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“Too Happy for Letter-Writing:” Irresolute and Distracted Suitors in Mansfield Park

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Jane Austen entered the literary scene on the cusp of the epistolary tradition, in which novels were written as a series of letters. Rather than choosing to adopt the epistolary form, however, she used letters throughout her novels to maintain characters' expressions of sincere emotion within the narrative voice. Scholars recognize the importance of examining fictional letters in the context of both the novels and eighteenth century culture. Eve Tavor Bannet asserts in *Empire of Letters: Letter Manuals and Transatlantic Correspondence, 1680-1820* that letter writing manuals are useful texts to study the culture of the eighteenth century. Cheryl Nixon and Louise Penner utilize these manuals to explore the letters of Austen's heroines in "Writing by the Book: Jane Austen's Heroines and the Art and Form of the Letter." In their research, Nixon and Penner find letters to be "an appropriate space for genuine female self-expression within courtship" (sect. 2). Their findings beg the question: to what extent did letter writing offer the same opportunity for men?

This paper uses a new historical approach by juxtaposing Austen's novels and the letters within them with eighteenth century letter writing manuals, which not only served as models for proper correspondence, but also expressed general standards for private and public conduct to encourage British citizens across ranks to present themselves with civil and moral self-management, both in writing and in action. Letter writing manuals were pervasive in Regency culture and influenced Regency writers. We even see traces of these influences in Austen's fictional letters. Many practices were associated with writing and sharing letters. I isolate five key themes, many of which are drawn from *The Art of Letter-Writing*, though other manuals¹ I have consulted reinforce these points: (1) write naturally and genuinely; (2) write openly and sincerely, particularly in letters of courtship; (3) discern one's character through his or her presentation of self in writing; (4) know one's audience; be aware that letters were often read aloud and shared with others; and (5) practice writing letters by writing often. The first theme is addressed in *The Art of Letter-Writing*, which states that "Nature, it is said, forms Poets, and Art Orators" (3), suggesting those who write well do so naturally, while the gift of oral persuasion and charisma is learned and rehearsed. For those in want of this "natural" gift, the manual recommends the following:

When it is our Lot not to be born with this rich Talent [of writing], we must read much, and transcribe often such Collections of Letters as are most in Request for their Beauty of Thought and Elegance of Diction: And thus we shall form ourselves by Degrees, and Art and Study will supply the Defects of Nature. (3)

With respect to the second practice, one handbook advises, "the proper Warmth of expression, which...Passion for the beloved Object, inspires...should have Foundation laid in *common sense* and *manly sincerity*" (Richardson A3). The third common practice is emphasized in the following passage: "If a Stranger was to write from the Extremities of the Earth, we should judge whether he was a person of Genius, Knowledge, and Politeness, by observing in his Letters" (*The Art of Letter-Writing* 4-5). The fourth practice required that familiar letters conveyed and imitated the voices of their writers so that, when read aloud and shared with others, they served as consolation for the writer's absence; however, this complicated the efforts of

¹ The volumes I referenced include *The Universal Letter-Writer* by Rev. Thomas Cooke; *The Accomplish'd Letter-Writer*; *Letters Written to and for Particular Friends, on the Most Important Occasions* by Samuel Richardson; *The Art of Letter-Writing*; and *The Compleat Letter Writer*.

those private letters that were not meant to be shared (McKenzie 7). The fifth recommendation proposes that “Experience daily” (*The Art of Letter-Writing* 2) will improve one’s ability to write. The manual states the following:

Entertaining one another constantly is a Kind of Study, as by it we are indefensibly accustomed to express ourselves with Ease and Propriety; whereas, writing but rarely and with some Reluctance, most People are embarrassed when obliged to take up their Pen: And thus it happens that the proper Style for Letter-writing is not attained without considerable Difficulty. (2)

These five themes from letter writing manuals are the standards by which I will measure successful letter writing practices in Austen’s characters.

