



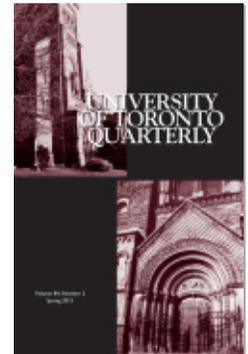
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Katie Gemmill

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KATIE GEMMILL

Ventriloquized Opinions of *Pride and Prejudice*, *Mansfield Park*, and *Emma*: Jane Austen's Critical Voice

ABSTRACT

This article explores the relationships between Jane Austen's critical views on the novel, her experience of having her novels criticized, and her own creative practice as a novelist. Comments in her letters about what family and friends thought of *Pride and Prejudice* shed light on how she reacted to having her novels reviewed. She later formalized her project of amassing readers' opinions by recording them in 'Opinions of *Mansfield Park*' and 'Opinions of *Emma*.' In both collections, Austen displays critical and editorial judgment. Her decisions about what to include, what to omit, what to quote verbatim, and what to ventriloquize reflect her critical voice. Austen's editorial role in collecting these opinions illuminates how her perceptions of readers' criticisms inflected her own novelistic technique.

In recent years, scholars such as Mary Waldron and Jocelyn Harris have used the allusions in Austen's novels and comments in her letters to make inferences about her assessments of other novels. According to these scholars, Austen's opinions of contemporary fiction shaped her own literary innovations. In the novels of her contemporaries, Austen objected to certain eighteenth-century tropes, such as gothic sensationalism, sentimental excess, and two-dimensional characters displaying extreme virtue or vice. In turn, diverse readers assessed Austen's own novels, as she was well aware. In letters written in 1813 to her sister Cassandra, she records opinions about *Pride and Prejudice* collected from acquaintances, and solicits Cassandra to ascertain the opinions of particular parties. Austen later formalized this project of amassing readers' criticisms in 'Opinions of *Mansfield Park*' and 'Opinions of *Emma*.' In compiling these collections, Austen displays critical and editorial judgment. She almost always ventriloquizes the opinions rather than recording them verbatim, inflecting them with her own point of view. The decisions that she makes about which opinions to include and omit, and how to order them, also reflect her critical biases. By analyzing the 'Opinions' in the context of her ventriloquism and her editorial choices, I will provide insight into Austen's experience of having her works

criticized. Her perception of others' views of *Pride and Prejudice*, *Mansfield Park*, and *Emma* interacted with her own, and this commingling of opinions shaped her novelistic practice.

Although 'Opinions of *Mansfield Park*' and 'Opinions of *Emma*' have received scholarly attention since their initial publication in Chapman's edition of Austen's *Plan of a Novel*, critics have overlooked the comments in her letters about the reception of *Pride and Prejudice*, which represent the earliest record of her impulse to collect readers' opinions. None of the letters that Austen wrote between June 1811 and October 1812 survives; *Sense and Sensibility* was published in October 1811, so it is possible that the missing correspondence from the ensuing year contained references to popular opinions of the novel. In the surviving letters, there is only one general comment from Austen to Cassandra – that *Sense and Sensibility* 'was very much admired at Cheltenham' (*Jane Austen's Letters* 252). For all scholarly intents and purposes, then, Austen's project of amassing opinions began in earnest only with the publication of her second book. Eight opinions in her 1813 letters refer unequivocally to *Pride and Prejudice*, all of which praise it. Two further opinions – one positive and one negative – probably refer to *Pride and Prejudice*, as they were written in the aftermath of its publication. All but two of these ten opinions are recorded in letters that Austen wrote to Cassandra, her sister and confidante; the letters thus reflect considerable candour on Austen's part, and they offer insight into her reactions to criticism of *Pride and Prejudice*.

Austen was convinced of the merit of her 'own darling Child,' as she affectionately refers to *Pride and Prejudice* in a letter of 29 January 1813. In the same letter, she states, 'I must confess that I think [Elizabeth] as delightful a creature as ever appeared in print' (201–02). In a letter of 4 February 1813, she admits, referring to the book, 'I am quite vain enough & well satisfied enough' (203). When people did not share her warm admiration of *Pride and Prejudice*, she was quick to undermine their opinions with biting irony. In a letter of November 1814 to her niece, Anna Lefroy, she alludes to just such a person, a man whose name was later cut out of the page: 'I will redeem my credit with him, by writing a close Imitation of "Self-control" as soon as I can; – I will improve upon it; – my Heroine shall not merely be wafted down an American river in a boat by herself, she shall cross the Atlantic in the same way, & never stop till she reaches Gravesent' (282–83). Austen disliked Mary Brunton's *Self-Control* and considered it a novel 'without anything of nature or probability in it' (234). By sardonically implying that this anonymous reader would approve only if she were to write an exaggerated imitation of a bad novel, she condemns his literary taste and effectively dismisses his opinion of her book.

