

## Letter Writing, Cassandra, and the Conventions of Romantic Love

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One of the most common and, I think, one of the most destructive, conventions of our culture in late twentieth century America is the rigid separation between friendship and romantic love. Our cultural belief that these are, or somehow ought to be, radically different, and even opposing, ways of feeling manifests itself in many ways, both in our understanding of friendship and in our understanding of romance. To love a friend, to love a lover—we are continually being taught that these are different kinds of emotion—and never the twain shall meet. I remember my own shock, my sense of decency being offended, when as an eighteen-year-old coed from Northwestern University I first went to Italy and saw Italian teenage boys and even grown men walking arm in arm and occasionally kissing each other on the cheeks. Yet it was the aftershock that made me most uncomfortable. I realized that, while I had always thought of myself as a North American, and therefore more free from tradition and less prudish than Europeans, maybe I was more governed by traditions in my country than I had ever been conscious of. Maybe my own feelings were more conventional, and less natural, than I had ever understood.

Now, thirty years later, I have become a little more aware of how much our culture dictates not only the value but also the very meanings we give our feelings. Certainly, many feminist historians and cultural analysts writing in the past two decades have informed that awareness. Among many exciting essays and books analyzing American conventions of female friendship and heterosexual love, for me two of the most memorable have focussed on the nineteenth-century. A particularly famous essay is Carroll Smith-Rosenberg's landmark study in 1975 of what she called "The Female World of Love and Ritual."<sup>1</sup> Smith-Rosenberg looked at letters between white, and primarily upper middle class, American women and discovered frequent patterns of what she described as "long-lived, intimate loving friendship between two women" (27). Having a few dear friends myself, I did not find this point too surprising.

What was surprising was the socially acceptable passionate language of these friendships. Thus in the 1860s a 31-year-old Jeanie writes to her long-time friend from boarding school days, "Dear darling Sarah! How I love you. . . . You are the joy of my life. . . . My darling how I long for the time when I shall see you" (30). Such language, also commonly expressing a desire to hold the absent other in her arms, was far from unusual or risqué. Indeed, it appears to have been frequent and perfectly acceptable, expressing a world of intimacy between friends, between mothers and daughters, between sisters. Few of us, I would guess, speak to our friends or sisters or mothers or daughters in such passionate language now.

Smith-Rosenberg concluded her essay by noting that "At one end of the continuum lies committed heterosexuality, at the other uncompromising homosexuality; between, a wide latitude of emotions and sexual feelings. Certain cultures and environments permit individuals a great deal of freedom moving across this spectrum. I would like to suggest that the nineteenth-century was such a cultural environment. That is, the supposedly repressive and destructive Victorian sexual ethos, may have been more flexible and responsive to the needs of particular individuals than those of mid-twentieth century" (55).

Smith-Rosenberg's study of some American women's letters brought to light a discourse which represented friendship as a matter of deep spiritual and physical feeling. She also argued that these same-sex feelings took place in a cultural environment which isolated people of opposite sexes, what historians of both the American and the British nineteenth-century have labelled the phenomenon of separate spheres. Challenging this now widely-held notion that "the deepest interpersonal relationships in nineteenth-century America were same-sex, thus underlining the 'separate' in separate spheres," is another historian of nineteenth-century America.<sup>2</sup>

In her fascinating 1989 book, *Searching the Heart: Women, Men, and Romantic Love in Nineteenth-Century America*, Karen Lystra also turned to middle and upper class white women's private letters, but focussing on those written to and from the men with whom they were romantically involved. What she found in examining literally hundreds of these letters was a frequency of deep and passionate expressions of love between men and women. Moreover, these feelings were expressed in a language which continually insisted not only on the emotional bonds between, but also on the similarities between, the lovers. Lystra's conclusion, and I am simplifying somewhat here, is that sisterhood, even in its intensely emotional and often downright passionate nineteenth-century American form, did not preclude what she described as attaining "deeply engaging and satisfying romantic relationships with men" (11).

Both Smith-Rosenberg and Lystra are working with materials from this side of the Atlantic. I have begun this discussion by focussing on their work because their writings have helped me to see what is normally hidden: the connections between how I understand my private feelings and the social conventions which have governed, and often even created those feelings. Both writers, because they are historians, are explicit in making clear that the ties between what we understand by friendship and what we understand by love cannot be discussed simply by theorizing or offering one's own view. The meaning of either, how we define these words and what emotional expectations we invoke when we use them, all this is a matter of cultural history. It is a matter of sexual politics. And intertwined with those culturally shaped meanings and expectations are patterns of male social and sexual power.

