

They Blush Because They Understand: The Performative Power of Women's Humor and Embarrassment in *Pride and Prejudice*, *Mansfield Park*, and *Emma*

Sarah K. Lingo

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Peter Graham, Committee Chair
Katrina M. Powell
Nancy Metz

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ABSTRACT

In this project, I analyze women's humor in three of Jane Austen's novels: *Pride and Prejudice*, *Mansfield Park*, and *Emma*. Using speech-act theory, I specifically examine Elizabeth, Emma, and Mary's utterances to demonstrate that in order for humorous utterances to be subversive, they must challenge societal or patriarchal constructs (religion, misogynist men, marriage, the feminine ideal) and do so artfully. An indirect speech act—a play on words, an insult, even a laugh—is often far more effective than a more direct one, especially when wielded by characters for whom a direct antagonistic speech act would have severe social consequences. When those socially-sanctioned and highly-regulated speech acts—marriages, wills, introductions, invitations, letters, titles—are less accessible or less beneficial to women, only indirect speech acts remain a viable option.

For Peter.

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Introduction

Austen/Austin

In *A Natural History of the Romance Novel*, Pamela Regis defends *Pride and Prejudice*, and other Jane Austen novels, against charges of sexism from critics who find fault with Austen's marriage endings. Among these critics is Wayne Booth, who argues "that the ending requires a moral compromise that harms readers" (Regis 76). The marriage, according to this reading, represents a woman's submission to societal expectation. Regis argues, in opposition, that "[i]n *Pride and Prejudice*, marriage itself may not be renovated, but it is rethought from within. The law and society's institutions cannot be changed by one heroine, but she can obtain maximum freedom within them" (78). In other words, though hierarchies of class and gender restrict Austen's female characters and limit their choices, these women retain agency by *playing within* these rigid restrictions. Regis adeptly summarizes this point: "Given the possibilities open to women, marriage is her best choice. In the first decades of the nineteenth century, it was still women's lot, still a fact of female life. We can regret this fact, but expecting Austen to do so as well is both unreasonable and anachronistic" (83-4). I explore here this freedom within social structures to which Regis alludes (78). Though, at first, it may seem paradoxical to identify freedom within oppression, as many scholars have suggested (Barreca; Bilger; Gillooly), Austen's cleverer female characters consistently attempt to resist societal oppression to varying degrees of success, namely through performative language, which appears in discrete moments of—often humor-driven—conversation.

Austen's female characters are restricted not only by laws of ownership and marriage, but also by pervasive rules of decorum, which regulate both speech and behavior. Characters must adhere to strict societal conventions, chiefly manners. In *Jane Austen's Narrative Techniques: A Stylistic and Pragmatic Analysis*, Massimiliano Morini describes Austen's dialogue as "a complex role-playing game, the rules of which are dictated by general consensus about what can and cannot be said, what can be said openly and what must be hinted at or implied" (79). Examining conversation manuals circulated in the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries alongside Austen's novels, Morini identifies many common conversation conventions that reflect "how people were expected to behave in polite society," including avoiding interruptions, responding to the current subject matter, choosing appropriate subjects, and abiding by rules of manners and grammar (80).

Women's language, within and without Austen's novels, is strictly regulated, and paradoxically, trivialized. Sean Zwagerman, in *Wit's End: Women's Humor as Rhetorical and Performative Strategy*, draws attention to this paradox: "[A]n important commonality among women, humor, and talk is that all three are dismissed as trivial while at the same time are deemed potent and threatening enough to warrant restriction through ideals of virtue and correctness—whether of gender or grammar" (25). Accordingly, Mark M. Hennelly acknowledges that many critics of *Sense and Sensibility* accuse the novel of "speak[ing] too much and do[ing] too little," a criticism that might be leveled against any of Austen's novels (63). This accusation similarly trivializes Austen's domestic spaces, in which women effect change through speech.

Much of the action in Austen's work centers on speech: characters make introductions, extend invitations, send letters, and generally speak to one another at great length. The reader comes to know Austen's characters through their words, and dialogue propels the narrative: the most pivotal scenes amount to mere verbal exchanges. Language—and speech in particular—in Austen's novels is always *doing* something. Hennelly, in "Performing, Promising, and Performing Promises in *Sense and Sensibility*," describes this power of speech to act in terms of speech-act theory, arguing "that [*Sense and Sensibility*] may be Austen's most performative work and that many of its speeches are themselves speech acts" (63). Furthermore, he maintains that *Sense and Sensibility* actually "anticipate[s] Austin's speech act theory," noting the significance of promises in particular across Austen's novels (72).

Considering the performative power of language that Hennelly identifies within Austen's writing, it is perhaps not surprising that recent scholarship has turned to the other Austin to understand the dynamics of Austen's dialogue. Eric Lindstrom, for example, in "Austen and Austin," applies speech-act theory—incorporating J. L. Austin, D.A. Miller, and Judith Butler—to instances of marriage in *Northanger Abbey* and *Sense and Sensibility*. In "Jane Austen's Speech Acts and Language-Based Societies," Candace Nolan-Grant also applies speech-act theory—paying particular attention to performative utterances—as a tool to study "the dynamic power of language to act" within Austen's novels (863). She writes, "To describe a society represented in literature as language-based is to suggest that most events within that society transpire by the agency of words. More deeply, such a description implies that events do not take place simply because of

words, or via speech, or through the medium of language; rather, utterance and writing *are* the events” (863). Nolan-Grant argues that “[i]ntroducing speech-act theory into subsequent, closer readings of Austen’s work will undoubtedly yield further unique and significant insights into the dynamics of her novels” (876).

In 1955, J. L. Austin introduced speech-act theory and the concept of the “performative utterance” across several lectures, which were reproduced in the posthumous *How to Do Things with Words* in 1962. In these landmark lectures, Austin differentiates constative utterances from performative utterances: constative utterances are statements that are used to describe the state of something, while performative utterances bring about some act.¹ If constative utterances describe reality, then performative utterances alter it. Examples of performative utterances include: to insult, to apologize, to bet, to vow, to christen, to appoint, and to order.

Here, I borrow Zwagerman’s broader definition of performative language: “*an act of communication, linguistic or otherwise, having a world-to-word—or world-to-symbol/gesture—direction of fit, toward some perlocutionary effect*” (22). Zwagerman draws on Searle, who uses the terms “world-to-word” and “word-to-world” to describe performative and constative utterances, respectively. “World-to-word direction of fit” means that “the satisfaction of the utterance depends on the world coming to conform to

¹ This distinction becomes blurry over the course of the lectures, and Austin eventually questions whether there is a substantial difference between these terms (Zwagerman 34). Austin says in his final lecture of *How to Do Thing with Words*, “[A] belief in the dichotomy of performatives and constatives ... Has to be abandoned in favour of more general *families* of related and overlapping speech acts” (149).

the words” (20).² This definition allows for indirect, quieter instances of performative speech, including humor, and is particularly useful in analyzing humor because it “opens up the study of performatives to a consideration of motives” (22). Zwagerman writes, “[M]y definition of performative acknowledges the world-to-word direction of fit expressives do have: they are ‘happy’ if and only if the world (however localized) changes in the way (however slight) the speaker hopes, the way that has motivated the speaker to utter an expressive in the first place” (23).

Austin insists on the importance of sincerity in performatives—of the speaker’s motive being clearly communicated in his or her utterance—and accordingly, Zwagerman writes that “promises and many other performatives assume the sincerity and seriousness of the speaker; and on first glance, sincerity and seriousness may seem absent from humorous utterances” (29). However, Zwagerman points out that absolute sincerity—almost always missing from jokes—is not essential for a performative to work: “[H]umor does not necessarily—or even unusually—undermine the speech act it conveys. Though humor, as an indirect speech act and a play with words, often divorces what is said (‘word meaning’) from what is meant (‘speaker meaning’), this divorce does not cause the speech act to fail, nor does it render speaker meaning insincere, trivial, or even necessarily ambiguous” (29). Accordingly, humor is not less likely to bring about change, to constitute a performative utterance or speech act, because of its surface insincerity, or “tongue-in-cheek-ness.”

² Compare this to the “word-to-world direction of fit,” in which statements must correspond to real circumstances to be true; these kind of declarative statements conform to reality instead of affecting it (Zwagerman 24).

Consider indirect speech acts as well as direct ones alongside Austen's novels: characters are doing *subtle* things with words. I suggest that indirect speech acts are extremely prevalent in Austen's dialogue, particularly because the characters operate within a very rigid framework of customs and manners and cannot effectively change their conditions with direct speech acts (these, too often, break the rules). In this rigid system, indirect speech acts become more useful than direct ones; indirect speech acts allow one to play within larger structures, which I have suggested Austen's female characters consistently do. Humor as an indirect speech act is particularly useful; as Zwagerman writes:

[A]s a verbal strategy that recognizes and employs the play and ambiguity between word meaning and speaker meaning, humor is ideally suited for the performance of indirect speech acts ... For what other form of speech is so clearly both a performative and a performance, an act of using words to affect one's status, relationships, and context (doing things with words) while also drawing attention to oneself as a verbal performer (doing things to words)? (29)

In the analyses that follow, I use speech-act theory to examine women's humor in three of Jane Austen's works. An emphasis on performative humor is largely absent from existing speech-act readings of Austen. I contribute to an ongoing conversation relating *Austen* to *Austin* by arguing that Austen's female characters, Elizabeth, for example, use humor as a means of subversion, a resistance of rigid social constraints that keep them otherwise passive.

However, while many scholars note the subversive potential of women's humor and identify this potential in Austen's novels, I interrogate these claims. What does it mean for a woman in these novels to be subversive? While I argue that women's subversive humor is present in Austen's novels, this subversion is dependent upon several factors. To determine how—and even if—subversive humor operates in Austen's novels, we must first determine what constitutes subversive humor. I suggest that humor is subversive only if 1.) it simultaneously achieves a specific perlocution—that is, the speaker's motivation is realized—and 2.) if it resists dominant cultural or patriarchal norms. I hope the analysis that follows will both further define and demonstrate the necessity of these criteria.