Because letter writing required careful rhetorical awareness of social decorum and presentation of self, particularly within courtship, this study also considers contemporary standards of masculinity. In *A Man’s Place*, John Tosh emphasizes the evolution of masculinity and its ties to domesticity in the nineteenth century, and in *Disciplining Love: Jane Austen and the Modern Man*, Michael Kramp studies the effects of the cultural tension of a modernizing England on Austen’s male characters, noting that “England was especially nervous about men’s susceptibility to love and sexual desire” (2), and that as a result, English society regulated its citizens by advocating rigid systems of self-management and restraint. Austen seems to suggest in her novels that an ideal masculine figure is one who upholds this traditional and upright British masculinity, yet who can also express his feelings. Letters offer the perfect medium through which her male characters can negotiate this.

The Importance of Letters in *Mansfield Park*

Austen’s *Mansfield Park* centers on the heroine, Fanny Price, who is sent as a young girl to live at Mansfield Park, her uncle’s estate. She feels like an outcast in her new home and finds comfort in her cousin Edmund’s kindness and instruction. However, as Edmund and Fanny mature, two threatening outsiders, siblings Mary and Henry Crawford, disrupt Mansfield. Edmund becomes infatuated with Mary and disappoints Fanny, who has fallen in love with him. Moreover, Fanny must assert herself against the unwelcome and persistent romantic attentions of Henry. Meanwhile, as these characters come and go from Mansfield Park, they communicate through and are dependent on letters, placing (to various degrees) their romantic happiness on them. In the end, Fanny harnesses her inner strength, and Edmund, after undergoing a process of education, realizes his love for Fanny.

Edmund Bertram is a sincere but misguided hero. He misunderstands his own heart, and consequently he falls somewhere in the middle of the spectrum of male letter writers because when he woos Mary Crawford he writes from the heart, but to the wrong person. Henry’s letters, on the other hand, are written through an intermediary, his sister Mary, because he is not ready to fully commit to Fanny. As a result, they are not spontaneous or from the heart, but calculated and insincere. Furthermore, as letter writing was a gentleman’s duty, by not writing in conjunction with his acts of courtship, Henry evades this responsibility, thus proving himself imprudent and untrustworthy. Because letters are linked to the performance of masculine duty and rituals of

courtship, Edmund Bertram and Henry Crawford's letters, or Austen's strategic omission of their letters, demonstrate their undermined masculine status. While Edmund's letter writing reflects that he is simply a conflicted hero whose masculinity can be recovered, Henry is conniving and ungentlemanly by manipulating and shirking conventions of letter writing. This distinction illustrates the virtues and vices of letter writing in *Mansfield Park*: when written with a conniving hand, Austen suggests that letters can be used to seduce or manipulate, but when composed with sincere intentions, letters have the power to uncover one's true feelings and redeem one's character.

Henry Crawford: A Lazy Manipulator of Letter Writing and Courtship Conventions

Henry Crawford is marked as a careless and unsuccessful letter writer. First, Henry expresses his dislike for writing letters by writing short letters and by writing infrequently. Moreover, he manipulates conventions of courtship by writing to Fanny through a medium, his sister Mary, which is not only conniving, but suggests that he cannot write well on his own. Finally, letter writing is a gentleman's duty in business and in courtship, and Henry shirks this responsibility in his relationship with Maria. These qualities of letter writing, and the absence of letter writing on his part, undermine his masculinity by the early nineteenth century standards of letter writing, and make Henry a subject of other's letters rather than an agent of his own letter writing.

Henry does not enjoy writing letters and seems to care little for them; his disinterest in this gentleman's responsibility, as seen through his failure to write well or to write at all, demonstrates his failure to reach an ideal masculine status, as "a man's credit...depended on the way he presented himself in his correspondence" (Bannet 26). His sister Mary is the first to bring his epistolary deficiency to our attention, yet instead of singling out Henry's shortcomings, she attributes his unsuccessful letter writing to men in general, or more specifically, to brothers:

What strange creatures brothers are! You would not write to each other but upon the most urgent necessity in the world; and when obliged to take up the pen to say that such a horse is ill, or such a relation dead, it is done in the fewest possible words. You have but one style among you. I know it perfectly. Henry...has never yet turned the page in a letter; and very often it is nothing more than—"Dear Mary, I am just arrived. Bath seems full, and everything as usual. Yours sincerely." That is the true manly style,—that is a complete brother's letter. (53)