There is, of course, another writer, not a historian, who offered these insights to me, and to all of us, long before Smith-Rosenberg and Lystra published their important research. There are many ways in which Jane

Austen's novels represent some of the conventional views of her time and place, particularly on the subject of British international policies. But closer to home there are some absolutely central ways in which her novels challenged, and still do challenge, conventional cultural beliefs. I locate the radical quality of Jane Austen's novels in their representations of relations between women friends, frequently sisters, and in their depictions of heterosexual love. Perhaps most impressive in the novels are the ways feelings of sisterly love and feelings of romantic love are similarly defined. The implications of such a similarity are what I hope to discuss in this paper.<sup>3</sup> But before turning to the novels, I will look first to a few of Jane Austen's letters, inspired by Jo Modert's wonderful new edition.<sup>4</sup>

"My dearest Cassandra," as Jane addressed her older, and only, sister, was the recipient of most of the Jane Austen letters now extant. It is tempting to believe that Cassandra was, in fact, the person her sister most often wrote to, but we can only guess about that. What we do not need to guess about is the quality of the sisters' feelings for each other. Cassandra, writing it is true out of deep grief to Fanny Knight soon after Jane had died, is still convincingly eloquent on the depth—and the kind—of her relationship with her sister. "I *have* lost a treasure, such a Sister, such a friend as never can have been surpassed,—she was the sun of my life, the gilder of every pleasure, the soother of every sorrow, I had not a thought concealed from her, & it is as if I had lost a part of myself."<sup>5</sup>

There is no mistaking the passionate intensity of Cassandra's grief or the extent to which her relationship with Jane was, from her point of view, a relationship of sharing, of familiarity, of similarity, of virtual identity. That this point of view was also Jane's becomes clear from looking at her extant letters to Cassandra. Again and again Jane begins her letters to her sister by expressing her enjoyment of the happy certainty that Cassandra's interest will make the details that she is about to recount still more pleasurable. "Here I am," announces Jane, "beginning with all my might" (Chapman, 9/15/1813).<sup>6</sup> And another time she begins, "I have so many little matters to tell you of that I cannot wait any longer" (Modert, f205, 1/18/1811). We hear her confidence that Cassandra shares her feelings about her writing when she remarks that "I cannot tire you, I am sure, on this subject" (Modert, f292, 11/6/1813). Cassandra certainly also functions as a soother of sorrow. Jane tells her that "I am very much obliged to you for writing to me" (Modert, f253, 5/24/1813) or, more simply at another moment, "your letter came to comfort me" (Modert, f220, 5/31/1811).

Jane's own feelings toward her dearest Cassandra emerge throughout her correspondence. She frequently expresses her empathy with what she imagines Cassandra to be feeling. On a particularly cold day she writes, "Poor Wretch! I see you shivering away with your miserable feeling feet," (Modert, f237, 1/29/1813) and another time assures her after a disappointing change of plans that "if you do not regret the loss of Oxfordshire and Gloucestershire, I will not" (Modert, f285, 10/26/1813). We can all hear the deep affection when Jane exhorts her sister to "take care of your precious self" (Modert, f189, 1/24/1809) or when she writes, "here is a thought—I

caught it for you" (Chapman, 9/15/1813).<sup>7</sup> The extent of their intimacy is captured, I think, in Jane's simple statement that "I tell you everything" (Modert, f189, 1/24/1809). And finally, Jane closes a letter in December, 1808 by telling Cassandra to "Distribute the affectionate Love of a Heart not so tired as the right hand belonging to it," (Modert, f173) thus explicitly passing to her sister her feelings and her voice.

I want to begin my consideration of the novels by suggesting that ideas about sisterhood and friendship inform not only relations between women in Austen's fiction but also relations between women and men. One of the patterns in the novels is a scene where one woman fails in friendship to another by offering a false vision of love between women and men. And the key to that false vision is always an assertion of difference, followed by a claim about the need for some sort of aggression and competition in relations with other women and with men. We see this pattern in Austen's first novel, *Northanger Abbey*, when Isabella Thorpe laughingly brushes aside Catherine's protests that Catherine did not lead on Isabella's brother with the worldly assurance that "a little harmless flirtation or so will occur, and one is so often drawn on to give more encouragement than one wishes to stand by. But you may be assured that I am the last person in the world to judge you severely."<sup>8</sup> Isabella's definition of personal empowerment is a matter of having power over a man. And it is also clear that Isabella's idea of the competitive nature of heterosexual relations is quite the same as her view of relations between women. If love is conquest, friendship is competition.