Austin and Zwagerman provide theoretical foundations for this paper; I borrow from the first an understanding of performative language and from the second, an argument that explicitly links women's humor and performative language. In addition to consulting existing readings of Austen, humor, and performativity, I perform my own close reading of three of Austen's works: *Pride and Prejudice*, *Mansfield Park*, and *Emma*.

Chapter 1

Women's Humor as Subtle Subversion

Before turning to Austen, it will be useful to review recent perspectives on women's humor, scholarship on women's humor in eighteenth and nineteenth century fiction, and critical approaches to women's humor in Austen's novels, specifically.

Women's humor has been historically downplayed and dismissed outright: women are said to fail to appreciate humor and are incapable of making jokes themselves. Consider William Congreve, who in 1695, writes, "But I must confess I have never made any Observation of what I Apprehend to be true Humour in women" (qtd. in *Last Laughs* 4). In her introduction to *Last Laughs: Perspectives on Women and Comedy*, Regina Barreca notes that "[c]omedy written by women is perceived by many critics as trivial, silly and unworthy of serious attention. . . . When writing about comedy, . . . women are damned to insignificance twice over. They are the unofficial discussing the insignificant. Who but other women would listen?" (6). Defending the legitimacy of feminist and women's humor—and distinguishing between these terms—is an ongoing endeavor, and feminist writers—academic and nonacademic—have thoroughly addressed this stigma. In particular, much has been written on women in stand-up comedy (Gilbert) and on women in literature (Barreca; Bilger; Gillooly) to demonstrate that women *do* have a sense of humor and that their humor can be politically powerful: as Barreca writes, "Women's humor is about our reclamation of certain forms of control over our own lives. Humor allows us to gain perspective by ridiculing the implicit insanities of a patriarchal culture" ("Untamed and Unabashed" 12).

Barreca identifies one particular feature "typical" of humorous works by women: play with words and meaning (18). She argues that "[w]ords play off many meanings rather than embodying one in such a way as to underscore women's unique relationship to patriarchal language" (18). This claim will become important as I turn to Austen, whose own play with meaning is both subtle and subversive. Accordingly, Barreca writes,

“They structure their discourse so that it both escapes and appears to submit to the rules of dominant discourse” (19). In Austen, humorous, indirect speech acts allow this simultaneous “escape” and apparent “submi[ssion].” Indirect speech acts are prevalent in Austen because they allow characters to negotiate strict rules of society while enacting change.

Joanne R. Gilbert locates the strength of women’s humor in its marginality, noting the power of marginal humor “to unmask the unabashed hypocrisy of the dominant culture” (Gilbert 27-8). She writes, “Unlike sociological marginality, which often stigmatizes, rhetorical marginality may actually empower” (6). Though Gilbert discusses specifically women in stand-up comedy, whose performances are typically more public and prearranged, the marginality of women’s humor appears in everyday speech acts as well. Many have called attention to the marginality of women’s humor and thus its inherent ability to redistribute power; Barreca similarly observes, “Women can defile, spoil, and ruin because they derive power from their exclusion” (“Untamed and Unabashed” 31). Furthermore, Gilbert writes, “A comic’s marginality and performance context grants him or her the authority to subvert the status quo; in this way, deviance from social norms and dominant cultural traits serves as a license for social criticism” (18).

Zwagerman challenges these claims that women’s humor necessarily “subvert[s] the status quo,” as, he argues, this scholarship “overstates humor’s subversive action and/or oversimplifies cultural and interpersonal gender dynamics” (4). He writes that although “[s]tudies of women’s humor often assume that women’s humor is always

subversive—of serious language, or the status quo, and of patriarchy—and always effective” (4), this is not the case. Rather, “[t]he performativity of humor is not an intrinsic formal property, and since performative humor must be employed by a conscious, intentionalistic speaker, the ideology of a humorous utterance ... can just as easily be conservative and stabilizing as radical and ‘decentering’” (6).

Zwagerman also notes that we cannot generalize about the subversive potential of women’s humor without considering that humor’s effect on an audience: “[T]he speaker’s authority (*ethos*) is itself influenced not only by the speaker’s identity and words but by context and audiences, and audiences marked by, among other things, gender. And audience uptake places a crucial role in determining whether humor triumphs over anything” (6). Here, Zwagerman cites Aristotle, who writes that an utterance “is persuasive because there is somebody whom it persuades” (qtd. In Zwagerman 6). Zwagerman notes that “humor cannot be theorized in advance as always already subversive because we must always consider the total speech situation,” and he advocates “mov[ing] past vague references to the action of humor as decentering” to concrete analysis (6).

Gilbert also acknowledges the importance of audience awareness in analysis of comedy. She writes, “More than any other type of performance, humor requires an audience. In private, an individual can be her or his own audience in dyadic communication, one person may be the humorist and another the audience. But in public, the audience for humor serves a critical function. How do we know that humor exists in public discourse? People laugh” (13). This consideration of audience will be particularly

important to this analysis, as I consider the multiple possible audiences for humor in Austen's novels: the speaking character, the other characters, and the reader. If, as Gilbert suggests, "[t]hrough the politics of laughter, the audience serves as ultimate arbiter of humor and power in public discourse" (15), then whose laughter—Elizabeth's, Mr. Bennet's, Darcy's, or the reader's, for example—marks a joke as felicitous and indicates realized performative potential?

In accordance with Zwagerman's argument that any analysis of humor must take into account the "total speech situation," let us consider the specific cultural context in which Austen wrote, paying particular attention to treatment of women's humor the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries. In *Laughing Feminism*, Audrey Bilger writes on the comedy of Frances Burney, Maria Edgeworth, and Jane Austen and argues for the subversive power of women's humor. Specifically, she argues that these authors consistently "mock sexist male characters in their novels" and "turn the tables on misogynist satirists and challenge the notion of male superiority" (Bilger 143). She writes, "Laughter's impolite qualities set it at odds with the norms of eighteenth-century manners. Furthermore, its capacity for breaking down hierarchies tended to have an irritating effect on members of the dominant classes" (16). She begins by calling attention to the "prohibitions against women's wit and humor cropping up in eighteenth-century writings" (15), the "cultural milieu ... that exerted ideological pressure on women's self-expression" (16). As sentimental comedy, which "relied heavily on images of domestic order," gained popularity towards the end of the eighteenth century, "social fears of noncompliance and disruption made it difficult for a writer to be comic, critical, and female" (21).

Accordingly, conduct books “constructed an ideal of femininity,” thus “defin[ing] proper feminine behavior for middle-class women” (21). Bilger maintains that the behaviors outlined in these books were necessarily incompatible with wit and humor, and she points to conduct-book writers James Fordyce, Thomas Gisborne, and John Gregory to demonstrate this. On the discordance of wit and marriage, Fordyce observes, “[W]hen I speak on this subject, need I tell you, that men of the best sense have been usually averse to the thought of marrying a witty female? ... Men who understand the science of domestic happiness, know that its very first principle is ease ... But we cannot be easy, where we are not safe. We are never safe in the company of a critic; and almost every wit is a critic by profession” (qtd. in Bilger 22). As Bilger argues, “Such restrictions on female laughter would have made it difficult for an eighteenth-century woman to exercise comic talents in public when, even in private, she was urged to be self-conscious about her wit and humor” (23). Furthermore, Bilger attributes that “common refrain [that] held that women had no sense of humor at all” to the burgeoning of that eighteenth-century “definition of the feminine ideal” (24).

Eileen Gillooly, in *Smile of Discontent: Humor, Gender, and 19th Century British Fiction*, argues that “feminine humor functions as a sustained, if diffusive undercover assault upon the authority of the social order itself” (24). Like Bilger, Gillooly notes the “revolutionary rigidification of social codes, conspicuous along gender lines” that appeared at the end of the eighteenth century; writers like Behn and Manley “became bywords for female abomination” (3). Amid these unyielding restrictions, a distinctively

“feminine humor” was born, one “sympathetic and restrained, tender and tactful” (4).

Such “emasculated or effeminized” humor, Gillooly argues,

might be safely practiced by women when more virile forms were deemed inappropriate for their use. Affectively sympathetic (though often infused with a trace of bitter sarcasm), rhetorically self-effacing, and intellectually (if covertly) occupied with the injuries, inconveniences, and injustices of gender, feminine humor not only offered nineteenth-century women a socially acceptable means of voicing their discontent but, with ironic aptness, employed virtues and wiles traditionally gendered feminine in doing so. (4)

This “feminine humor,” Gillooly argues, “simultaneously satisfies psychic needs and the cultural demands with which they are continually in conflict” (24). She writes that feminine humor is marked by displacement: “Its logic—being semiotic and linguistically associative (like that of parapraxes and dreams) rather than binary—permits compromises in feeling and thought that are intolerable to ordinary consciousness because they are morally unacceptable or mutually contradictory” (24). In this way, feminine humor serves as a coping mechanism for its users, “a temporary escape from the burdens of reality” (25).

Rachel M. Brownstein notes the privileged critical position of Austen’s narrator in “Jane Austen: Irony and Authority.” She argues that Austen’s authoritative voice allows her to play with irony and meaning: “Austen can comment with varying degrees of explicitness on the limits of rhetorical and human authority. Through self-reflexive irony

she can keep her distance from the discourse of authority, the patriarchal mode of imposing oneself through language” (68). Austen establishes this authoritative voice by inviting readers to look down on the Mrs. Bennets and the Lady Bertrams as the narrator does. Additionally, she establishes ethos by “signing herself ‘A Lady’” (58), a pen name that “combines an authoritative ring with flexible self-mocking undertones” (68). Thus, authority and the capacity to be ironic are intrinsically linked: “The illusion depends on the way the confident, confidential tones of A Lady are deployed so as to mock the accents of authoritative patriarchal discourse in the universe that contains her universe and her fictions” (62-3).