Fanny, in her quiet yet earnest manner, protests Mary's assertion that Henry's writing "is the true manly style," claiming that her brother, a midshipman in the navy, writes long and meaningful letters—and Edmund attests to William's "excellence as a correspondent" (53). The conversation quickly turns to class when Mary notes, "with an air of grandeur, 'we know very little of the inferior ranks. Post-captains may be very good sort of men, but they do not belong to us'" (53). Mary implies that it would be beneath her to associate with William due to his "inferior rank" in the navy. This implication contradicts *her* standards for "manly" letter writing by revealing Henry's weakness and William's strength as correspondents. Incidentally, though Mary sets herself and Henry above those lowly-ranked men in the navy, the conversation that follows highlights the irony of the situation—that as a gentleman, Henry fails to successfully

carry out a duty of his rank, while William, a poor midshipman, proves himself to be a successful letter writer

Although Henry is a poor correspondent with his sister, his neglect of other female correspondents reveals his heightened awareness of the public nature of letter writing, and therefore Austen strategically opts for his character *not* to write Maria Bertram, which illegitimizes his attentions toward her in private and demonstrates his avoidance of responsibility and integrity in courtship. Letters were of a public nature and were generally read aloud and shared with others (Bannet 34). According to David Monaghan, courtship was also a public affair: “publicity [was] not merely sanctioned in courtship but required” (67-68). Yet, Henry defies this convention, expressly acknowledging “secrecy could not have been more desirable for [Maria’s] credit than he felt it for his own” (*Mansfield* 407). Elizabeth Lenckos connects the public nature of letters and courtship when she discusses the “taboo placed on epistolary lovemaking” (para. 8) when the author and recipient of the letter are not engaged. One letter writing manual also speaks to an anxiety such as Edmund’s when it counsels:

If a gentleman makes his addresses to you, or gives you reason to believe he will do so, before you allow your affections to be engaged, endeavour, in the most prudent...manner, to procure for your friends every necessary piece of information concerning him; such as his character for sense, his morals, his temper, fortune, and family, whether it is distinguished for parts and worth, or folly, knavery, and loathsome hereditary diseases. (*The Accomplish’d Letter-Writer* 61)

Maria Bertram fails to heed this advice in her relationship with Henry and is seduced by his imprudent attentions. Henry conducts himself entirely inappropriately and crosses many social boundaries when he toys with the engaged woman’s heart, believing that “all is safe with a lady engaged; no harm can be done” (*Mansfield* 40). Henry evades rules of courtship and propriety when he disappears with Maria while Mr. Rushworth, her fiancé, returns to the house to fetch a key to unlock a gate on his property. Maria expresses her feelings of symbolic confinement within the locked gate, to which Henry pointedly replies:

And for the world you would not get out without the key and without Mr. Rushworth’s authority and protection, or I think you might with little difficulty pass round the edge of the gate, here with *my* assistance; I think it might be done, if you really wished to be more at large, and could allow yourself to think it not prohibited. (88, *my italics*)

Here, Henry urges her to receive his subtle attentions and from then on continues to cross boundaries through secret and seductive whispers and attentive expressions. Consequently, Maria becomes anxious “that Crawford should now lose no time in declaring himself” (*Mansfield* 166). Instead, Henry leaves Mansfield, shirking his responsibilities as a suitor. Henry’s romantic attentions toward Maria are conducted entirely in private, through verbal and physical actions, which—if managed elusively—cannot be reproduced, shared, or acknowledged publicly. By sending “no letter, no message” (175), Henry evades his duties of courtship by refusing to declare his intentions publicly and thus dupes Maria into an imprudent relationship

that ends in her disappointment. *The accomplish'd letter-writer* highlights Maria's sorry fate: "Nothing can expose you more to ridicule, than the taking up a man on the suspicion of being your lover, who, perhaps, never once thought of you in that view" (67).

Henry continues to display his disrespect of the convention by carelessly writing as if he were eager to finish an annoying task and by only taking up the pen when delaying his travels to achieve his immoral and vain pursuits. When he resolves to extend his stay at Mansfield for his own amusement, that is, "to make Fanny Price fall in love with [him]" (*Mansfield* 198), Austen describes his epistolary resolution: "having...written a few lines of explanation to the Admiral, he looked round at his sister as he sealed and threw the letter from him" (198). This emphasis on tossing the letter carelessly reinforces his disrespect for the convention. Furthermore, when he encounters Maria (who, in an attempt to ease her disappointed love, had decidedly married the wealthy Mr. Rushworth), Henry also writes to extend his stay in London: "the temptation of immediate pleasure was too strong for a mind unused to make any sacrifice to right: he resolved to defer his Norfolk journey, resolved that writing should answer the purpose of it, or that its purpose was unimportant—and stayed" (406-07). Again, we witness Henry taking up the pen only when he deems it necessary to achieve his vain and selfish pursuits.

