

Letters of Sense in *Emma*

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Abstract

Mary A. Favret in *Romantic Correspondence* asserts that letters reflect “interior spaces and female vulnerability” (Favret, 1993, p.4). The sentimental letters of epistolary form usually with a feminine feature are disguised to present the writer’s revolutionary political views in the historical moment of Romanticism (Ibid., pp.9-10). Letters of writing truly indicate the individual identity and the status of the writer, which often shows one’s privacy and the “interiorized moments—domestic details, closed circles of family and friends, the inner workings of the mind.” (Ibid., p.12) The ability to write a good letter is a sign of being well bred. Through analyzing the letters in *Emma*, this essay found: First, a letter could highly present the writer’s courtesy and give the reader the first impression before the first meeting; second, a letter for proposal expressing the sincerity and emotion of the sender could be helpful to obtain the lover’s heart; third, the manners to write and answer may manifest in the responding speed, the length and content of the letter and as an indirect notice to avoid face to face embarrassment and show attitude. Moreover, handwriting could be influenced by family members, education and genders; fourth, the functions of letters in *Emma* could be distributed to delivery of information, emotional attachment, requirement, invitation and clarification. In short, Jane Austen presents her view that letter writing as an important tool of communication in the 19th century represents the sense of manners of the corresponders in *Emma*.

Key words: Letters; *Emma*; Jane Austen

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INTRODUCTION

Mary A. Favret in *Romantic Correspondence* asserts that letters reflect “interior spaces and female vulnerability” (p.4). The sentimental letters of epistolary form usually with a feminine feature are disguised to present the writer’s revolutionary political views in the historical moment of Romanticism (Favret, 1993, pp.9-10). Ruth Perry notices that letter as the epistolary genre used by middle-class women writers is a method to examine themselves on the personal experience and a social attainment since primarily their economic status had been enhanced in the eighteenth century (1980, pp.1-11). Letters truly indicate the individual identity and the position in society, which often shows one’s privacy and the “interiorized moments—domestic details, closed circles of family and friends, the inner workings of the mind” (Favret, 1993, p.12). Thus, Favret illustrates that letters manifest a kind of individualism with its feminine identity (Ibid., p.13). Actually, letters reveal the writers’ characters. Duckworth observes in *Pride and Prejudice* that the pride of Mr. Darcy is reasonable and uncriticized because his letter writing shows his character of being responsible (1994, p.130). Darcy’s letter writing is more prudent and thoughtful than Mr. Bingley’s rapid and careless writing. In addition, Duckworth points out that letter writings of Mr. Bennet, Lydia and Collins are exposing their personal irresponsibility or selfishness. Nevertheless, Mr. Darcy and Mr. Gardiner could befriend by realizing their similar characteristics of being responsible from the alike good writing. In the meanwhile, Elizabeth is a good letter writer to show her responsible character too (Duckworth, 1994,

p.132). Whereas Favret reviews Austen's letters lack of "self" because her language is "open and confidential" and tries to show the internal world indirectly (1993, pp.133-134). She quotes Cassandra Austen's remarks on Jane Austen's letters and agrees Jane Austen's letters are full of "emotional interest" (Ibid., p.134). In another word, letters are like commodities to have objected value of "use and exchange value unrelated to their content" (Ibid., p.136) to please the corresponders. Brownstein notes the materialism is correlative in Austen's novels that the heroines always seek for a right husband with social position and estate but these heroines' desire of creating a home is to find an external space of their own (1982, p.95). On the contrary, women are favorable to receive and write letters, which implies the mind of exploring internal space and its exchange. Favret demonstrates how Austen emphasizes the material part of the appearance, the length, frequency and the over-read value of letters which are more like to connect with the neighborhood community than the in-depth internal thought of the writer. In fact, this could be traced in Austen's biography since she had grew up in a big family of eight children (six brothers and one sister) with a common income of her father. Her sister Cassandra Elizabeth never married because of "lack of money" (Jane Austen's biography). Therefore, it is most possible for her to sense economic pressure and notice the material objects. Although her brothers could give a certain amount of economic help to their sisters, when she writes she probably has a concern with the book market to appeal to the readers since she needs to feed herself and sometimes supports the family. Consequently, Austen's novels indeed have had a market value since she expresses her ideas about manners that are popularized conducted content of literary books in the late eighteenth century. Her novels has the significance from "character of mind" and "general way of life", morals, habits to "ceremonious behaviour" and "studied civility" (Byrne, 2005, p.297) in the letters. In fact, literary books containing conducted guidance are often welcomed by young women in the middle class and from them they could know courtesy of "the aristocratic ideals of civility and gallantry" (Ibid.). Moreover, conduct book constructs the early writing art of Austen. "Politeness" is a new watchword of innate superiority as the virtues of benevolence, modesty, self-examination and integrity indicating nurture and education. By learning from conduct books, women could know how to behave during courtship and marriage and how to be dutiful daughters, wives and mothers. Therefore, this essay will take a sight into how Austen interprets manners in the letters.

