once she overcomes (perhaps painfully) her own biases that would cause her to favor Emma, and possibly prevent her from successfully empathizing.

[19] Thus we see that Mrs. Weston possesses a Miss Batesian genius for empathy, and a Coleridgean “spirit of reconciliation and human kindness.” Beginning with empathy accessed through love, she may therefore gain access to hidden perspectives that empower her with an “exquisite Discerning” inaccessible to mere selfish (and self-serving) judgment. Crucially, she only uses this power of
discernment for the happiness of her beloved friends, in the manner of Carlyle’s anti-self-consciousness theory. When Mr. Knightley remarks that she is a woman of “good sense and quick feelings,” we might say rather exquisite discernment that proceeds from loving empathy. Indeed, she out-reasons Mr. Knightley in their debate in the best possible way—she somehow causes him to be “much obliged” to her “very good advice” (32). He is so convinced of her reasoning that he promises her “it shall be attended to” (32). A possible implication may be that discerning judgment alone (even though it be as discerning as Mr. Knightley’s), without empathy and without love, must remain contentedly inferior when Mrs. Weston anti-self-consciously unifies the two in service to her friend’s happiness.

[20] As we began our study with the question “how does Austen please her readers as their friend,” we now conjecture that in the character of Mrs. Weston, Austen depicts the perfect pleasing friend. She describes Emma’s feelings towards Mrs. Weston:

A friend and companion such as few possessed: intelligent, well-informed, useful, gentle, knowing all the ways of the family, interested in all its concerns, and peculiarly interested in [Emma], in every pleasure, every scheme of hers—one to whom she could speak every thought as it arose, and who had such an affection for her as could never find fault. (6)

Emma attributes Mrs. Weston with the estimable qualities “intelligent, well-informed,” as well as the lovable qualities “gentle,” and “peculiarly interested in Emma, in every pleasure [of hers]” and with “such an affection for her as could never find fault.” That is, Mrs. Weston has enormous powers of judgment, but in her love she exercises these powers only to be “useful” to Emma, never to “find fault” with her. Indeed, recalling Johnson’s remark that “few spend their time with much satisfaction under the eye of uncontestable superiority,” we wonder how Mrs.
Weston, apparently superior to Emma in both judgment and empathetic capacity, yet inspires such love from her.

[21] Austen suggests that Mrs. Weston may gain Emma’s love through the complete selflessness, and perhaps even self-subjugation with which she promotes her happiness. Emma recalls how “she had devoted all her powers to attach and amuse her in health...a large debt of gratitude was owing here” (6). Mrs. Weston literally “devote[s] all her powers to attach and amuse,” which process of attachment is highly relevant to our study of how Austen also “attaches and amuses” her readers despite her undeniable intellectual and empathetic superiority. Therefore will look more closely at how she depicts Mrs. Weston’s process of attachment. We learn that although Mrs. Weston began her relationship with Emma as her governess, yet she was always “less as a governess than a friend” and that “between them it was more the intimacy of sisters” (5). Despite her role as governess and her superior empathy and judgment, she does not exercise any superiority of authority over her student which may help them to maintain a friendship as equals:

Even before Miss Taylor [later Mrs. Weston] had ceased to hold the nominal office of governess, the mildness of her temper had hardly allowed her to impose any restraint; and the shadow of authority being now long passed away, they had been living together as friend and friend very mutually attached, and Emma doing just what she liked; highly esteeming Miss Taylor's judgment, but directed chiefly by her own. (5)

We learn that Emma and Miss Taylor begin to live “together as friend and friend very mutually attached” only after “the shadow of authority” has “passed away.” “The shadow of authority” appears somehow to prevent the existence of a “mutually attached” friendship. Because of her “mild temper,” (Johnson defines mild as "kind, tender, good, indulgent, merciful, compassionate, clement" (Johnson Dictionary
1294)) Miss Taylor was never able to exercise any authority over Emma: “the
mildness of [Miss Taylor’s] temper had hardly allowed her to impose any restraint.”
The habitual past-tense, “had hardly allowed,” suggests that at no point in Miss
Taylor’s role as governess did she ever “impose any restraint.” Regardless of the
distant past, at the point the novel begins we learn that Miss Taylor now exercises no
authority over Emma whatsoever, and has “ceased to hold the nominal office of
governess.” Indeed, that the office was “nominal” when it existed further indicates
that Miss Taylor never exercised authority over her charge in any non-superficial
way. Miss Taylor allows her friend to “[do] just what she like[s],” and to be “directed
chiefly by her own [judgment].” The implication may be that the friendship would not
be “very mutually attached” if Emma could not do “just what she liked,” and had to
be “directed” by Miss Taylor’s judgment. Thus Austen suggests that the equality of
friendship that they share, simply “friend and friend,” and “very mutually attached,”
may be due in part to Miss Taylor’s never exercising any authority, restraint, or
judgment over Emma.

[22] Further, we learn from Mr. Knightley that being Emma’s friend, and
allowing her happy freedom in a “very mutually attached” friendship, requires Miss
Taylor’s constant “submitting [her] own will” to that of Emma (30). Although the two
are equal friends, they do not exercise equal levels of self-denial for the preservation
of the friendship. In a conversation with Miss Taylor regarding Emma, he tells her
that she was “not at all [fit] for a governess” (30). He says that, far from educating
Emma, Miss Taylor was rather “receiving a very good education from her”—in
“submitting [her] own will,” “doing as [she was] bid,” and in developing “every
disposition to bear” (30-1). That is, to please Emma by allowing her the “many
enjoyments” of “doing just what she liked” and of being “directed chiefly by her own
[judgment],” Miss Taylor always had to submit and to bear. Indeed, the adverb “just”
in the statement “just what she liked” suggests that she only ever did what she liked—
literally, never anything she did not like. Thus one implication of Mr. Knightley’s
(unchallenged) observations is that, while this “very mutually attached” friendship
requires much submission of the will from Miss Taylor, it requires little submission
of the will from Emma. The descriptions of the friendship, “friend and friend” and
“very mutually attached” (emphasis mine) suggest a perfect equality between the two
that may belie the unequal amount of submission of the will required on Miss
Taylor’s part.