In “Austen’s Laughter,” Patricia Meyer Spacks traces Austen’s treatment of humor through *Pride and Prejudice*, *Mansfield Park*, and *Emma*, arguing that “each emphasizes different aspects of that dynamic [of laughter] and correspondingly demands the reader’s comic response in different ways” (71). In *Pride and Prejudice*, “Laughter allows useful defensive transformations of pain into pleasure; it records the freedom and power of a kind of wit closely allied with intelligence” (74). However, laughter in *Pride and Prejudice* “can also distort . . . vision” (75). In *Mansfield Park*, “Over and over one must feel the link between laughter and moral weakness” (77). Finally, in *Emma*, Austen “establishes a more complicated view of laughter, discriminating clearly between acceptable and unacceptable modes” (80).

I argue that applying speech-act theory to Austen’s dialogue will further illuminate the intricacies of humor’s subversive potential. As I have noted, much has been written recently regarding Austen and speech-act theory, namely by Nolan-Grant,

Lindstrom, and Hennelly. Nolan-Grant asserts that examining Austen's novels with attention to the ways in which language performs assists study of "numerous threads internal to the novels" including but not limited to "character dynamics, plot progression, and implicit meaning" (876). She divides speech acts in Austen's novels into three kinds: "the official performative, (given force by institutions), the explicit social performative (given force by accepted social mores), and the implicit social performative (given force by peculiarities of context)" (863). She then gives examples of each category: marriages and wills are official performatives, introductions and invitations are explicit social performatives, and letters and titles are implicit social performatives. Her primary argument is that "these groupings roughly correspond to stages in the development of the theory and reveal the movement along a continuum from official to implicit and its close link to issues of context" (863-4). In other words, the distinctions Nolan-Grant makes between the official performative, the explicit social performative, and the implicit social performative reflect the revisions Austin made over the course of his lectures. Using these three terms, Nolan-Grant explores their interaction and the overall effect they have on the characters, plot, and meaning from several of Austen's novels.

Lindstrom writes on the performativity of marriage in Austen's novels. He ultimately admits "that it may not be just marriage itself, but the dominant conditions for the whole promissory structure of experience (entailments, engagements, dance cards, rents, Christ's evangelical promise, the weather, credit and money), that most occupy Austen's canvas for fiction" (511). In other words, Austen's novels are characterized by a series of fulfilled—and often unfulfilled—promises. Meanwhile, Hennelly offers three

examples of promises in *Sense and Sensibility*: “John Dashwood’s deathbed pledge to his father, John Willoughby’s unspoken plighting of himself to Marianne, and Edward Ferrars’ marriage proposal to Lucy Steele” (63-4). Hennelly compares how male and female characters keep or break promises, observing that “[w]hile both male and female characters in *Sense and Sensibility* frequently perform promises in Austin’s sense of uttering them, the female characters appear more able performers of them in Hume’s sense of keeping or fulfilling them” (74).

Nolan-Grant, Lindstrom, and Hennelly identify those overt examples of speech-acts in Austen’s novels: marriage proposals, wills, titles, and a myriad of others. However, in this project, I look to Zwagerman, who demonstrates the advantages of a subtler application of speech-act theory to humor through his analysis of American literature from the twentieth century. The above examples constitute “tightly scripted official speech acts” or “explicit performatives” (16), but Zwagerman argues for application of speech-act theory to “implicit performatives” as well. To explore the power of more indirect performative utterances, Zwagerman uses the example “Hello,” which seems initially to have no “perlocutionary intention” other than announcing one’s presence or greeting (18).³ However, as Zwagerman points out, the performative significance of “Hello” varies greatly depending on context, audience, and the motives of the speaker: “Compare the ‘Hello’ of two strangers who pass each other in the park, the ‘Hello’ of a

³ Austin also “distinguish[es] between ‘locutionary’ and ‘illocutionary’ acts (‘an illocutionary act, i.e. performative of an act *in* saying something as opposed to performance of an act *of* saying something’)” (Tandon 22). The locution, in other words, is “the utterance itself,” and the illocution is “the intentional and conventional force of the utterance” (Zwagerman 13). A final essential term, the “perlocution,” is “the consequences of the speech act: how the words affect the hearer and the context” (Zwagerman 13). Austin explains, “We can distinguish the locutionary act ‘he said that ...’ from the illocutionary act ‘he argued that ...’ and the perlocutionary act ‘he convinced me that ...’” (Austin 102).

police officer to a motorist pulled over for reckless driving, and the ‘Hello’ of a servant to a cruel master” (18-9). In the second and third instances, a “perlocutionary motive” emerges because “the utterances are meant to do more than merely be recognized as greetings” (19). Zwagerman writes, “The complexity of motivation makes it not only possible but likely that seemingly benign or banal utterances have some formative push behind them, and not only—or even mainly—when we are trying to be manipulative or seductive” (21). Thus, this consideration of speaker motivation is essential to understanding how humor is performative.

Austen’s female characters clearly respond to the eighteenth and nineteenth century feminine ideal in varied ways, and particular responses, like those of Elizabeth Bennet or Mary Crawford, appear subversive—that is, they oppose Fanny’s “embodi[ment] [of] mocked virtues” (105) and “patriarchal zeal” (Gillooly 109). In addition, Austen’s narrator regularly criticizes and dismantles patriarchal and cultural norms, as Gillooly, Brownstein, and Bilger observe. However, like Zwagerman, I argue that to assess how subversive Austen’s character’s responses *actually* are, we must be aware of the entire speech situation: illocution, perlocution, and context. As Zwagerman writes, “for [strategic humor] to succeed, the utterance must be recognizable as a certain performative type, the context must be cooperative, and the audience must ‘get it’” (3). If, as Zwagerman suggests, women’s rhetorical use of humor is not “inherently subversive” (71), then what circumstances make some women’s humor rhetorically effective (and thus potentially subversive) and others ineffective? Can utterances be truly subversive if rendered infelicitous by an unpersuaded (or unaffected) audience? Finally, how does

some women's humor achieve its intended rhetorical effect where others only offend or fall flat? To address these questions, I turn now to Austen's texts.

Chapter 2

Teaze Him—Laugh at Him

Consider *Pride and Prejudice*, whose characters regularly apply—and misapply—humor. Let us look first at humor's misapplication in the novel, beginning with its chief offenders, Mrs. Bennet and Lydia.

For any performative to be felicitous, its speaker and listeners must share a particular context. Lydia and Mrs. Bennet always miss out on this necessary context, and thus either laugh at inappropriate times or fail to be embarrassed when embarrassment is an appropriate response. To understand why their use of humor is never felicitous, recall Zwagerman's definition of a performative: "*an act of communication, linguistic or otherwise, having a world-to-word--or world-to-symbol/gesture--direction of fit, toward some perlocutionary effect*" (22). A felicitous performative, then, is one in which the illocution (the speaker's motive) and the perlocution (the effect of the utterance) agree. Unable or unwilling to accurately assess other characters' feelings and their larger social context, Lydia and Mrs. Bennet fail to effect intentional change with humor because they laugh without considering the perlocutionary effect such laughter will have.

Inattention to the perlocutionary is evident in Lydia's and Mrs. Bennet's consistent lack of embarrassment; though they frequently commit faux pas, they are never embarrassed. Embarrassment, like humor, requires a mutual understanding; the

shared knowledge required for the success of a joke is also a prerequisite for embarrassment. Consider Lydia's mortifying homecoming after her marriage to Wickham. During this scene, only Lydia, Mrs. Bennet, and Wickham are unembarrassed: "Lydia was Lydia still; untamed, unabashed, wild, noisy, and fearless" (*PP* 211). Mrs. Bennet "embraced her and welcomed her with rapture," but meanwhile, "*She* [Elizabeth] blushed, and Jane blushed; but the cheeks of the two [Lydia and Wickham] who caused their confusion, suffered no variation of colour" (211). Lydia's and Mrs. Bennet's consistent want of embarrassment reveals their underlying failure to appreciate social mores and the feelings of others.

Mrs. Bennet and Lydia laugh because they do not know that they should be embarrassed. Lydia in particular is always laughing loudly and at nothing: "She turned from sister to sister, demanding their congratulations, and when at length they all sat down, looked eagerly round the room, took notice of some little alteration in it, and observed, with a laugh, that it was a great while since she had been there" (211). In another scene, Lydia rides in a carriage home with her sisters, and says, "Well, now let us be quite comfortable and snug, and talk and laugh all the way home" (149). Lydia calls for laughter, but as Zwagerman points out, "We cannot say ... with much hope for performative felicity, 'Admire me,' 'Accept me,' or 'Love me'" (31), and similarly, Lydia cannot make her sisters laugh simply by directing them to do so. Lydia proceeds to do all the talking, meanwhile breaking all of the conventions of conversation identified by Morini: she chooses inappropriate subjects by describing her recent improper exploits (including "dress[ing] up Chamberlayne in woman's clothes, on purpose to pass for a

lady”); she dominates conversation, allowing no one to respond to her questions; she criticizes Jane for not having married yet; and she lists information in a chaotic, almost impossible to follow, sequence (149).

Lydia concludes, “Lord! how I laughed! and so did Mrs. Foster. I thought I should have died” (149). Though she describes events that amuse her, she is oblivious to the disinterest of her sisters. Her illocution, to entertain her sisters, fails because it does not match the perlocution: their extraordinary boredom: “Elizabeth listened as little as she could” (149). Consider also this commentary from the narrator: “With such kind histories of their parties and good jokes, did Lydia, assisted by Kitty’s hints and additions, *endeavor to amuse* her companions all the way to Longbourn” (149, emphasis added). Lydia recounts jokes, tells stories, and laughs, but ultimately fails to evoke the desired reaction in Jane and Elizabeth. Lydia’s ineffective use of humor demonstrates Zwagerman’s observation that humor is not always necessarily effective⁴ against oppression: “The claim . . . that humor is inherently subversive is untrue . . . Though humor can be the performative mode of the oppressed, it is not magically effective against that oppression” (71).