LITERARY ANALYSIS

Firstly, a letter could highly present the writer's courtesy and give the reader the first impression before the

first meeting. Although people of Highbury never saw Frank Churchill before nor the content of this letter is introduced, his "high-prized" (Austen, 2000, p.9) letter presents a good image for him. Nevertheless, Favret believes that Frank Churchill's letter is impressed to the whole community as "very proper", "handsome", "very handsome indeed" and "pretty" on the appearance rather than the content (1993, p.136). Actually, community residents might not need to remember every word of a letter even the content but seeing the appearance and hearing the coming of the letter give the surroundings a sense of satisfaction. Not everyone expects the "private romance" or "provocative politics" (Favret, 1993, p.136) in Austen's letters like a literary critic. At the same time, why Frank's letter satisfies the locals in Highbury largely accounts for his identity. Byrne (2005, p.300) suggests Austen prefers to connect good manners of good heart and social status. Comparing to these sub-interests of conventions usually satirised by Austen, she tends to reveal people's hypocrisy and snobbery of being willing to make friends with aristocrats no matter whether they are familiar with. Although the residents of Highbury never met Churchill before, he is the authorized heir of his uncle who owns Enscombe, a large estate and his adopters give him a good education in London. His father has made his fortune by doing business, bought Randalls, gotten a wife and renewed a happy life. Frank's nurturing background and his father Mr. Weston's positive appraisalment has made him a "boast" of Highbury, which make the people concern "his merits and prospects" (Austen, 2000, p.9). Even Emma in the later plot favors him in a certain time because she firstly thinks he is the best man matching her near around the community considering wealth, education and age. Such a "very fine young man" (Ibid.) writes a letter to his stepmother but not to his father on the occasion of their marriage before his coming, which could already be approved as a good manner. This action shows his considerate courtesy and the content at this time is not that important though the readers would know that the content has a favorable quality in the later plot.

Secondly, if a proposal letter expresses the sincereness and emotion of the suitor even though the letter writer's character seems rough, it could be helpful to touch the lover's heart. Martin's proposal letter to Harriet is a good example. His conditions for marriage at first are caviled by Harriet's "mentor"— Emma because of her prejudice. His job is a farmer and that's the reason Emma disdains him because she thinks he should be without education and Harriet should match a "very real gentleman" (Ibid., p.19) in "good society" (Ibid., p.18). The preconceptions are embodied in her question: "Mr. Martin, I suppose, is not a man of information beyond the line of his own business. He does not read?" (Ibid., p.17) She changes her snobbish tone a little bit after Harriet tells her he has read novels and proses besides *Agriculture Reports* related to

his business: “What sort of looking man is Mr. Martin?” And then Emma transforms to concern with the substantial conditions such as age, economic condition, social status and circle of friends of Martin. Emma expresses her sense of hierarchical views on him as “a very inferior creature” (Ibid., p.20). She also shows her sickness of being goddess by criticizing his class in which he could be independent and she could not embody her value:

A young farmer, whether on horseback or on foot, is the very last sort of person to raise my curiosity. The yeomanry are precisely the order of people with whom I feel I can have nothing to do. A degree or two lower, and a creditable appearance might interest me; I might hope to be useful to their families in some way or other. But a farmer can need none of my help, and is therefore in one sense as much above my notice as in every other he is below it. (Ibid., p.17)