Although irony and humour can function purely as mechanisms of criticism, they can also deflect attention from real concerns and insecurities.

Austen may indeed have had more invested in readers' opinions of *Pride and Prejudice* than her playful irony implies. When she receives complimentary reviews of the book, she questions their sincerity. Fanny Knight praises the book directly to the author, but Austen is satisfied only when Cassandra confirms Fanny's positive review: 'To me, it is of course all praise – but the more exact truth which she sends to you is good enough' (205). In further instances, she writes that Miss Benn 'really does seem to admire Elizabeth' (201), and that 'Lady Robert is delighted with P. & P. – and really *was* so as I understand before she knew who wrote it' (218). Austen repeatedly assures her sister – and, indirectly, herself – of the genuineness of the praise accorded to *Pride and Prejudice*. In their spirit of sisterly openness, Austen's letters to Cassandra show that she is convinced of her own merit, but she needs external corroboration of it; she seeks praise, but she registers it with skepticism. This process is a way for Austen to think about novelistic technique, in *Pride and Prejudice* as in her compilations of opinions.

Austen's informal documentation of opinions on *Pride and Prejudice* in her letters is the precursor of her formal collections: 'Opinions of *Mansfield Park*' and 'Opinions of *Emma*.' The very existence of the 'Opinions' is evidence of her continuing battle to reconcile her own opinion on her works with those of her readership, and to reflect on her novelistic practice. The circumstances surrounding Austen's compilation of the 'Opinions' are murky at best. She collected 'Opinions of *Mansfield Park*' after the novel's publication in May 1814. As Janet Todd and Linda Bree point out, Austen tells Cassandra in a letter of 24 November of that year, 'Mrs Creed's opinion is gone on my list,' Mrs Creed's being the last opinion to appear in the document ('Opinions of *Mansfield Park*' 696; *Letters* 282). She started a new collection after *Emma* was published in December 1815 and probably added to it over a longer period. Todd and Bree note that she makes reference in a letter of February 1817 to having received Mrs Charles Cage's praise of *Emma*, which she included as the thirty-fifth opinion on her list of forty-one (702). Exactly how readers communicated these opinions to Austen is unknown. Some are recorded verbatim, suggesting that she had transcribed them from letters. Because other opinions are paraphrased, it is impossible to tell whether she drew them from written sources or from her own memory of a conversation. Hearsay is another source of opinions: in the letters to Cassandra and Fanny Knight, Austen thanks them for reporting the responses of mutual friends.

The lack of information about how Austen assembled these opinions makes their analysis problematic. Grounded in the views of other people, they cannot be categorized with Austen's fictional works, nor can they be analyzed as such. Austen, however, decides what opinions to include or omit, what to paraphrase or quote, and how to order

them. There is an undeniable similarity between the way in which she ventriloquizes readers' opinions and the way in which the narrators in her novels modulate characters' voices in passages of free indirect discourse; both are forms of mediation. David Lodge, articulating the dual function of free indirect discourse in Austen's works, argues that it allows her 'to give the reader intimate access to a character's thoughts without totally surrendering control of the discourse to that character' and, at the same time, to 'control and direct the reader's affective and interpretive responses to the unfolding story' (175–76). Just as the narrative method of reporting characters' thoughts through free indirect discourse affords considerable control to Austen as an author, so does the technique of ventriloquizing readers' opinions afford the same degree of control to Austen as the editor of these two collections, 'Opinions of *Mansfield Park*' and 'Opinions of *Emma*.'

The hybrid status of the 'Opinions' – part fact and part fiction – has been largely overlooked by Austen critics, who have invoked them almost exclusively to paint a picture of the popular reception of the novels following their respective publications. These opinions, however, have the potential to illuminate Austen's oeuvre in a new way. To this end, they should be analyzed in the context of the editorial choices that she made to shape how they would be read and received, if only by herself and select friends and family. Her editorial choices implicitly record her point of view, as it alternately contends or dovetails with those of her readers. Reading the 'Opinions' through this editorial lens, one can infer how Austen's perception of readers' criticism influenced her literary practice.

Particularly interesting is Austen's choice of which opinions merit direct quotation rather than paraphrase. In the list of thirty-eight 'Opinions of *Mansfield Park*,' seven are transcribed word for word, and three are a combination of transcription and paraphrase. The paraphrased opinions record both strengths and weaknesses of the novel, while the verbatim opinions are overwhelmingly favourable. Generally, the verbatim opinions all praise the same feature of the novel: Austen's naturally depicted characters. Mary, Lady Kerr, praises '[t]he excellent delineation of Character' ('Opinions of *Mansfield Park*' 232). Anne Sharpe writes, 'Your Characters are drawn to the Life, so *very, very* natural & just' (233). In a similar view, Lady Harriet Gordon remarks that 'in most novels you are amused for the time with a set of Ideal People whom you never think of afterwards or whom you the least expect to meet in common life, whereas in Miss A-s works, & especially in MP. you actually *live* with them, you fancy yourself one of the family' (234).