Compare Lydia’s infelicitous laughter, which fails to have a world-to-word direction of fit, with Elizabeth’s laughter. Elizabeth uses humor more effectively than her mother and sister because she pairs it with careful observation. Instead of laughing openly and at nothing, Elizabeth is often amused but laughs only inwardly, carefully determining when to share her observations with others. Look, for example, to this

⁴ In addition to naming Lydia as an ineffective laugher, Fergus also mentions Mr. Bennet, whose “laughter and irony are corrosive rather than subversive, allowing him to deny intimacy and embrace patriarchal irresponsibility” (Fergus 109).

instance: Bingley, poking fun at Darcy, says, “I declare I do not know a more awful object than Darcy, on particular occasions, and in particular places; at his own house especially, and of a Sunday evening when he has nothing to do” (34). In response, “Mr Darcy smiled; but Elizabeth *thought she could perceive that he was rather offended*; and therefore checked her laugh” (34, emphasis added). In Chapters X and XI, which I examine closely here, Elizabeth is continually amused by her companions but frequently refrains from laughing openly at them. While not laden with explicit jokes, the scene described in these two chapters is subtly humorous because both Elizabeth and the reader recognize the foolishness of the other characters and their underlying motives.

In “The Power of Women’s Language and Laughter,” Jan Fergus, who also analyzes dialogue from Chapter XI, argues that “Elizabeth’s laughter and irony ... successfully subvert the social order ... And although in this scene she maintains distance and dominance, these are supported by laughter and irony, not by a more privileged class position or by socially privileged language” (Fergus 108). I agree with Fergus, and I argue that adding a speech-act lens to an analysis of this scene, and others, will illuminate the complex power dynamics operating between Darcy, Elizabeth, and their companions.

Chapter X begins with a series of infelicitous utterances as Miss Bingley tries to engage Mr. Darcy, to distract him from his letter-writing. As Miss Bingley badgers him, Elizabeth, who recognizes the underlying humor of the scene, silently watches:

Elizabeth took up some needlework, and was sufficiently amused in attending to what passed between Darcy and his companion [Miss Bingley]. The perpetual commendations of the lady either on his hand-writing, or on

the evenness of his lines, or on the length of his letter, with the perfect unconcern with which her praises were received, formed a curious dialogue, and was exactly in unison with her opinion of each. (31)

Miss Bingley, by praising Darcy, uses behabitives, or utterances related to “attitudes and social behavior” (159).⁵ However, these heavy-handed performatives are clearly infelicitous, as Darcy’s responses to them indicate. First, he ignores her. Miss Bingley says, “How delighted Miss Darcy will be to receive such a letter!” (31). Darcy “made no answer” (31). Miss Bingley persists: “You write uncommonly fast” (31). Here, Miss Bingley is employing another behabitive, but Darcy, instead of accepting the compliment, intentionally reduces it to a constative, a statement of fact, and then also declares it to be incorrect, replying, “You are mistaken. I write rather slowly” (31). Darcy’s declaration that her statement is false effectively strips the utterance of its complimentary and performative power.

Following these failures to compliment, Miss Bingley switches tactics, trying her hand at another kind of behabitive—sympathy: “How many letters you must have occasion to write in the course of the year! Letters of business too! How odious I should think them!” (31). Darcy refuses her sympathy as easily as he refuses her compliments; instead of engaging in her offered commiseration, he responds with a constative utterance: “It is fortunate, then, that they fall to my lot instead of to yours” (31). Miss Bingley is not

⁵ According to Austin, “[b]ehabitives include the notion of reaction to other people’s behavior and fortunes and of attitudes and expressions of attitudes to someone else’s past conduct or imminent conduct” (159). Austin admits that behabitives “are a very miscellaneous group” (151). Other examples include to apologize, to thank, to condole, and to challenge (159).

dissuaded, turning next to requests and then commands (both exercitives⁶): “Pray tell your sister that I long to see her” (31). Darcy again refuses to bend to her will, responding, “I have already told her so once, by your desire” (31). This is Darcy’s constant defense: the performative utterance disguised as a constative one. These instances, in which Darcy uses statements of fact to undermine performatives, blur the distinction between constative and performative utterances, as Darcy is able to effect change merely by describing reality.⁷

Either oblivious to or, as I believe, undiscouraged by Darcy’s disinterest, Miss Bingley then cycles unrelentingly again through these tactics, each as unsuccessful as the last. Only ending when Bingley interrupts her, her final utterance is a compliment: “It is a rule with me, that a person who can write a long letter, with ease, cannot write ill” (32). Bingley cuts across her here by insulting Darcy (another behabitive): “‘That will not do for a compliment to Darcy, Caroline,’ cried her brother—‘because he does *not* write with ease. He studies too much for words of four syllables.—Do you not, Darcy?’” (32). Though Bingley’s joke is lighthearted, motivated by playfulness rather than by malice, Darcy still refuses to play along; he deflects this jest with yet another constative: “My style of writing is very different from yours” (32). Miss Bingley then indirectly defends Darcy against Bingley’s attack in turn by insulting Bingley: “Charles writes in the most careless way imaginable. He leaves out half his words, and blots the rest” (32). Bingley’s response is seemingly one of humility: “My ideas flow so rapidly that I have not time to

⁶ “An exercitive is the giving of a decision in favour of or against a certain course of action, or advocacy of it” (Austin 154).

⁷ These statements seem to simultaneously demonstrate a world-to-word and a word-to-world direction of fit; they both describe reality and alter it.

express them—by which means my letters sometimes convey no ideas at all to my correspondents” (32).

Elizabeth breaks her silence for the first time upon Bingley’s self-censure: “Your humility, Mr. Bingley . . . must disarm reproof” (32). This performative is a subtle one, because like Darcy’s apparent constatives, it seems, initially, to merely describe reality. However, it is actually a verdictive, or “a delivering of a finding . . . upon evidence or reasons as to values of fact,” because Elizabeth explicitly *analyzes* Bingley” (Austin 152). She calls attention to the performative power of his self-admonishing utterances: they “disarm reproof” or deflect criticism (*PP* 32). Elizabeth, in this moment, understands Bingley’s motivation, and this mutual understanding prompts Darcy’s response.⁸ Darcy observes, “Nothing is more deceitful . . . than the appearance of humility. It is often only carelessness of opinion, and sometimes an indirect boast” (32). Darcy agrees with Elizabeth that apparent humility can be boastful if the speaker is insincere. Bingley asks, “And which of the two do you call *my* little recent piece of modesty?” (32). Darcy replies, “The indirect boast;—for you are really proud of your defects in writing, because you consider them as proceeding from a rapidity of thought and carelessness of execution, which if not estimable, you think at least highly interesting” (32).

In this exchange, Darcy and Elizabeth actually analyze speech and performativity, combining their powers of observation to explain the motives of their companions. Darcy, like Elizabeth, constantly observes others: “When you [Bingley] told Mrs. Bennet this morning that if you ever resolved on quitting Netherfield you should be gone in five minutes, you meant it to be a sort of panegyric, of compliment to yourself” (32).

⁸ Notably, Darcy only begins to actively participate in this dialogue game after Elizabeth does.

However, though Elizabeth and Darcy are both observant, accomplished judges of character, only Elizabeth unites this talent with humor: “Follies and nonsense, whims and inconsistencies *do* divert me. I own, and I laugh at them whenever I can” (39). Darcy, in contrast, is ever-stoic, merely deflating the performative powers of others as we have seen in the above instances.

To appreciate this distinction between Darcy and Elizabeth, consider Darcy’s infamous utterance and Elizabeth’s response to it: “She is tolerable; but not handsome enough to tempt *me*” (7). Elizabeth only laughs: “She told the story however with great spirit among her friends; for she had a lively, playful disposition, which delighted in any thing ridiculous” (7). By laughing at Darcy’s insult, and by sharing this story with others, she turns the criticism of her appearance back on Darcy, inverting the ever-present male gaze. Elizabeth, as an “out” young woman, is continually subjected to the gaze at dances and at dinners, but she uses humor to become the observer rather than the observed, a behavior that she learns from her father, who says, “For what do we live, but to make sport for our neighbors, and laugh at them in our turn?” (245). I argue here that laughter transforms observation from a passive activity to an active one.

To witness this male gaze in action, let us move into Chapter XI, which takes place in the same drawing room the next day. Miss Bingley, continuing her pursuit of Darcy, changes tactics again, this time appealing to Elizabeth. She says, “Miss Eliza Bennet, let me persuade you to follow my example, and take a turn about the room.—I assure you it is very refreshing after sitting so long in one attitude” (38). Miss Bingley’s explicit exercitive, “to persuade,” is felicitous, as Elizabeth “agreed to it immediately”

(38). More significantly, the utterance is felicitous because Miss Bingley successfully attracts Darcy's attention. Darcy, who declines an invitation to join them, observes, "You either chuse this method of passing the evening because you are in each other's confidence and have secret affairs to discuss, or because you are conscious that your figures appear to the greatest advantage in walking—if the first, I should be completely in your way;—and if the second, I can admire you much better as I sit by the fire" (38). Though, superficially, Darcy again merely declares that he sits in an advantageous position, this statement carries performative weight. Darcy essentially says, "I am observing you," and more significantly, "I am assessing you," making this utterance a verdictive. Darcy declares his power over the women by announcing his doubly advantageous perspective: he can see them clearly from his physical location in the room and also from his elevated status as a wealthy man.

Miss Bingley responds playfully, participating in Darcy's game. She says to Elizabeth, "How shall we punish him for such a speech?" and Elizabeth replies, "Nothing so easy, if you have the inclination ... We can all plague and punish one another. Teaze him—laugh at him—Intimate him as you are, you know how it is to be done" (38). Elizabeth thus vocalizes her usual strategy to combat such oppression: become the observer through laughter. Miss Bingley protests by again complimenting Darcy: "Teaze calmness of temper and presence of mind! No, no—I feel his may defy us there. And as to laughter, we will not expose ourselves, if you please, by attempting to laugh without a subject" (38). Miss Bingley, ironically, in cautioning Elizabeth against "laugh[ing]

without a subject,” gives advice that would be better directed at Elizabeth’s mother and sisters.