One pursuit of this sort is to secure the promotion of William in order to manipulate Fanny into an engagement. Henry arrives at Mansfield bearing letters of business between his uncle and other highly ranked naval officers, presenting them to Fanny as gifts—yet not in the way that Susan Whealler describes. These letters are of business, and it is the purpose they achieve, rather than any emotional significance attached to their author, that overwhelms Fanny. When she asks him, bewildered, how he had secured the promotion, despite the fact that his uncle had handled the correspondence and letters, Henry describes "very particularly what he had done," and when she attempts to share the news with Sir Thomas, Henry stops her to reveal his vain motive: "the opportunity was too fair, and his feelings too impatient" (261). His proposal provokes Fanny to realize that, by presenting the letters, "he had been conferring an obligation" (261) on her part, which deeply distresses her. Fanny realizes that these letters, presented as "gifts," were meant to manipulate her happiness and oblige her to accept his proposal. In this sense, Henry uses the letters of others to manipulate Fanny and to secure his own happiness, further revealing his selfish purpose.

Because Fanny is made so uncomfortable by Henry's proposal, when the Crawfords leave Mansfield, Henry attempts to gently persuade her into matrimony by writing through the medium of his sister, Mary, instead of directly to Fanny. When Mary leaves Mansfield, she asks Fanny to write to her: "Fanny would rather not have been asked; but it was impossible for her to refuse the correspondence" (316). This reluctant acceptance enables Henry to communicate with Fanny through the medium of Mary's letters.

...in each letter there had been a few lines from himself, warm and determined like his speeches. It was a correspondence which Fanny found quite as unpleasant as she had feared. Miss Crawford's style of writing, lively and affectionate, was itself an evil, independent of what she was thus forced into reading from the brother's pen. (326)

By writing through his sister, Henry attempts to negotiate the delicate nature of his unfounded relationship with Fanny while simultaneously manipulating her acceptance of his proposal. In doing so, Henry not only demonstrates his conniving and selfish determination to win Fanny, but also, perhaps, an inability to write well on his own, which would necessitate the medium of Mary. Henry's relationship with Fanny eventually fails on his part, as he impetuously scandalizes himself with the married Maria Rushworth. Austen describes Henry's regretful fate:

...we may fairly consider a man of sense, like Henry Crawford, to be providing for himself no small portion of vexation and regret—vexation that must rise sometimes to self-reproach, and regret to wretchedness—in having so...lost the woman whom he had rationally as well as passionately loved.” (*Mansfield* 407-08)

Peter W. Graham notes that “nowhere else in the Austen canon does a love both rational and passionate turn out this way” (889). I suggest that Austen's strategic insertion of Henry's “letters” to Fanny, which are really Mary Crawford's letters, manifest his uncertainty or inability to fully declare his feelings toward her by writing to her directly. This tactful narrative, as well as the fact that Henry runs off with Maria, the woman to whom he failed to write entirely, make Henry's fate inevitable. In establishing Henry as a failed letter writer, Austen ensures a union between Edmund and Fanny, the only woman to whom Edmund writes directly. In this sense, Henry's unsuccessful letter writing, as demonstrated by his blatant disrespect for the gentleman's convention and his dependence on his sister and his uncle to write letters on his behalf, mark his inability to achieve an ideal masculine status, and consequently his failure to win Fanny Price's heart.

Edmund Bertram: A Sincere Yet Misguided Suitor

In contrast to Henry, Edmund Bertram is not a failed letter writer, nor is he a failed hero. His lack of constancy, reflected in his letters to Fanny, establishes him as a misguided and irresolute male figure who strays from the masculine ideal, though he eventually reclaims his status. While sincerely well intentioned and ultimately heroic, Edmund's judgment is frequently distorted and his actions are inconsistent. For example, he morally objects to his brother Tom's plan to produce a bawdy play while their father is away, yet he ultimately ends up participating in the show himself. His letter writing mirrors the inconsistency of his actions and illuminates his transgression from the masculine ideal.