Part of the greatness for me of Austen's fiction lies in the ways the stories reveal the artificiality, the cultural construction, the dangerous conventionality, of much of what Austen's culture – and ours – call true friendship or true love. Is Marianne Dashwood in *Sense and Sensibility* a spontaneous and free-thinking social rebel? She is not. In fact, as I have argued in some detail elsewhere, Marianne is the conservative of the story, the one whose feelings and opinions, her very understanding of her world, are dictated by a code she did not invent and does not, until the end of the novel, even begin to question. Indeed it is Willoughby's familiarity with the tenets of that public code of sensibility, that passion for dead leaves and one true love and spirited readings of Cowper, which allows him to appear to think and feel and perceive similarly to Marianne, and thus allows him to seduce her (emotionally of course). All either of them are doing – she, it is true, with eager sincerity and he with just as eager insincerity – is reproducing, which is to say, mimicking, a pre-defined cultural program for what is acceptable to think and say and feel. Some Austen readers, though not I, have chosen to claim that Marianne's cult of sensibility is more appealing than Elinor Dashwood's cult of politeness. I find that a dubious position to argue, though perhaps finally a matter of personal inclination. Yet what I would claim cannot be argued, what Austen's novel does not allow us to argue, is that Marianne's view is somehow more "natural," less a construction, than Elinor's.

It is clear in *Sense and Sensibility* that the conventions of romance which emphasize uncontrolled feelings labelled as natural and also labelled as more valuable than feelings of responsibility or obligation to others are conven-

tions which function to benefit men and endanger women. Both literally with Eliza Williams' daughter and emotionally with Marianne Dashwood, Willoughby's power as a seducer depends upon the extent to which his would-be victims buy into a public code which tells them that it is acceptable, and even profoundly moral because somehow true to their truest nature, to place love of a man above love for their families and love of themselves. One way to put this is that Marianne chooses, even positively insists, that Willoughby take control of her heart. Of course, she assumes that he will take good care of it. But the issue is definitely left up to him. For most of the novel Marianne understands true romance as a matter of passing to another emotional responsibility for herself.

I remind you that Elinor Dashwood's difference from Marianne and her quiet strength are not simply representations of some sort of cold power to pit self-control against affection and have control be victorious. Even Marianne retracts her suspicion that Elinor could be so resolute because she never actually felt much for Edward with the admission that "because your merit cries out upon myself, I have been trying to do it away" (SS 264). Yet Elinor's merit is not in opposition to her feelings, but is itself a matter of feeling. Between the two sisters it is Elinor who has the fuller heart, the deeper sensibility. Her love for her sister, for her mother, her love for herself, are deep feelings which cannot be forgotten or rendered insignificant by her love for Edward. Romance does not put everything else out of Elinor's mind because it does not put everything else out of her heart. As she quietly tells Marianne in that wonderful moment when Marianne asks how she has been able to bear for four months the knowledge of Edward's secret engagement to Lucy Steele, "I did not love only him" (SS 263).

With a symbolism which I sometimes find a little overdone, Marianne Dashwood literally almost dies from her adherence to the code of sensibility. But male characters can be damaged by it too. One of Austen's most endearing heroes, along with Mr. Knightley and Captain Wentworth, is Fitzwilliam Darcy in *Pride and Prejudice*. Yet can any of us forget the insult in his opening words declaring his love for Elizabeth Bennet that "in vain have I struggled. It will not do. My feelings will not be repressed" (PP 189). Darcy's view of romantic love is embarrassingly similar to Marianne Dashwood's, in spite of their differences in attitude toward it. For both the proof of true love is that it is "impossible to conquer," (189) that instead it is a conqueror, existing in defiance of and dominating over other feelings and other obligations. Darcy, like Marianne, has taken his definition of romantic love from the cult of sensibility and tried to fit his feelings into the conventions of that code.

For Darcy the advantages are clear. Understanding his feeling for Elizabeth as some sort of mysterious force his better self cannot keep in check, he does not have to examine why those romantic feelings actually are at odds with his other emotions. Such an examination—which we are surely all happy to see that he does finally undertake—leads Darcy to understand that the dualism was not—as the cult of sensibility would have it—between wild love and tame reason but rather between a generosity of heart which could

guide him to appreciate Elizabeth enough to learn to love her and feelings of selfishness and snobbery which he had learned as a spoiled child. His love for Elizabeth, honestly understood, is far from being a violation of duty. Rather, it is a critique of other, less admirable, feelings he has indulged himself with for years.