Fergus draws our attention to Elizabeth’s response to Darcy’s declaration that “it has been the study of [his] life to avoid those weaknesses which often expose a strong understanding to ridicule” (39). Elizabeth answers, “I am perfectly convinced that Mr. Darcy has no defect. He owns it himself without disguise” (39). As Fergus observes, “The doubleness of irony has seldom been more perfectly exercised. While staying completely within the bounds of polite discourse, Elizabeth has managed to say—without saying it—that Darcy is full of defects and that he has been doing his unsuccessful best to hide them” (Fergus 106). In terms of speech-act theory, Elizabeth has successfully conveyed a “speaker meaning” distinct from “speaker words” (Zwagerman 29). Though Elizabeth’s superficial meaning differs from her intended meaning, her utterance is felicitous: it is, in Zwagerman’s words, not “insincere, trivial, or even necessarily ambiguous” because speaker motive is successfully conveyed; that is, Darcy understands her underlying meaning (29). Fergus observes, “Elizabeth’s irony . . . like all female irony to some extent, repeats the terms of the dominant male discourse, but displaces them: it can be read ‘straight’ as repetition (Mr. Darcy has no faults) and ironically as displacement (Mr. Darcy has many faults)” (Fergus 106).

Darcy’s response indicates the utterance’s felicity: he says,

No . . . I have made no such pretension. I have faults enough, but they are not, I hope, of understanding. My temper I dare do not vouch for.—It is, I believe, too little yielding—certainly too little for the convenience of the

world. I cannot forget the follies and vices of others so soon as I ought, nor their offenses against myself ... My good opinion once lost is lost forever.

(*PP* 39)

Fergus observes that “Darcy must alter his discourse to engage with Elizabeth’s. He therefore abandons the generalizing, moralizing discourse that has failed him hitherto. In response to her supremely ironic announcement of his faultlessness, Darcy has to admit his faults; he must retreat from language that pretends to be above the fray, that has pretensions to objectivity” (Fergus 107). In “alter[ing] his discourse,” Darcy conforms to Elizabeth: thus, the power dynamic of the scene has shifted in Elizabeth’s favor.

Elizabeth has forced Darcy to reflect upon his own flaws, and thus, Elizabeth has gone from being the observed to being the observer: herein lies the performative power of her humor. As Fergus argues, Elizabeth is successful not only in “laughing at Darcy in complex ways” but also “in challenging his language and ... modifying it” (Fergus 105). By “modifying” Darcy’s speech, Elizabeth has achieved performative felicity: she has turned Darcy’s censure toward him.

Even after Darcy and Elizabeth reconcile their differences and reach a mutual understanding, Elizabeth tempers her laughter: “Elizabeth longed to observe that Mr. Bingley has been a most delightful friend; so easily guided that his worth was invaluable; but she checked herself. She remembered that he [Darcy] had yet to learn to be laughed at, and it was rather too early to begin (*PP* 250). Fergus finds significance in these lines, writing, “I believe, we can see Austen’s attitude to the power of laughter to disrupt discourse and the regimes of truth that discourse registers: the subversive effects of

laughter on a dominant discourse are powerful but temporary. Laughter must be reiterated, reinforced, repeated in order to reform, to make a difference, and it works best in intimacy” (Fergus 108).

Elizabeth artfully communicates her meaning to Darcy—who is clever enough to appreciate her irony—while remaining within the bounds of social decorum. I have argued that her powers of observation allow her to do this. In speech-act terms, she considers the entire speech act, which Austin contends is crucial in understanding individual utterances: “We must consider the total situation in which the utterance is issued—the total speech-act—if we are to see the parallel between statements and performative utterances, and how each can go wrong” (Austin 52). Elizabeth regularly performs her own analyses of performative language; the same social awareness that causes her to blush at appropriate times, also allows her to cause embarrassment in others, namely Darcy. This power to embarrass, coupled with keen observation, affords Elizabeth power within her otherwise unyielding milieu.

Chapter 3

Merely Joking

I turn now to *Mansfield Park*, which, as Spacks observes, lacks the humor that pervades *Pride and Prejudice* (76); Fanny, does not laugh as Elizabeth does (76), and the “mocking narrator of *Pride and Prejudice*” (79) has vanished. Spacks calls attention to a “consistent association . . . between laughter and ethical inadequacy” (79), exhibited most

frequently by Mary Crawford, who, along with her brother Henry, “present easy and obvious examples” (Spacks 77). In this analysis, I examine Mary Crawford’s attempts to influence others through humor. Mary’s utterances often seem potentially subversive because she regularly “[fails] to internalize an upper-middle-class code of feminine conduct” (Gillooly 100). Consider also the targets of Mary’s humor: “daughterly duty,” “marriage,” and “class” (98). However, in spite of her wit, her misreading of the entire speech situation consistently prohibits felicitous speech acts.

I turn first, as Spacks does (77), to Fanny, Mary, and Edmund’s discussion of public prayer while visiting Mr. Rushworth’s estate. As Mr. Rushworth describes the household’s former custom of praying together in the family chapel, Mary Crawford, who lacks context and is unaware of Edmund’s plans to become a clergyman, makes a sneering joke: ““Every generation has its improvements,” said Miss Crawford, with a smile, to Edmund” (*MP* 92-93). Though the utterance is ostensibly constative, having a word-to-world direction of fit, Mary’s motive transforms the utterance into a performative: she does not wish to describe reality; rather, she wishes to change it by securing Edmund’s affection with a witty gibe.

Neither Mary nor the reader will know if her utterance was felicitous—that is, if Edmund appreciated her joke and likes her better for it—because Fanny unwittingly interrupts the flirtation and sets in motion a verbal struggle for power. Fanny challenges Mary, offering a series of constative utterances: “It is a pity . . . that the custom should have been discontinued. It was a valuable part of former times. There is something in a chapel and chaplain so much in character with a great house, with one’s ideas of what

such a household should be! A whole family assembling regularly for the purpose of prayer is fine” (93). Mary mocks Fanny in turn: “Very fine indeed,” said Miss Crawford, laughing. “It must do the heads of the family a great deal of good to force all the poor housemaids and footmen to leave business and pleasure, and say their prayers here twice a day, while they are inventing excuses themselves for staying away” (93). Here, Mary is ostensibly subversive, “expos[ing] the paternalistic results such evangelical notions often breed” (Gillooly 97).

Mary frequently bookends her inappropriate utterances with laughter, as if laughter will allow her to express uncouth feelings and simultaneously “erase an undesired or unintended perlocutionary effect or to declare [herself] blameless in the causation of that perlocution” (Zwagerman 35). In Gillooly’s words, Mary operates “under the cover of laughter” in order “to disparage patriarchal practices” and escape admonition for doing so (101). By laughing, Mary implies that she is “only joking,” an evasive strategy to which Zwagerman calls our attention: “To don the mask of humor, or to claim to do so after the fact by asserting ‘I was only joking,’ can thus . . . be an act of self-preservation, as shorthand expression for ‘I declare a gap between the intended and the literal meanings of my words, between what I said, (‘the truth’) and what you heard (‘your *misinterpretation*’)” (39). Though Mary Crawford does not always explicitly utter the words “I was only joking,” her ill-timed laughter regularly implies them.

When Edmund defends Fanny against Mary’s laughter, Mary reasserts her dislike for public prayer: “At any rate, it is safer to leave people to their own devices on such subjects. Everybody likes to go their own way—to chuse their own time and manner of

devotion. The obligation of attendance, the formality, the restraint, the length of time—altogether it is a formidable thing, and what nobody likes” (*MP* 94). If Mary’s perlocution is to secure Edmund’s affection, her performative utterance fails utterly to perform, as evinced by Fanny’s and Edmund’s reactions: “For a few moments she was unanswered. Fanny coloured⁹ and looked at Edmund, but felt too angry for speech; and he needed a little recollection before he could say, ‘Your lively mind can hardly be serious even on serious subjects’” (94).

When Julia later reveals that Edmund is to become a clergyman, “Miss Crawford’s countenance, as Julia spoke, might have amused a disinterested observer. She looked almost aghast under the new idea she was receiving” (96). Fanny interprets her expression as one of embarrassment and she “pitied her”: “‘How distressed she will be at what she said just now,’ passed across her mind” (*MP* 96; Spacks 77). Edmund confirms his intentions to join the clergy, and “Miss Crawford, rallying her spirits, and recovering her complexion, replied only, ‘If I had known this before, I would have spoken of the cloth with more respect,’ and turned the subject” (*MP* 96). The reader, like Fanny, is led to believe that Mary is embarrassed at her social gaffe. However, as Spacks observes, “Miss Crawford’s embarrassment is fleeting. She does not learn to refrain from making fun of the clergy” (77). Shortly after this scene, Mary attacks Edmund’s choice of career, and the reader must question whether Mary was ever truly embarrassed: “For what is to be done in the church? Men love to distinguish themselves, and in either of the other lines distinction may be gained, but not in the church. A clergyman is nothing” (99).

⁹ This is not the first instance of Fanny blushing, nor is it the last. Fanny blushes no less than nineteen times throughout *Mansfield Park*.

Indeed, dissuading Edmund from taking the cloth becomes Mary's chief motive from these scenes onward as she does not desire the life of a clergyman's wife. That evening, she again attempts to persuade Edmund to pursue a more fashionable occupation. She confronts him about his taking orders and his sister's marrying in November upon their father's return from abroad, and begins by couching a command in laughter: "Don't be affronted," said she, laughing" (116). She continues, "[B]ut it does put me in mind of some of the old heathen heroes, who, after performing great exploits in a foreign land, offered sacrifices to the gods on their safe return" (116). Edmund replies "with a serious smile," saying, "There is no sacrifice in the case . . . it is entirely her own doing" (116). Though Edmund must realize that Mary speaks principally of his joining the church, he refuses to acknowledge her meaning. His unwillingness to agree that his chosen profession is a sacrifice renders Mary's utterance infelicitous. Austin's conditions for a felicitous utterance include cooperation of each participant, and as Zwagerman observes, "intention alone is never fully determinate: speech acts are contextual, social transactions, in which the scene and all the actors collaborate to enact a shared sense of meaning—or else contend with one another to challenge and resist such arrangements" (39). Thus, without Edmund's participation, Mary's speech act cannot be felicitous. However, she promptly recovers by excusing her impropriety with humor more explicitly: "Oh yes I know it is. I was merely joking. She has done no more than what every young woman would do; and I have no doubt of her being extremely happy" (116).¹⁰

¹⁰ Though Mary calls her comparison between marriage, taking orders, and sacrifice a joke, Edmund does not laugh; just as Lydia cannot make her companions laugh on command, Mary cannot amuse Edmund simply by directing him to be amused.