Significantly, the impetus of Edmund and Fanny's relationship, and the source of Fanny's admiration and appreciation for her older cousin, is Edmund's kind offer to give Fanny the resources and instruction to write to her brother William, whom she misses desperately upon moving to Mansfield. In doing so, he not only proves himself a successful letter writer, but also a genuine promoter of those conventions that the letter writing manuals dictate. At the young age of ten, Fanny feels isolated and unwanted when she arrives in Mansfield. Edmund attempts to assuage her distress by attentively noting her love for her brother and asks if it would please her to write William. Upon her affirmative response, he immediately pursues the process:

Edmund prepared her paper, and ruled her lines with all the good-will that her brother could himself have felt, and probably with somewhat more exactness. He continued with her the whole time of her writing, to assist her with his penknife or his orthography, as either were wanted; and added to these attentions, which she felt very much, a kindness to her brother, which delighted her beyond all the rest. He wrote with his own hand his love to his cousin William, and sent him half a guinea under the seal. (*Mansfield* 15)

This passage suggests that Edmund is not only an experienced and educated letter writer, even at the age of sixteen, but that he is willing to share his letter writing skills with his young, impressionable cousin, in order to perfect her letter writing. Moreover, he assures her that her “uncle will frank it, it will cost William nothing” (15), referencing the contemporary convention that the recipient paid for postage rather than the sender. In doing so, he demonstrates gentlemanly patronage by covering the expense of postage and setting a half a guinea under the seal, perpetuating the concept that “letters received were often represented by recipients as a ‘favor’ in acknowledgment of the attention, time and care that had been taken over them, as well as of their value to their recipients” (Bannet 257). This generosity marks his character as a genuinely thoughtful companion who is acutely aware of and sensitive to their economic differences.

Despite this disparity, his guidance is neither haughty nor forced, but rather an expression of natural and sincere kindness. First, he does not dictate the content of her letter to William, but instead helps her with her handwriting and spelling, thus doing what the manuals seek to do by refining the stylistic elements of her letter, but not changing the natural voice. Consequently, he allows Fanny to write naturally, as she would speak, which the letter writing manuals instruct, while directing his focus to “those conventions bearing on subject, style, self-representation and decorum, which constituted worldly polish” (46). In this respect, Edmund encourages and reproduces the dictated conventions in order to teach Fanny to express herself successfully in a letter, thus demonstrating that he not only follows conventions of letter writing, but that he encourages others to do the same. His success as a teacher of letter writing foreshadows his ability to grow or change as a character, which signals both his dissent from and return to Austen’s masculine ideal.

When Fanny and Edmund are grown, however, Edmund neglects to abide by one rule of letter writing, in particular: practice writing letters by writing often. *The Art of Letter-Writing* emphasizes that speaking is easier than writing because people have greater cause to speak than to write, therefore suggesting that letter writing can be improved by regular practice (2). When Edmund fails to abide by this suggestion, his neglect to write devastates Fanny, yet because his letters are few and far between, Fanny cherishes the first note he writes her, even though it is hardly an example of epistolary excellence. Distressed by Mary Crawford’s insistence that she accept the gift of a chain to hold a pendant her brother William had given her, Fanny retreats to her room, where she is surprised to find Edmund “writing at the table! Such a sight having never occurred before, was almost as wonderful as it was welcome” (226). Edmund abandons his pen and presents *his* gift (also a chain for her pendant) to Fanny in person. Upon his exit, Fanny

seized the scrap of paper on which Edmund had begun writing to her; as a treasure beyond all her hopes, and reading with the tenderest emotion these words, 'My very dear Fanny, you must do me the favour to accept—' locked it up with the chain, as the dearest part of the gift. It was the only thing approaching to a letter which she had ever received from him. (230)

Susan Whealler illuminates Fanny's action by describing letters as gifts, and indeed, Fanny designates the letter "as the dearest part of the gift," more important than the necklace itself (230). Whealler emphasizes that "the written word will always be...more intimate than the printed. Every letter brings to the hand that holds it not only the words of the hand that wrote it but, in the writing in which those words are embodied, also the character, authority, and person of the writer" (5). Edmund recognizes the significance of letters of importance that relay significant news and substantial affairs, yet he neglects to recognize the importance of letters as gifts—as thoughtful tokens even when they have little to say. He claims to Fanny, "I have no pleasure in the world superior to that of contributing to yours" (*Mansfield* 227), yet he fails to realize that what gives her the most pleasure is his barely-written note to her. Thus, although Edmund sincerely means to please Fanny, he fails to understand that the simple act of writing, whether or not he feels he has anything of importance to say, is meaningful to the recipient.