It is also clear that Darcy invokes the notion of romantic love as uncontrolled emotion as part of his certainty about his superiority to, and power over, Elizabeth, who has neither of the advantages of his money or his family prestige. Nor does she have the cultural advantage of simply being a man. During that first proposal scene, Darcy talked about being out of control, of being at the mercy of his feelings and at the mercy of Elizabeth. But as she easily sees, all along he "had no doubt of a favorable answer. He *spoke* of apprehension and anxiety, but his countenance expressed real security" (*PP* 189). For all Darcy's declarations of unbridled passion, he never loses track of the practical truth that he is a man, a man of wealth, a man of position, and therefore has the real power over Elizabeth. He does not, after all, feel confident of her saying yes because he has any reason whatsoever to believe that she might actually have fallen in love with him. In fact, at this point in the novel she hasn't. But Darcy is confident because of his social position, a position which automatically, though hardly naturally, gives him power over a girl's heart. The language of sensibility, for all its implicit claims to romantic disdain for social convention, functions to sustain and continue those very conventions. Thus Darcy's shock when Elizabeth accuses him of not behaving as a gentleman. For he has, according to conventional definitions, been behaving exactly as a gentleman should.

Austen's novels offer one particularly superb version of the conventional gentleman, a character who, with the kind of beautiful literary balance we have come to expect from an Austen novel when the subject is love and friendship, comes paired with a superb version of a gentlewoman. I am speaking, of course, of that charming brother and sister, Henry and Mary Crawford. *Mansfield Park* has many claims to greatness, not the least of which is the creation of this infamous and delightful pair. The link between male power and the cult of sensibility, implicit in the representation of Fitzwilliam Darcy, blooms with gorgeous explicitness in the creation of Henry Crawford.

As character after character assures the beleaguered Fanny Price, Mr. Crawford is a true gentleman. Sir Thomas Bertram, surely the highest authority in the world of *Mansfield Park*, finds Henry "a young man of sense, of character, of temper, of manners, and of fortune," (319) a young man who behaves "In the most gentleman-like and generous manner" (321). Yet we know from the moment a bored and insincere Henry vows to "make a small hole in Fanny Price's heart" (229) to the moment when he finds himself truly "in love, very much in love," yet still determined "to have the glory as well as the felicity, of forcing her to love him," (326) that for Henry Crawford romance is power. The more charmingly Henry woos Fanny, the more we see that his feelings for someone else are intertwined with, and inseparable from, his own vanity, his superior love for himself.

Henry's role in the novel is to embody what social convention labels as the right sort, the gentleman, the proper lover, the great catch. Henry is a fine gentleman, the type of suitor parental figures—uncles and aunts—would welcome. And his intentions, at least his later intentions, to Fanny are certainly what the world calls honorable. But what is it that the world calls honorable? Henry openly and sincerely offers marriage. As Austen's novel makes clear, according to conventionally accepted codes of heterosexual romance, courtship is a game and winning is its socially approved goal. But winners, after all, imply losers. Precisely what Henry wants is for Fanny to become the loser, to give up what she knows and how she sees him, to subsume her independence of mind and heart in his vision and his desires, while his society looks on and calls it love. Henry will fulfil his part by taking good care of her. He has refined taste, he is what his society calls "nice," because Henry is, of course, a consumer. And the morsel he likes best is a reluctant woman's heart. The novel teaches us to see through these conventions of romance, not to read Henry's insistent intentions the way Sir Thomas does, as leading to a socially desirable form of inequality in love. For it is through such a reading of romance that the culture controls women.

Sixty years before Austen wrote her novels, Samuel Richardson also understood the sexual politics of the cult of romantic love, the iron fist hidden in the velvet glove of conventional romance. I think of his great character Lovelace, entertaining himself with fantasies about when the proud Clarissa Harlowe would submit to him. *Clarissa* is a mid-eighteenth-century novel, and what Lovelace has in mind is sexual seduction or, failing that, rape. But Henry Crawford, no less than Richardson's famous rake, wants power over the beloved's soul.

If Henry is Fanny's false lover, his equally charming sister is her false friend. Mary has completely embraced the world of male power and competition—with the proviso that she, rather than being classed among the victims, gets to play predator along with the boys. Mary is equally at home leaving "Fanny to her fate" (231) as the sometime object of Henry's flirtations, "on the days that I do not hunt" (229) or, with impressive impartiality, savoring what she thinks of as Fanny's own victory in gaining "power over Henry" (360).