As we have witnessed in the above instances, Mary (and the narrator, Gillooly argues) conceal their critique through misdirection, “by adopting indirect strategies of humor” and “sometimes by simply diverting attention from their own humorous utterance” (Gillooly 104). Mary further evades reproach for her humor because “[h]er impoverished moral education consequently grants her an excuse for speaking indecorously and sometimes insensitively, which in turn permits her—so long as she speaks under the cover of laughter—both to disparage patriarchal practices and to challenge, by her own enormous appeal, cultural notions of feminine ideality” (101).

However, Gillooly argues that Mary is ultimately “more often cited and more severely judged for her unfeminine opinions” than the narrator (105). To understand why this is and why Mary’s particular brand of laughter fails to influence others, compare hers with Elizabeth’s: while the narrator of *Pride and Prejudice* lauds Elizabeth’s laughter, “the laughter of the Crawford siblings is presented as morally dubious in the extreme” (Spacks 76). Mary not only fails to influence others with humor; she also insults them. What specifically, then, distinguishes felicitous laughter from infelicitous laughter, an Elizabeth Bennet from a Mary Crawford?

Chapter 4

But Some Ladies Say Anything

I turn now to a particular instance of humor in Austen's work: Emma’s unfortunate Box Hill joke. The entire scene represents a struggle for power, as Churchill

and Emma, through speech, compete for control of the party. This struggle culminates in Emma's ridicule of Miss Bates. I have suggested that Austen's female characters combat societal oppression by using humor, but it will be useful to consider a scene in which humor fails the female protagonist: in this analysis, I examine the power dynamics enacted through speech that give rise to Emma's joke, looking at why humor leads to embarrassment rather than laughter. I argue that Emma's fundamental misunderstanding of the situation—brought about by Churchill's manipulative speech acts—prohibits her from effecting positive change through humor.

Superficially, Churchill and Emma speak openly—too much so—with one another in this scene: the narrator says that their interaction, “in the judgment of most people looking on it, must have had such appearances as no English word but flirtation could very well describe” (*Emma* 334). Throughout the scene, the pair violates the rules of decorum to which the reader has grown accustomed, and Churchill playfully instigates flirtatious conversation. As the scene opens, Churchill's behavior indicates that Emma exclusively commands his affection and attention: “Frank Churchill grew talkative and gay, making her his first subject. Every distinguishing attention that could be paid, was paid to her. To amuse her, and be agreeable in her eyes, seemed all that he cared for” (334). Though Emma participates in this flirtation, she does not genuinely admire Churchill; she “gave him all the friendly encouragement, the admission to be gallant . . . which now, in her own estimation, meant nothing” (334). The narrator's use of the word “seemed” in “seemed all he cared for” is a subtle indication that the party misreads

Churchill's attentions toward Emma. The narrator hints at but ultimately conceals Churchill's insincere flirtation.

Churchill, to further suggest that he is taken with Emma, nearly declares it, explicitly and repeatedly stating that Emma has power over him and over the company at large: Emma says, "You are comfortable today because you are under command," to which Churchill replies, "Your command?—Yes" (334). Notably, instead of making the constative utterance, "I am in your command," Churchill pretends that Emma has already said as much. "Your command?—Yes," seemingly a question, is actually an assertion and, more significantly, the first of Churchill's many manipulative performative utterances. In pretending to misunderstand Emma—that she suggests she commands him—Churchill makes her question her own intentions aloud, and this is the perlocutionary effect: Emma says, "Perhaps I intended you to say so, but I meant self-command" (334). The utterance has a world-to-word direction of fit because Emma's perception of her own motivation is altered. Emma says, "[A]s I cannot be always with you, it is best to believe your temper under your own command rather than mine," to which Churchill replies, "It comes to the same thing. I can have not self-command without a motive. You order me, whether you speak or not. And you can be always with me. You are always with me" (334-5). Churchill draws attention to the power of Emma's words, claiming that she commands him (with or without speaking). Ironically, here—and elsewhere—Churchill *speaks for* Emma, an act that undermines his constant insistence that she is in control.

Though the the narrator repeatedly uses positive words like “friendly,” “felicity,” and “happiness” in description of the Box Hill gathering (334), the issue of felicitous performatives in this scene is more complicated; few utterances are sincere—reflective of the speaker’s motive—but many are felicitous in that the illocutionary motivation and the perlocutionary effect agree (that is, the speaker successfully alters reality in the way he or she wishes to through particular utterances). Consider Emma’s frequent disingenuous laughter (which qualifies as a speech act according to Zwagerman's inclusion of “symbols” and “gestures” in his definition): Emma “laughed because she was disappointed” (334). Though her laughter here is feigned, the picnic-goers conclude that her laughter is a sign of admiration: “‘Mr. Frank Churchill and Miss Woodhouse flirted together excessively.’ They were laying themselves open to that very phrase” (334). The utterance is insincere, but its illocution and perlocution agree: Emma intends to appear to be genuinely flirting, and her intended effect is realized.

After this initial flirtatious exchange, Emma and Churchill conspire to liven the party’s conversation, or rather, Churchill conspires and pretends that Emma conspires with him. Churchill says, “Our companions are excessively stupid. What shall we do to rouse them? Any nonsense will serve. They *shall* talk” (335). Then, Churchill makes this false declaration to the crowd, a wave of manipulative utterances: “Ladies and gentlemen, I am ordered by Miss Woodhouse (who, wherever she is, presides,) to say, that she desires to know what you are all thinking of” (335). The overall performative is an exercitive, or “the giving of a decision in favour of or against a certain course of action,

or advocacy of it,” because the illocutionary motive is to urge the picnic-goers to talk (“They *shall* talk”) (Austin 154).

Each time Churchill speaks, he offers a series of performatives in quick succession, pretending that each has been given by Emma rather than by him. By starting with “Ladies and gentlemen,” he invokes formal ceremonial proceedings, and already this is a performative because “Ladies and gentlemen” is a command that translates to: “Pay attention to me!” It’s also a declaration that “I am about to say something important!” Churchill claims that Emma has ordered him to speak on her behalf, to find out what everyone is thinking. Though Churchill uses the forceful word “order” as he says, “I am ordered by Miss Woodhouse,” he also uses passive voice and thus remains the subject of the utterance. Once again, he subtly declares his own power by speaking for her. He emphasizes Emma’s influence when he claims that “wherever she is, [she] presides.” Finally, the question of “What are you thinking of?” is a forward one, as Mrs. Elton reminds us: “‘It is a sort of thing,’ cried Mrs. Elton emphatically, ‘which *I* should have thought myself privileged to enquire into’” (*Emma* 335). However, Churchill successfully displaces responsibility for the question onto Emma by citing her “desire to know.” Mr. Elton’s response is evidence of the felicity of Churchill’s utterance: “[B]ut some ladies say anything” (336).

Mr. Knightley immediately questions the sincerity of the utterance while simultaneously participating in—and mocking—Churchill’s speaking for Emma: “Is Miss Woodhouse sure that she would like to hear what we are all thinking of?” (335). Emma finally speaks for herself in response: “‘Oh, no, no!’ cried Emma, laughing as

carelessly as she could” (335). Emma is laughing insincerely again, but the felicity of her laughter here is more ambiguous: does she convince the company that her laughter is without care? The phrase “as she could” implies that Emma struggles to be convincing, that the laugh as a performative is less than felicitous. Though she finally speaks for herself, her response seems ineffective. Churchill retains control of the party.

Frank’s next wave of performative utterances further indicates that he maintains control of the gathering: “‘It will not do,’ whispered Frank to Emma, ‘they are most of them affronted. I will attack them with more address’” (336). By whispering to Emma, Frank seemingly shares inside knowledge with her, inviting her to participate in the conspiracy. However, in this moment, Emma merely listens; she does not step in as Churchill begins, once again, to speak for her: “Ladies and gentlemen, I am ordered by Miss Woodhouse to say that she waives her right of knowing exactly what you all may be thinking of, and only requires something very entertaining from each of you, in a general way” (336). Churchill begins in the same way with “Ladies and gentlemen” and the exercitive that he pretends originates with Emma. He continues, “Here are seven of you, besides myself, (who, she is pleased to say, am very entertaining already,) and she only demands from each of you, either one thing very clever, be it prose or verse, original or repeated; or two things moderately clever; or three things very dull indeed; and she engages to laugh heartily at them all” (336). He first compliments himself, as if Emma has done so, then “demands” witticisms from the company (another displaced exercitive).

Miss Bates is the first to speak after Churchill’s barrage of performatives: “‘Oh! very well,’ exclaimed Miss Bates; ‘then I need not be uneasy. Three things very dull

indeed. That will just do for me, you know. I shall be sure to say three dull things as soon as ever I open my mouth, shan't I? (looking round with the most good-humoured dependence on everybody's assent.) Do not you all think I shall?" (336). Miss Bates, in this moment, makes a performative utterance by making fun of herself; the joke she makes is at her own expense. She exhibits self-awareness by pointing out her tendency to talk at great length, even inviting others to agree with her.

Emma supplements Miss Bates's self-criticism, responding cruelly: "'Ah! ma'am, but there may be a difficulty. Pardon me, but you will be limited as to the number,—only three at once'" (336). This is an insult as well as a joke, or in Austin's terms, a behabitive (Austin 159). Emma begins by asking Miss Bates to "pardon" her, but this performative utterance is obviously infelicitous because Emma is not motivated by forgiveness: it fails because Emma is insincere. The joke itself, "you will be limited as to the number,—only three at once," though also insincere, is felicitous because its perlocutionary effect aligns with Emma's illocution: to insult.