[23] If we are to compare Austen to Mrs. Weston and ourselves to Emma,
then we must study how Austen achieves the effect in her novels of appearing to
submit her will to us in an anti-self-conscious sacrifice for our happiness. From the
first page of Emma we learn that Mrs. Weston exercises no authority over Emma: she
has “lived nearly twenty-one years in the world with very little to distress or vex her,”
and indeed may suffer from “having rather too much her own way” for although she
“highly esteem[s] Miss Taylor’s judgment,” she remains “directed chiefly by her
own” (5). Mrs. Weston’s refusal to “vex” or “distress” Emma by exercising her
authority over her recalls Samuel Johnson’s definition of “good-humour” as that
which “pleases principally by not offending.” Further, we recall his admission that in
writing for one’s friends whose “prejudices and partialities are known,” one “must
therefore please, if not by favouring them, by forbearing to oppose them” (Johnson
Life of Pope). Perhaps Austen, like Mrs. Weston, submits any desire to exercise authority over us, and rather pleases us by “forbearing to oppose.”

[24] We encounter a difficulty, however, because we understand that the universal readership that Austen enjoys must include readers of opposing “prejudices and partialities,” who all yet feel friendship with her. Thus we recall Miss Bates’ universal loving empathy, and Mrs. Weston’s selfless employment of judgment for her friends’ happiness. Miss Bates desires the happiness of every body, and her genius of empathetic capacity allows her to find the merit in everyone while overlooking their faults. She would submit her pride and humiliate herself in order to accurately empathize and find the lovable merits in another’s perspective, in order to avoid contemning (and possibly hating) them. Mrs. Weston has the judgment that Miss Bates lacks. Her judgment allows her to perceive dangers and threats to her friends, while she simultaneously loves them enough to empathize with them, and to overlook their faults. That is, we conjecture that Austen has the power to relinquish her own biases and prejudices in order to empathize with any perspective. She can thus overlook the faults and find the merits and goodness in that perspective, and can take an interest in the happiness of everyone. Then she may exercise her genius of reason—her ability to discover threatening faults, irrationality, and contradictions, for the benefit of every person with whom she empathizes. Finally, it seems that through her universal empathetic understanding and universal desire for the happiness of others, she crafts a story that “pleases principally by not offending,” that is, by finding all the merits and none of the faults of any readerly perspective (Johnson Rambler 72). By refusing to discover anybody’s faults, she achieves an authorial
persona whose universal popularity may be described in the same way that Emma describes that of Miss Bates, “and nobody is afraid of her: that is a great charm.”
Conclusion

In *Jane Austen: Women, Politics, and the Novel*, Claudia Johnson explains to us that “Austen orchestrates opposites and analogues, not to clarify, but rather to embarrass judgments”—that she “obliges us to regroup and reassess characters and issues, to broaden our judgments and to accept contradiction” (Claudia Johnson 77). That is, Austen never allows us to make a simple “right or wrong, yes or no” judgment about anything in her works. She argues that Austen attempts to “impede generalization”:

Austen has contrived Pride and Prejudice in such a way that virtually every argument about it can be undercut with a built-in countervailing argument, a qualifying ‘on the other hand’ which forestalls conclusiveness. (77)

We feel that her ability to present every possible argument, counter-argument, and “qualifying ‘on the other hand’” may proceed from an unimaginably powerful Miss Batesian capacity to empathize with all perspectives. In a moment of (what I believe) to be genuine wisdom, Emma tells her father that “one half of the world cannot understand the pleasures of the other” (66). Taken at its extreme, this would mean that for every two people, neither side will understand the pleasures of the other. But Austen, somehow, understands both.

In the context of Claudia Johnson’s argument, that Austen teaches us how to empathize, that is, “to broaden our judgments and to accept contradiction,” we turn to George Levine’s discussion of the willed experience of absolute empathy propounded by John Ruskin:

When John Ruskin tries to teach his audience how to ‘read,’ how to learn from great thinkers of the past, he insists on a Keatsian negative capability. Our responsibility is to put ‘ourselves always in the author’s place, annihilating our own personality, and seeking to enter into his. (Levine 69)
As Austen depicts with Miss Bates and Mrs. Weston, “annihilating our own personality” may require self-humiliating relinquishment of our own biases. But, she suggests, if we act like Miss Bates and “are interested in every body's happiness” and “quicksighted to every body's merits,” we may be compelled to make such sacrifices. Here we see a useful similarity to Shelley’s language in *A Defense of Poetry*, that “a man, to be greatly good, must imagine intensely and comprehensively; he must put himself in the place of another and of many others” which “awakens and enlarges the mind itself by rendering it the receptacle of a thousand unapprehended combinations of thought” (Shelley *A Defense of Poetry*). The anti-self-conscious empathetic genius of Miss Bates and Mrs. Weston does indeed allow them to enter “the place of another and of many others.” We feel that Austen understands, better than most, the difficulties of empathy and the complexities and contradictions that one must face and accept in such a challenge.
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