As Emma says her value manifests in helping the others but for her need to be a Holy Mary other than to meet the others’ preferences, she could get a sense of enjoyment from being a redeemer but she seldom has had a transpositional consideration. Thereby, when Martin writes a “very good letter”, containing a “direct proposal of marriage”, she doubted “one of his sisters must have helped him” but “it is too strong and concise”, not like a woman’s writing (Ibid., pp.31-32). Actually, she has a contradictory view about Martin: On one hand, she admits Martin’s letter is indeed a very good letter than she had expected:

She reads, and was surprised. The style of the letter was much above her expectation. There were not merely no grammatical errors, but as a composition it would not have disgraced a gentleman; the language, though plain, was strong and unaffected, and the sentiments it conveyed very much to the credit of the writer. It was short, but expressed good sense, warm attachment, liberality, propriety, even delicacy of feeling. (Ibid., p.31)

Furthermore, Harriet looked over the letter again and had “a soften tendency” (Ibid., p.34) because of his good writing (Ibid., pp.31-32) when Emma makes stress on Harriet to refuse the proposal; on the other hand, she has a heavy prejudice on his occupation as a farmer in Abbey-Mill Farm— “out of all good society” and “the society of the illiterate and vulgar” (Ibid., pp.33-34). Nevertheless, Martin’s letter has impressed both of the two ladies and finally urged the marriage with Harriet.

Another example for expressing cheerful and exulting emotion is Mr. Elton’s announcing letter of marriage. It is another letter without content but introduced by the others as Mr. Knightley said: “It was short, merely to announce— but cheerful, exulting, of course. ...The information was, as you state, that he was going to be married to a Miss Hawkins. By his style, I should imagine it just settled” (Ibid., p.112). Favret states the greatest significance of a letter in *Emma* is in circulation since the acquaintances passed around and over-read the letters (1993, pp.136-137). Mrs. Cole knows the news from her husband and

writes to Miss Bates and then the news becomes public. Because at first Mr. Elton presented his ambiguous attitude to Harriet, complimented Emma’s drawing of Harriet’s portrait and especially served them to frame the drawing in London, and played the equivocal riddles to Harriet and Emma, however, afterwards he expresses his desire to Emma but gets refusal and finally he decides to marry another rich lady Miss Hawkins. To lighten the embarrassment of his love games, a more proper act is to announce the news of his marriage by a letter before these entangled young people meet. And the letter should not be directly sent to Emma or Harriet but a mature longtime inhabitant and a businessman Mr. Cole and to forward the news. Thence, the cheerful and exulting emotion would spirit up a ceremonial atmosphere of the community no matter how they may gossip the thing. In the meanwhile, Mr. Elton’s frivolousness could be criticized but it is blameless for pursuing the possibilities to a dream woman for improving the quality of the family life. In the novel, Emma’s censure on him is obvious but Mr. Elton does not publicly blame her refusal, only a polite announcing letter, short but decent.

Thirdly, the manners to write and answer a letter represents in the responding speed, length and content. Good manners show individual sensibility since manner always involves good sense with intellectual emotion. In *Northanger Abbey*, although Henry Tilney agrees women are usually good letter writers: “Every body allows that the talent of writing agreeable letters is peculiarly female” (Austen, 2006, p.19), he presents his comment about women’s letter-writing: “As far as I have had opportunity of judging, it appears to me that the usual style of letter-writing among women is faultless, except in three particulars.” Catherine asked: “And what are they?” Henry replied: “A general deficiency of subject, a total inattention to stops, and a very frequent ignorance of grammar.” (Ibid., p.20) Except the literal content should have a concentrated subject, proper length and grammar awareness due to Henry’s standards, letters have its special use into displaying the writers’ sense of manners. Mr. Elton is one of the smart letter writers in *Emma*. It seems he was playing with Harriet followed by Emma’s expectation before he shows his real desire to Emma. Mr. Knightley observes this and says: “I think it will be all labour in vain.” (Austen, 2000, p.42) As he suggests Elton is a very respectable vicar of Highbury and he talks sentimentally but he will act rationally since he’s smart enough to know the value of good economy but Harriet, a bastard with an unknown birth without fortune certainly is not his wise choice of wife according to Mr. Knightley’s analysis. However, Emma insists on her silly enjoyment of insensible match-making which develops the unhealthy relationship to an embarrassed condition that Mr. Elton expresses his admiration to Emma but not to her intimate plain friend Harriet. Anyhow, Mr. Elton made efforts for