Miss Bates, "deceived by the mock ceremony of [Emma's] manner," initially misunderstands (*Emma* 336). Then Emma's meaning becomes clear: "[B]ut, when it burst upon her, it could not anger, though a light blush showed that it could pain her" (336). Miss Bates's embarrassment is contingent on her understanding of the insult, of the double-meaning of Emma's words. This shared knowledge required for the success of a joke—or in this case, an insult—is also a prerequisite for embarrassment. For humor to succeed—that is, for it to evoke either laughter or embarrassment—all participants need

to be “in on the joke.” Similarly, for any performative to be felicitous, its speaker and listeners must share a particular context.

Emma, who is normally careful to withhold her criticism, is unreserved here. Why does this cruelty emerge now? I suggest that Emma’s behavior is the culmination of her immediately preceding interaction with Churchill, and her comment to Miss Bates is natural within the context of the game Churchill invents. In this game, Churchill is the moderator and referee: he decides the rules, enforces them, and commentates but claims to remain on the sidelines (“[Emma] is pleased to say, [I] am very entertaining already”). Most significantly, he dictates who may speak. Emma, who participates in the game, can only assert herself by verbally abusing the vulnerable Miss Bates.

Recall Zwagerman’s observation that humor is not always subversive: “The claim ... that humor is inherently subversive is untrue ... Though humor can be the performative mode of the oppressed, it is not magically effective against that oppression” (71). Though Emma makes a joke, the joke does not bring about positive change because Emma does not fully realize that she operates within Churchill’s game. On the contrary, she falsely believes that he operates within hers as she considers a possible match between him and Harriet. Churchill says of his imagined future wife, “She must be very lively, and have hazel eyes. I care for nothing else” (339). Emma wonders, “Would not Harriet be the very creature described? Hazel eyes excepted, two years more might make her all that he wished. He might even have Harriet in his thoughts at the moment; who could say?” (339). As Bharat Tandon points out in *Emma: An Annotated Edition*, Emma makes a gross oversight here in discounting the importance of the “hazel eyes,” which

only she has (424). To resist oppressive conventions and social structures, one must be aware of them, and Emma is oblivious. I argue that Emma's lack of awareness allows her to betray Miss Bates.

Emma only realizes her folly when, removed from the context of the game, Knightley points it out to her: "How could you be so unfeeling to Miss Bates? How could you be so insolent in your wit to a woman of her character, age, and situation? Emma, I had not thought it possible" (*Emma* 340). This performative utterance, a criticism and a behaviorist, is not initially felicitous, as Emma disregards it; her response is characterized by a Freudian excess of explanation: "Nay, how could I help saying what I did? Nobody could have helped it. It was not so very bad. I dare say she did not understand me" (340). First, she suggests that it could not be helped; second, that the insult was not as cruel as Knightley suggests; and third, that Miss Bates did not catch her meaning. Ironically, in accusing Miss Bates of not understanding the insult, Emma further demonstrates her own misreading, as Knightley points out: "I assure you she did. She felt your full meaning. She has talked of it since" (340).

Knightley must alter Emma's perception of her behavior and its effect for his utterance to be felicitous: he must explain why the insult was cruel and why Miss Bates did not deserve it: "She is poor; she has sunk from the comforts she was born to; and if she live to old age, must probably sink more. Her situation should secure your compassion. It was badly done indeed!" (340). Finally, removed from the context of Churchill's game, Emma recognizes her faux pas: "Never had she felt so agitated, mortified, grieved, at any circumstance in her life" (341). The word "mortified" here

indicates that Emma is finally embarrassed by her joke: she only needed to understand its effect.

Humor fails Emma at the Box Hill picnic, but I argue that in other scenes and in other novels, characters who understand more and assume less—like Elizabeth, for example—use humor with greater awareness and thus more effectively. However, regardless of its positive or negative effect, women’s performative language in Austen’s novels is powerful, as the Box Hill scene demonstrates, and worth further examination with a speech-act lens.

Chapter 5

Subversion and the Marriage Ending

In each of these scenes, verbal struggles for power are marked by a slew of performative utterances. Elizabeth, Darcy, Mary Crawford, Fanny, Edmund, Emma, and Churchill participate—knowingly or unknowingly—in a series of language games. Transfer of power across these verbal contests is, as I hope these analyses have shown, more easily discerned through a speech-act lens as illocution and perlocution sometimes match but more often do not. Comparing illocution and perlocution reveals the felicity or, more often, the infelicity, of these characters’ utterances.

Returning to my initial line of inquiry, how subversive are Austen’s characters’ humorous utterances? Does humor, as much scholarship suggests, truly allow these characters to subtly resist patriarchal oppression; does it provide, “a temporary escape

from the burdens of reality” (Gillooly 25)? Can humor allow “discourse . . . that . . . both escapes and appears to submit to the rules of dominant discourse” (*Last Laughs* 19), and does its marginality “unmask the unabashed hypocrisy of the dominant culture” (Gilbert 27-8)?

To determine how subversive humor operates in Austen’s novels, we must first decide what constitutes subversive humor. As I have suggested, humor is subversive only if it simultaneously achieves a specific perlocution—that is, the speaker’s motivation is realized—and if it resists dominant cultural or patriarchal norms. Across the examples I have explored in these analyses, we see many instances of potential subversion. For an utterance to be subversive, its speaker must be motivated by an “ideology”—to borrow Zwagerman’s term—that works against patriarchal norms (6). I argue also in these final comments that the degree to which a character comprehends the entire speech situation determines whether their attempts at humor end in laughter or embarrassment—and ultimately whether they are truly subversive.

Resistance of dominant cultural or patriarchal norms is equally important as the felicity or infelicity of an utterance. As Zwagerman points out, “the ideology of a humorous utterance” potentially conforms to the status quo or patriarchal norms, even if the speaker is a woman (6). What then, constitutes a truly subversive ideology? To understand in what ways these characters subvert patriarchal restrictions, consider the prevalence of these restrictions in Austen’s novels. Hierarchies and patriarchal norms appear in at least two forms. First, recall that the eighteenth century saw a “revolutionary rigidification of social codes, conspicuous along gender lines” (Gillooly 3) that made

“self-expression” difficult for women, particularly when that self-expression involved humor (Bilger 16). Emergence of the feminine ideal in the eighteenth century reinforced those conventions of “polite society” (Morini 80) that Morini and Bilger find in conversation manuals and conduct-books, respectively. As the above analyses show, Austen’s characters conform to and depart from these conventions with varying degrees of success.

Second, societal constructions of class, marriage, and law necessarily ensnare Austen’s characters. Gillooly draws attention to patriarchal dominance in the eighteenth-century, particularly as it relates to the law: “[T]he common law in England did not generally recognize woman as an independent subject. If married, her political and economic rights were supposedly ‘covered’ under those of her husband (*feme covert*); if single (*feme sole*), her interests were by custom, if not always by law, superintended by her father and family” (9). Furthermore, laws restricted women’s right to property: “Of the host of gender discriminatory laws and practices that prevailed in England through the end of the nineteenth century, no two occasioned more outcry than the exclusion of women from the expanding franchise or the inability of married women to own property” (9).

Pride and Prejudice sufficiently demonstrates the gender-based inequities of nineteenth-century England and the high cost of a marriage that theoretically ameliorates these inequities—read, Mr. Collins. Mr. Bennet explains Mr. Collins’s prosperous position to his family like this: “[W]hen I am dead, [he] may turn you all out of this house as soon as he pleases” (*PP* 42). In a rare moment of lucidity, Mrs. Bennet notes the

egregiousness of the situation: “I never can be thankful, Mr. Bennet, for anything about the entail. How anyone could have the conscience to entail away an estate from one's own daughters, I cannot understand; and all for the sake of Mr. Collins too! Why should *he* have it more than anybody else?” (91). In another potentially subversive scene, Elizabeth turns down Mr. Collins’s marriage proposal.¹¹ She is shocked when, three days later, she learns that her friend Charlotte is to marry Mr. Collins instead: “Engaged to Mr. Collins! My dear Charlotte—impossible!” (86). Charlotte explains her choice:

“I see what you are feeling,” replied Charlotte. “You must be surprised, very much surprised—so lately as Mr. Collins was wishing to marry you. But when you have had time to think it over, I hope you will be satisfied with what I have done. I am not romantic, you know; I never was. I ask only a comfortable home; and considering Mr. Collins's character, connection, and situation in life, I am convinced that my chance of happiness with him is as fair as most people can boast on entering the marriage state.” (87)

Charlotte directly references property and class. Note that though Charlotte negotiates restrictive societal constructions differently from Elizabeth and in perhaps less subversive ways, her strategy nevertheless affords her otherwise unattainable material comfort.