Yet, Austen suggests that Edmund's seriousness and integrity are at the core of his character and his letter writing. Furthermore, Edmund appreciates meaningful silence over superficial conversation: "I have been talking incessantly all night, and with nothing to say. But with *you*, Fanny, there may be peace. You will not want to be talked to. Let us have the luxury of silence" (*Mansfield* 242). When Mary Crawford first entreats Edmund to add a few coquettish lines from her into his next letter to his brother Tom, Edmund replies, "If I write, I will say whatever you wish me; but I do not at present foresee any occasion for writing" (52). In addition, when Fanny leaves Mansfield, Edmund assures her, "I *shall* write to you, Fanny, when I have anything worth writing about" (324). These comments not only highlight Edmund's refusal to write when he has nothing that he deems substantial to convey, but also demonstrate the seriousness and the genuineness of his character. Mary Crawford observes this when she opines that "he was not pleasant by any common rule, he talked no nonsense, he paid no compliments, his opinions were unbending, his attentions tranquil and simple. There was a charm, perhaps, in his sincerity, his steadiness, his integrity" (58). That Edmund writes only when he has something substantial to say underlines his earnest and unequivocal character.

Although Edmund's letters are all the more valuable because of their substantial content, his refusal to write otherwise causes him to neglect Fanny. When Fanny feels isolated in Portsmouth and distant from the happenings at Mansfield, she "might...be said to live upon letters" (371). It is at this time in Portsmouth, when Fanny awaits the promised letter from Edmund, that she begins to dread that he, distracted by the enthrallment of Mary Crawford, is "too happy for letter writing" (347). Indeed, she is not completely mistaken. Although he is not especially happy, he is certainly distracted. When his letter finally arrives, Edmund expresses that he had been too distressed and preoccupied during his visit to London, where he courted Mary, to write anything conclusive to Fanny about the status of his courtship. Fanny's fears of neglect are confirmed in the letter that she had been both anticipating and dreading: "For this letter she must try to arm herself. That a letter from Edmund should be a subject of terror!" (324).

Expecting that it will convey news of Edmund's engagement to Mary Crawford, she is relieved to learn that nothing is settled between them, though devastated that Edmund is so unknowingly cruel in focusing the contents of his letter to the woman who loves him on his courtship of Mary Crawford.

Although Austen is careful to establish Edmund's good character, Edmund's sincere intentions and serious self-reflections are undoubtedly contradicted by his tendency to overlook Fanny and misunderstand her feelings as well as his own. This conflict between his natural inclinations and his internalized sense of social responsibility are, what Michael Kramp deems, what causes Edmund to fall short of the masculine ideal. Kramp claims that Edmund is "a well-trained Burkean man and future aristocratic leader...but he is also a sensitive man, and he remains susceptible to Mary's sensual charms" (103). While Kramp seems to use positive terms, like "sensitive," to acknowledge Edmund's shortcomings, he interprets Edmund's susceptibility to Mary's influence as a reflection of his failure to meet ideal masculine standards. Kramp examines an evolution in Edmund's letters from the initial, extensive letter to Fanny regarding his distressed visit to London to those letters he writes regarding the scandals of his sisters. In doing so, Kramp refers to John Wilshire, who asserts that Edmund's letter to Fanny "adopts, or rather adapts, the convention of the sentimental novel...by revealing with such naked sincerity the helplessness of his passion for Mary" (104). Not only does this letter expose Edmund's sentimental inclinations, but also the irresolution that derives from his conflicted masculinity. This indecisiveness is reflected in his letter when he writes to Fanny of how he plans to propose to Mary:

I have...*sometimes resolved* on doing nothing till she returns to Mansfield...I shall write to her. I have *nearly determined* on explaining myself by letter...Considering everything, I *think* a letter will be decidedly the best method of explanation. I shall be able to write much that I could not say...*I must think this matter over a little.* (367, my italics)

Edmund contemplates writing a letter of courtship to Mary, but even in this he is undecided! He is able to aptly express to Fanny that Mary "is the only woman in the world whom [he] could ever think of as a wife" (366), yet he cannot bring himself to write this to Mary herself, the claimed object of his affection. He can, in contrast, relay to Fanny sincerely, "You are very much wanted. I miss you more than I can express" (367), and in doing so, momentarily resolve her painful feelings of former neglect. Yet, he cannot determine how or when he will reveal his feelings to Mary. His irresolution toys with Fanny's expectations and frustrates her to such an extent that even she declares to Edmund internally, "Oh! write, write. Finish it at once. Let there be an end of this suspense. Fix, commit, condemn yourself" (368-9). Fanny's urging emphasizes that writing is an indication of decision in courtship, because writing a letter of courtship codifies a romantic relationship between the correspondents.

Fanny's and Edmund's relationship is confusing and problematic, which primarily results from the tension underlying Edmund's dissent from the masculine ideal—his natural sentiment drifts toward Mary and his Burkean reason toward Fanny, whom he has taught to be a more steadfast proponent of Burkean thought than himself. Yet, Edmund eventually recognizes that he had imagined Mary to be something she was not. It is with this realization that he begins to see

Fanny anew and slowly recognizes his hidden feelings. Austen assures the reader that eventually, “Edmund did cease to care about Miss Crawford, and became as anxious to marry Fanny as Fanny herself could desire” (409). Thus Fanny was, indeed, the hidden object of Edmund’s heart all along. Through all of his doubt and uncertainty, he values Fanny’s opinion most. Therefore, Edmund’s letter about Mary emphasizes his irresolution, but also a faith that he can trust Fanny—a faith he does not fully have in Mary. For this reason, in addition to the letters we *do* see from Edmund, there is one strategic absence that we hear about, but which never comes to fruition: Edmund’s letter to Mary Crawford. Although he is distracted and neglects to write Fanny, he *does* write her eventually, whereas he never resolves to write Mary Crawford, namely because he fears her vulnerable to the manipulation and opinions of others. Austen’s strategic presence and absence of Edmund’s letters demonstrates that he wants to be with someone whom he can trust with his feelings, who will uphold his values, and with whom he can speak openly, and that someone is not Mary Crawford. Fanny’s intuition, however, is unbending. She fosters in Edmund the resolute determination that he lacks. In marrying Fanny, Edmund doesn’t lose his sentimentality—rather, he transfers it to Fanny, where it is combined with her moral uprightness and steadfast character. It is through his letters that Edmund discovers his heart. After all, despite his distractions and irresolution, Edmund always feels he can share his heart with Fanny, as he confesses in his first letter: “You have my thoughts exactly as they arise, my dear Fanny; perhaps they are sometimes contradictory, but it will not be a less faithful picture of my mind” (*Mansfield* 366).

Austen’s Resolution and the Restoration of the Masculine Ideal

Both Edmund and Henry’s masculine statuses are undermined by Edmund’s fall from and return to the English masculine ideal and Henry’s rejection of it completely. However, because Edmund ultimately harnesses the epistolary skills necessary to an English gentleman, he is able to successfully express himself and his feelings through his letters to Fanny. Ironically, though his letter to Fanny conveys his feelings for another, the fact that he is able to write his feelings to Fanny and ultimately cannot write to Mary demonstrates his deep trust in Fanny and faith in her opinion, qualities that he eventually recognizes as love, and he reclaims his masculine ideal in his union with her. On the other hand, Henry Crawford fails to achieve this ideal because he does not respect the epistolary convention and consequently fails to negotiate his “rational” and “passionate” feelings for Fanny. By strategically inserting and omitting letters in *Mansfield Park*, Austen tactfully determines the romantic fortune of, arguably, her most pragmatic and obscure male characters. Had Henry expressed himself as a talented letter writer, he might have deserved Fanny Price—but it is Edmund whom Austen forgives. She thus instills in him the “gift” of letter writing, the key to restoring his masculine ideal, and rewards him with Fanny’s love.

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