his favorable marriage and did not waste much of the young lady Harriet's precious golden time of selecting mate. When he receives Emma's refusal to his proposal and knows her intention to match him to Harriet, he stops chasing, leaves Highbury in the way to Bath for a period of time and writes a letter to Mr. Woodhouse as an indirect notice to avoid embarrassment and show his attitude, which most demonstrates his sensibility and good manner.

The evening of the very day on which they went, brought a note from Mr. Elton to Mr. Woodhouse, a long, civil, ceremonious note, to say, with Mr. Elton's best compliments, "that he was proposing to leave Highbury the following morning in his way to Bath, where, in compliance with the pressing entreaties of some friends, he had engaged to spend a few weeks, and very much regretted the impossibility he was under, from various circumstances of weather and business, of taking a personal leave of Mr. Woodhouse, of whose friendly civilities he should ever retain a grateful sense—and had Mr. Woodhouse any commands, should be happy to attend to them." (Austen, 2000, p.91)

This note is actually a letter of relative formal writing to a senior. Emma, at this time is unwisely surprised because he doesn't mention her. In fact, a man screwed up his courage to make a proposal and had been refused, which is a losing-face thing or at least hurts his ego. Why does she continually expect beloved emotional pleasure by the cost of his inferiority? This letter is a model of showing sensible courtesy indirectly conveying his bearing of maintaining their contact without breaking the relationship in an elegant manner.

Handwriting could manifest individual character and enhance the emotional attachment. John Knightley discusses the value of friendship with Miss Fairfax when she collects the letters at the post-office. Mr. John Knightley says: "Time will generally lessen the interest of every attachment not within the daily circle" (Ibid., p.191). Therefore, handwriting letters could help to maintain the emotional contact as a distinguished sign of personal identity since when the corresponders write and receive, they may have a feeling to meet the letter writer face to face. John Knightley feels family members could have the similar handwriting: "The same sort of hand-writing often prevails in a family" and he thinks the same teacher could also account for the likeness of the handwriting especially for female writers (Ibid., p.193). Hence, he mentioned the general influential factors of family, teacher and genders on handwriting. However, his brother George Knightley carefully distinguishes Emma's handwriting from Isabella's probably because of his hiding emotion to Emma at that time or his observant ability. He points out "Emma's hand is the strongest" (Ibid.), which is consistent to her tough personality although Mr. Woodhouse also perceives Isabella, Emma and Mrs. Weston "write beautifully" (Ibid.). Mr. Knightley himself unconsciously notices the feminine and masculine features of the hands since he disagrees Emma's remark

on Frank Churchill's penmanship as the best and he deems it is too small without enough strength and it is a kind of feminine writing (Ibid., p.194). Knightley's commentary on the strongest Emma's and too small hands of Frank are contradictory to his gender perspective and this ambiguity comes from the stereotyped concept of gender identity. As Lacan states gender identity conveys the man and his relationship with the woman. A boy in his childhood is expected to be a man and a girl to be a woman, which clarifies them into the category of constituted gender identity, "namely, an ethological level which is properly one of a semblance." (II 12) In another word, the concept of gender is artificially constituted and thus there is actually no gender but a semblance, a difference between physically with or without the phallus and a castration complex according to Lacan. Mr. Knightley is unconsciously aware of the distinction of feminine and masculine characteristics rather than mere gender identity, which is reflected on his observation of the handwritings. In addition, Knightley's subjectiveness is another factor since both Mrs. Weston and Emma disagree with his opinion and Emma believes: "No, it by no means wanted strength—it was not a large hand, but very clear and certainly strong" (Austen, 2000, p.194). Therefore, it concludes that letters could display varying manners according to diverse subjective individual interpretations. Additionally, this argument presents subversiveness of Austen's novel and the "belief in female subjectivity" of the heroines (Litvak, 1983, p.763).