Of Elizabeth, Mary Crawford, and Emma, Mary most exemplifies direct defiance of hierarchies and patriarchal norms, boldly criticizing societal constructions like class

¹¹ Though accepting Mr. Collins’s proposal could potentially save Elizabeth’s family from financial ruin, she refuses to submit to this particular marriage ending. Here, Elizabeth is possibly subversive in her refusal to marry *and* through her language. This humorous scene, laden with infelicitous speech acts, deserves its own speech-act reading, which the constraints of this project will not allow here.

and marriage (Gillooly 98). She is clearly “completely unintimidated by authority” and “presents the greatest challenge to phallogocentric control” (97). Mary, “the witty disruptor of the patriarchal status quo” is Fanny’s “narrative analogue”—she speaks when Fanny is silent (100); she laughs when Fanny shows restraint (101). Gillooly observes that, “next to the narrator, Mary is the sharpest wit” in *Mansfield Park* (97) and that Mary’s humor and the narrator’s overlap considerably with regard to “rhetoric” and “perspective” (102). Spacks, on the other hand, adopts a notably less flattering assessment of the Crawfords and their humor: she writes, “Laughter’s moral contamination in this novel heightens the reader’s uneasiness” (78). Unlike Elizabeth, Mary disregards certain conventions of polite speech, always laughs openly. Spacks suggests, in contrast to Gillooly, that that narrator strictly disapproves of Mary’s laughter, arguing that the absence of “the gently mocking narrator of Austen’s earlier novels” (79) indicates a “moral alliance with Fanny” (80).¹²

Even if the narrator approves of Mary’s laughter and humorous utterances, these utterances are nevertheless usually infelicitous—that is, they fail to affect the world in intended ways. Thus, I argue, that her humor fails also to be subversive. Compare Mary’s use of humor to Elizabeth’s and their relative consideration of the entire speech situation. As Mary overestimates her influence over others, believing, for example, that she can

¹² The narrator’s feelings toward laughter in *Mansfield Park* likely exist somewhere between Gillooly’s celebration and Spacks’s condemnation of it. As evident in the above analysis, Mary usually fails to persuade her audiences. However, as Gillooly argues, “everyone finds Mary’s witty solubility irresistible” (99). Gillooly also notes that “because Mary Crawford is not the heroine of *Mansfield Park*, she has narrative permission to scandalize her fellow characters, and often her readers, with relative impunity” (98). In spite of her apparent social gaffes and infelicitous utterances, *Edmund still admires her*, as does Fanny: “I like to hear her talk. She entertains me” (qtd. in Gillooly 99). Even Spacks writes that “the reader ... will probably laugh at [Mary and Henry] at least occasionally” (77), even if such laughter is tinged with “uneasiness” (78).

dissuade Edmund from joining the church, she underestimates those around her, as her interactions with other characters demonstrate. Mary's laughter fails to effect change because she does not consider the entire speech situation, namely the ability of her audience to understand when her word-meaning and speaker-meaning do not agree—when she is being insincere. Instead of artfully negotiating the boundaries of social decorum as Elizabeth does, she crashes through them, offending anyone clever enough to realize she is not “merely joking.”¹³

Mary Crawford demonstrates that the felicity or infelicity of an utterance clearly affects that utterance's subversive potential. Her failure to subvert is directly attributable to her infelicitous speech acts; Emma's, in contrast, is attributable to her submission to patriarchal control. Emma usually delivers felicitous speech acts; however, as the Box Hill joke illustrates, a joke's felicity alone does not indicate subversion. In this scene, Emma misunderstands the speech situation *and* she is complicit in Churchill's language game. She clearly does not “unmask the unabashed hypocrisy of the dominant culture” (Gilbert 27-8). Emma's humor in this scene does nothing to “[break] down hierarchies” (Bilger 16); on the contrary, she upholds Churchill's dominance by verbally abusing Miss Bates. As Zwagerman reminds us, “the ideology of a humorous utterance ... can just as easily be conservative and stabilizing as radical and ‘decentering’” (6).

¹³ Like Lydia and Mrs. Bennet, Mary's want of embarrassment and her failure to anticipate the perlocutionary effects of her utterances reveals either an inability or an unwillingness to appreciate social mores and the feelings of others. However, Mary's impropriety is less straightforward than Lydia's or Mrs. Bennet's, as it is not attributable to foolishness. Instead, Mary's underestimation of others accounts for her lack of embarrassment. She assumes that others do not detect her motives; thus, she feels no obligation to blush. Consider, for example, this exchange between Mary and Edmund: when Edmund refuses to acknowledge his plan to become a clergyman, Mary misattributes this to confusion. She says, “My other sacrifice, of course, you do not understand” (*MP* 116, emphasis added). However, Edmund needs no clarification, and he promptly responds, “My taking orders, I assure you, is quite as voluntary as Maria's marrying” (116).

Meanwhile, Elizabeth's careful observation of others gives rise to the social awareness that Mary and sometimes Emma lack. She regularly performs analyses of others' performative language and does not underestimate them. Furthermore, she rarely laughs "at the wrong things" as Mary does (Spacks 80); similarly, Fanny "refuses to participate in the kind of frivolity that might obscure the proper grounds of judgment. Her reluctance to laugh, in other words, belongs to aspects of her character that one must judge admirable" (77). Fanny, meanwhile, is equally—if not more—susceptible to embarrassment as Elizabeth and accordingly avoids "[l]aughter's moral contamination" (78). Though Fanny is incapable or unwilling to share Elizabeth's laughter, these protagonists share a capacity to feel embarrassed, a measure of social awareness Mary Crawford clearly lacks.

Unlike Mary, Elizabeth pairs careful observation with subtlety in her responses; subtle speech acts are necessary because they seemingly conform to societal rules while simultaneously challenging them. Indirect speech acts must be used artfully, so that they "[appear] to submit to the rules of dominant discourse" ("Untamed and Unabashed" 19). Elizabeth thus demonstrates the feminine humor that Gillooly describes: "it coyly contrives to undermine the authority of that [cultural construction of femininity] even as it faithfully records the conditions, virtues, and behaviors required of life in the feminine position" (12). In particular, Elizabeth uses wordplay; when she says, "I am perfectly convinced that Mr. Darcy has no defect. He owns it himself without disguise" (39), she does not betray polite decorum as the literal meaning of her utterance is complimentary; however, she successfully criticizes Darcy (Fergus 108), as Darcy's response indicates:

“No . . . I have made no such pretension. I have faults enough, but they are not, I hope, of understanding” (*PP* 39).

Elizabeth is also consistently critical of patriarchal dominance, laughing to herself and with others from the margin; remember, for example, Darcy’s assessment of her appearance: “She is tolerable; but not handsome enough to tempt *me*” (7). While the utterance first makes her a passive recipient of an insult, her response to it affords her power; laughter allows her to transition from the observed to the observer: “She told the story however with great spirit among her friends; for she had a lively, playful disposition, which delighted in any thing ridiculous” (*PP* 7). This example also supports claims that women’s humor is powerful precisely because it is marginal: as Fergus argues, Elizabeth “maintains distance and dominance, [and] these are supported by laughter and irony, not by a more privileged class position or by socially privileged language” (108). In this scene, Elizabeth is literally on the margin: she is close enough to Bingley and Darcy to hear their conversation though she does not participate in it. As Bingley and Darcy observe her, her marginal position also makes her a removed observer; thus, she is at liberty to take the insult and use it against Darcy: as Barreca notes, “Women can defile, spoil, and ruin because they derive power from their exclusion” (“Untamed and Unabashed” 31).

Elizabeth, Emma, and Mary’s utterances demonstrate that in order for humorous utterances to be subversive, they must challenge societal or patriarchal constructs (religion, misogynist men, marriage, the feminine ideal) *and* do so artfully. An indirect speech act—a play on words, an insult, even a laugh—is often far more effective than a

more direct one, especially when wielded by characters for whom a direct antagonistic speech act would have severe social consequences. When those socially-sanctioned and highly-regulated speech acts—marriages, wills, introductions, invitations, letters, titles—are less accessible or less beneficial to women, only indirect speech acts remain a viable option.

I end by returning to Regis's defense of *Pride and Prejudice's* marriage ending. In spite of the presence of subversive humor in Austen's novels, explored by many scholars and the above analyses, the patriarchy persists at the end of Austen's novels, clearly not overturned by women's humor. Consider that Austen's novels inevitably end in marriage; consider also that Mary's use of humor is ultimately punished, and Emma's humor in the Box Hill scene is rebuked by Knightley. Even Elizabeth, as Fergus reminds us, must learn by the end of *Pride and Prejudice*, to restrain her humor.

However, as Regis argues, "The law and society's institutions cannot be changed by one heroine, but she can obtain maximum freedom within them" (78). I hope that this project has shown that Austen's characters *do* resist patriarchal norms, even if they do not ultimately overcome them. Recall Regis's observation of the marriage ending: "We can regret this fact, but expecting Austen to do so as well is both unreasonable and anachronistic" (83-4). Though Elizabeth eventually agrees to marry Darcy, I argue that this does not discredit the subversion she exhibits in smaller instances of speech. If, as Gillooly suggests, women's humor can serve as "a temporary escape from the burdens of reality" (Gillooly 25), then can Elizabeth serve as her own audience? Does not Elizabeth's amusement, particularly when she does not laugh openly, "simultaneously

[satisfy] psychic needs and the cultural demands with which they are continually in conflict” (24)? I argue that, if Elizabeth can be her own audience, as Gilbert suggests is possible—if “an individual can be her or his own audience in dyadic communication” (13)—then Elizabeth’s humor, which permits “useful defensive transformations of pain into pleasure” (Spacks 74), also allows for subversion in spite her marriage ending.

Finally, consider the role of the narrator in potential subversion through women’s humor. As Gillooly argues, *Mansfield Park*’s narrator defends the submissive Fanny where Fanny does not defend herself. Gillooly calls attention to the novel’s “Richardsonian morality, its lack of gaiety, its apparent political and social conservatism” (81) but notes that, while Fanny is “dutiful and submissive,” conforming to “the code of feminine behavior” in ways that Elizabeth, Emma, or Mary do not, “the cultural authority that determines and encourages Fanny’s behavior is itself undermined by the narrative humor” (90). Sir Thomas embodies the “spirit of restraint and repression” at Mansfield Park (92); Gillooly notes, in particular, his “bullying” (96) of Fanny when she rejects Henry’s proposal of marriage:

It is of no use, I perceive, to talk to you ... I will, therefore, only add ... that you have disappointed every expectation I had formed ... I had thought you peculiarly free from willfulness of temper, self-conceit, and every tendency to that independence of spirit, which prevails so much in modern days, even in young women, and which in young women is offensive and disgusting beyond all common offence. (qtd. in Gillooly 95)

While Fanny is unable to respond to this censure, Gillooly argues that, the narrator's humor successfully "undermin[es]" such instances of "patriarchal authority" (96). As this example demonstrates, further speech-act analysis of women's humor in Austen's novels should consider the narrator as a speaker, especially if the reader is regarded as an unintended but significant audience.

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