Austen considered the naturalness of character essential to fiction. In 1814, she wrote five letters to her niece Anna Lefroy to offer opinions on the young author's novel-in-progress, which, as Cronin and

McMillan note in their introduction to the Cambridge edition of *Emma*, 'represent her most sustained exercise in literary criticism' (xxiv). Austen urges her niece to draw characters that behave consistently and do not display extreme traits. Objecting to an unwise decision made by the character Mrs F, she warns Anna, 'Remember, she is very prudent – you must not let her act inconsistently' (*Letters* 275). She also remarks that Anna's character 'Cecilia is perhaps a little too solemn and good' (276), and doubts 'whether Ly Helena is not almost *too* foolish' (277). She prefers mixed characters such as D. Forester, whom she likes 'a great deal better than if he had been very Good or very Bad' (267). Making editorial interventions into Anna's fiction sharpens Austen's own taste in character and the manner in which character is represented. Not coincidentally, naturally drawn characters are the main feature praised in the verbatim opinions of *Mansfield Park*. As editor of this collection, Austen chooses to quote any opinion that reflects literary standards in line with her own.

Most of the opinions that Austen paraphrases pertain to characters, and she draws on a limited lexicon of verbs to sum them up. She notes the characters that readers 'liked,' 'admired,' or 'enjoyed,' and those with which readers were 'delighted' or 'pleased.' Similarly, she notes the characters that readers 'disliked,' 'couldn't bear,' or 'hated.' With this limited roster of modifiers, Austen produces a tone of homogeneity and vagueness in the paraphrased opinions – many of which contradict one another – and, as John Wiltshire notes, 'Austen puts them down so that their contradictoriness is amusingly exposed' (lix). By juxtaposing contradicting opinions, paraphrasing them in generic terms, and omitting the reasoning behind them, Austen effectively implies their arbitrariness and perhaps even their insignificance.

This arbitrariness and insignificance do not apply universally to the paraphrased opinions; in fact, Austen rephrases a select few in detail, making them stand out against the others. Just as all of the verbatim opinions are overwhelmingly positive, all the opinions that she rephrases at length are negative. The longer paraphrases object to the same aspect of the novel: the human frailty of characters. For her nephews Edward and George, Austen writes that 'Henry C.'s going off with M^{rs} R – at such a time, when so much in love with Fanny, [was] thought unnatural by Edward' ('Opinions of *Mansfield Park*' 230). Fanny Knight's opinion also merits longer paraphrasing, as she 'could not think it natural that Edm^d sh^d be so much attached to a woman without Principle like Mary C. – or promote Fanny's marrying Henry' (230). Mary Cooke 'admired Fanny in general; but thought she ought to have been more determined on overcoming her own feelings, when she saw Edmund's attachment to Miss Crawford' (232). These opinions object specifically to one of Austen's literary contributions: the replacement of two-dimensional

characters with ones that exemplify the complex and often variable nature of the human mind.

As she states in her letters to Anna, Austen was opposed to characters who displayed virtue or vice in their absolute forms. She preferred a realistic depiction of human fallibility in her own novels. As a result, she achieved what Mary Waldron has described as a 'blurring of the moral focus' (35) that 'leaves the reader unsure whether to approve or disapprove' (34) of characters. Objections to human frailty in *Mansfield Park* came from people who probably approached it with the expectations of a typical eighteenth-century reader. Faced with characters' weaknesses, these readers saw them as flaws in Austen's execution. They belong to a group, identified by Waldron, whose criticisms 'centred on the shortcomings of a character the commentator clearly thought intended to be virtuous by the author' (112). By recording these objections at length, compared to the other tersely paraphrased opinions, Austen acknowledges them; by framing them in her own language, however, she makes the acknowledgement grudgingly.