Letters could delay the time of reaction and thus it could ease the hardship of getting along by chewing over the words of expression. In the last volume of the novel, Emma asks for Harriet's letters rather than personal meeting of communication (p.285) to avoid shamefacedness, because Emma has tried several times of inappropriate match-making to Harriet. Furthermore, Emma finally recognizes her love to Mr. Knightley while Harriet wrongly conceives that Knightley adores her. Under the circumstances, letters instead of meeting could be a sign of Emma's irresponsibility of escaping but a way to avoid trouble in the tense atmosphere and maintain the courtesy.

The language of the letters could signify the sender's attitude as well. In the language of *Emma*, there is impressive usage of *very* according to Ostrade's quotation of Barchas' linguistic finding (2014, p.5). The word is normally applied to express the level of judged opinions of the speakers, such as the folks view Frank Churchill's letter as "very proper" and "very handsome indeed", Emma's remark on Martin's letter as "a very good letter", Emma's personal commentary on Martin as "a very inferior creature". However, there is little of *very* used in the letters. It could again explain the difference of speaking and writing language. The words of letters are more formal to show the sincerity of the letter writers.

Fourthly, the functions of letters in *Emma* could be distributed to a method to deliver information, emotional attachment, requirement, invitation and clarification. Frank Churchill's high prized letter to announce his coming (Austen, 2000, p.9) and Mr. Elton's announcement of marriage (Ibid., p.111) are in the function of delivering information. The function of expressing emotional attachment is embodied in Mrs. John Knightley's letter about the lovely kids (Ibid., p.113), Mrs. Weston's letter about Highbury (Ibid., p.170), Miss Fairfax's expectation for letters (Ibid., pp.190-191), the correspondence between the two sisters Emma and Isabella (Ibid., p.204) and Frank Churchill's letter about Enscombe (Ibid., p.255). Requirement could be made in letters such as Mr. Churchill's letter to ask Frank to return for Mrs. Churchill's dreadful illness (Ibid., p.251). Invitation is another function of the letters in *Emma*, Emma's note for inviting Jane to spend a day at Hartfield is an example (Ibid., p.255) although she was refused. It is better than get a refusal in person. Frank Churchill's long letter (Ibid., pp.286-291) is a kind of clarification and he obtains the forgiveness and respect of Emma because of his sincere manner. Smith concludes "Clever letter writers can keep their letters to one page while still cramming them full of the latest news and gossip" because the recipient should pay for the weight of the letter and how long it traveled (2013, web.). Nonetheless, because of the importance of letters in *Emma* and since the corresponders seems never care about the cost of the postage, if Frank wrote only one page of this letter for clarification, it could not be enough to express his sincereness and clarify himself.

Favret's view on letters of "interior spaces and female vulnerability" (1993, p.4), which reflects the feminine feature and individual's identity of the corresponders. Letters often show one's privacy and the "interiorized moments— domestic details, closed circles of family and friends, the inner workings of the mind." (Favret, 1993, p.12) Writing a good letter could manifest one's well-education and impress the readers by setting a responsible image of the writer. To sum up, by analyzing the letters in *Emma*, this essay found: First, a letter could highly present the writer's courtesy and give the reader the first impression; second, a letter for proposal expressing the sincereness and emotion of the writer could help the suitor to obtain the agreement of the lover; third, the manners to write and answer could manifest in the responding speed, the length and content of the letter and as an indirect communicational tool to avoid embarrassment

and show attitude. Moreover, handwriting could show the personality of the letter writers, which has been influenced by family members, education and genders; fourth, the functions of letters in *Emma* could be distributed to delivery of information, emotional attachment, requirement, invitation and clarification.

CONCLUSION

In short, Jane Austen presents her view that letter writing as an important tool of communication in the 19th century manifests the sense of manners in personalities of the corresponders in *Emma*. According to Byrne's observation to Austen's viewpoint, the true good manner comes from a good heart and emotional intelligence other than "birth, station or social nuance" (2005, p.304).

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