Mary's vision of romance as a matter of power is very close to her idea of friendship. This is not a question of whether Mary actually has some warm feelings for Fanny. Of course she does, as she also does for Edmund. Commenting on Edmund's decision to sacrifice his conscience for the sake of acting in the play with her, Mary has this to say: "I never knew such exquisite happiness. . . . His sturdy spirit to bend as it did" (358). Mary's feelings, like her brother's, are understood and acted upon in terms of competition and conquest. Most of Mary's time with Fanny involves pushing Fanny around—embarrassing her into accepting Mary's taking over her horse, tricking her into taking the gold chain, manipulating her into unwanted private interviews, insisting on extracting a reluctant promise that they correspond.

Dominating another person is fairly easy to recognize as offensive when we are talking about friendship. Even those of us who adore Emma Woodhouse and find Harriet Smith a bore know that Emma does wrong to dictate to Harriet as she does. Perhaps less easy to recognize is the offensiveness of domination when the subject is romantic love. The repeated claim of Austen's novels is that there is a better way of friendship, which itself can show us a better way of romance. Being a desirable gentleman does not mean suddenly appearing in the neighborhood in a handsome hunting jacket or the bright red uniform of the militia. It does not mean rescuing a young lady from a group of gypsies or a fall in the rain. It does not mean being dashing, or visibly heroic, at all. Such kinds of stances, in relation to a woman, inevitably imply having the advantage over her.

Finally what being a desirable gentleman does mean in Austen's novel has everything to do with blotting your ink, franking your letters, honestly criticizing your mistakes, learning to be laughed at, and generally being a friend. Austen's lovers, like her sisters and girlfriends, offer the clarity of the familiar, not the brightness of the strange. Indeed, men seem best if you've known them since you were a child, if they live in the house or perhaps next door. Edmund Bertram and Mr. Knightley won their heroines not only because they were deserving but because they were part of the neighborhood. I've often thought that of the many reasons why Captain Wentworth's and Fitzwilliam Darcy's initial romantic commitments had to fail was that, regardless of what good qualities they had or how much they needed to learn, they were just strange young men who had recently come into the neighborhood. When at the end of their stories they come back, they have acquired that most essential quality in Austen's successful lovers, of being an old friend who returns.

One might be tempted to claim that this propensity for the familiar in love indicates a commitment to a tame or a limited world. Or, thinking of English and Continental history in the 1790s or 1800s, one could just as easily argue that it indicates a sense of the ways we establish points of stability in a wild or frighteningly changing world. Yet both of these positions seem reductive. Neither captures the cultural critique embodied in the range of ways Austen's novels oppose socially approved forms of heterosexual love with a radical vision of the intertwining of friendship and romance. Empathy, similarity, equality – these are the signs of true love. Familiarity is a value in the novels precisely because of its potential for discrediting the all-too-familiar romantic convention which would have women value the unfamiliar, the exotic, and the inaccessible. The novels reveal the ways these traditional romantic patterns function to put women at a disadvantage, and argue instead for a quite unfamiliar convention: the romantic appeal of people we already know. Friends in Austen's novels are not lovers. But successful lovers are always friends.



## NOTES

- <sup>1</sup> Carol Smith-Rosenberg, "The Female World of Love and Ritual: Relations between Women in Nineteenth-Century America," *The Signs Reader: Women, Gender, & Scholarship*, eds. Elizabeth Abel and Emily K. Abel (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1983), pp. 27-55.
- <sup>2</sup> Karen Lystra, *Searching the Heart: Women, Men, and Romantic Love in Nineteenth-Century America* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1987), p. 154.
- <sup>3</sup> I am indebted throughout this discussion to many invaluable conversations with Susan Kneeder. This debt is so extensive that I am no longer able to separate her ideas on Austen's representations of love and friendship from my own.
- <sup>4</sup> Jo Modert, ed., *Jane Austen's Manuscript Letters in Facsimile: Reproductions of Every Known Extant Letter, Fragment, and Autograph Copy, with an Annotated List of All Known Letters* (Carbondale and Edwardsville: Southern Illinois University Press, 1990).
- <sup>5</sup> R. W. Chapman, ed., *Jane Austen's Letters to her Sister Cassandra and Others* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1932), pp. 513-14.
- <sup>6</sup> Modert was unable to trace this letter.
- <sup>7</sup> Modert was unable to trace this letter.
- <sup>8</sup> *The Novels of Jane Austen*, R. W. Chapman, ed., 3rd ed. (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1933), *Northanger Abbey*, 146. All further references to the novels are to the volumes in this edition.