Austen's apparent need to express her authorial control shaped her next literary endeavour, *Emma*. While Fanny Price might often be considered a 'picture of perfection' (Austen, *Letters* 335), Emma Woodhouse is endearing because of her flaws. As Waldron points out, 'nobody could mistake [her] for an attempt at a conduct-book model' (112). In the same spirit of authorial control that governs her editorial choices in the 'Opinions of *Mansfield Park*,' Austen took the imperfect morality to which readers objected in that novel and amplified it in her next heroine, Emma. Insecurity about popular opinions did not, apparently, affect her faith in her own literary innovations, nor did it change her novelistic practice. Although *Emma* has been 'widely regarded as the greatest of her novels' since the end of the nineteenth century (Cronin and McMillan, in *Emma* xxix), it was not the case at the time of its publication. Austen's acute awareness of this fact inflects her editorial choices in compiling 'Opinions of *Emma*.' Totalling forty-one, there are three more opinions in this second collection than in the first. Paradoxically, only three of the 'Opinions of *Emma*' are fully or partially verbatim, striking a sharp contrast to the ten direct quotations in 'Opinions of *Mansfield Park*'. The three verbatim opinions in the *Emma* collection corroborate that Austen reserved direct quotation for positive opinions. Penelope Lutley-Sclater wrote that Austen had 'brought it all about very cleverly in the last volume' (238). Austen's brother Charles wrote, 'I am delighted with [Emma], more so I think than even with my favourite *Pride & Prejudice*, & have read it three times in the Passage' (239). While complimentary, these opinions are fairly general. The third verbatim opinion expresses approval of Austen's innovative method. Like the admirers of *Mansfield Park* whom Austen quoted directly, Mrs Cage is all praise for

the verisimilitude with which she draws her characters: 'Every character is thoroughly kept up . . . I am at Highbury all day, & I ca'nt help feeling I have just got into a new set of acquaintance' (238). Austen's editorial choice to use verbatim quotation to highlight favourable opinions in line with her own is the same in both collections; there are simply far fewer such opinions for *Emma* than for *Mansfield Park*.

This comparative increase of negative feedback for *Emma* is apparent in the opinions that Austen paraphrases, but she editorially tempers their impact through diction and syntax. Of the thirty-eight paraphrased opinions in this collection, seven are purely positive, outnumbered by the twelve that are purely negative. All of these unequivocal opinions, positive and negative alike, are recorded in a terse and general manner. In the nineteen paraphrased opinions that express favourable and unfavourable comments simultaneously, Austen's editorial technique is more complex. She uses mildly hyperbolic language to highlight the positive aspect of the opinion, and syntactically reframes the negative part to minimize its impact. Of her sister-in-law Mary, Austen writes that she 'liked & admired [*Emma*] very much indeed, but must still prefer P & P.' (235). Similarly, of her maternal uncle James Leigh Perrot and his wife Jane, she writes that they 'saw many beauties in it, but cd not think it equal to P. & P.' (236). In the first opinion, she employs near redundancies for emphasis, using two verbs, 'liked' and 'admired,' and two qualifiers, 'very much' and 'indeed.' She uses the verbs 'must' and 'could' in the respective opinions instead of the more straightforward verb 'did,' implying a lack of agency on the parts of the opinion holders. These verbs suggest that Mary Austen and the Perrots hold these opinions almost against their will, or perhaps against their better judgment. Indirectly, these adjusted opinions hint at the merit of *Emma*.

With her talent for turning criticism to virtue, Austen writes that Ben Lefroy, husband of her niece Anna, 'thought that if there had been more Incident, it would be equal to any of the others' ('Opinions of *Emma*' 237). She frames this negative criticism in the affirmative, employing the conditional tense to create a hypothetical situation in which *Emma* is on a par with her other works. She equates *Emma* with her other novels syntactically, even though Lefroy's real opinion is that *Emma* is not equal to them. Austen's frustration with her readership's apathetic reception of *Emma*, by contrast to *Mansfield Park*, emerges in her decreased use of verbatim quotation and her increased tendency to paraphrase and temper negative criticisms. Her efforts to maintain editorial control over her readers' unfavourable opinions, motivated by her own convictions about the worth of her work, are even more apparent in this second collection of opinions than in the first.

In the years after her novels were first published, Austen was torn between her own conviction of the need for specific novelistic

innovations, and her desire for readers to understand and appreciate them. As demonstrated in her letters to Cassandra about *Pride and Prejudice*, she had faith in herself as a writer, yet she needed others to corroborate it. In her editorial compilation of the 'Opinions of *Mansfield Park*,' this need persists, as Austen highlights opinions that praise her literary innovations, and reframes in her own diction those that do not. Empowering herself and her literary vision by editorially manipulating readers' criticisms, Austen armed herself with the courage to draw her imperfect heroine Emma, in spite of readerly objections over the human fallibility exemplified in Edmund and Fanny of *Mansfield Park*. Faced with a comparative onslaught of negative feedback while collecting 'Opinions of *Emma*,' Austen's editorial presence is even more evident. Largely overlooked in the critical literature, these ventriloquized opinions are gems in Austen's oeuvre. They allow a clearer picture of how Austen reconciled public opinion with her aim to forge innovations in the representation of character that set the stage for nineteenth-century realism.

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