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Turning Their Talk: Gendered Conversation in the Nineteenth-Century British Novel

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TURNING THEIR TALK:
GENDERED CONVERSATION IN THE NINETEENTH-CENTURY BRITISH NOVEL

DISSERATION

A DISSERTATION SUBMITTED IN PARTIAL FULFILLMENT OF THE REQUIREMENTS
FOR THE DEGREE OF DOCTOR OF PHILOSOPHY IN THE COLLEGE OF ARTS AND
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BY

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2015

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ABSTRACT OF DISSERTATION

TURNING THEIR TALK:
GENDERED CONVERSATION IN THE NINETEENTH-CENTURY BRITISH NOVEL

Turning Their Talk investigates the pressures placed upon female characters’ communication styles as they enter the heterosexual market in Jane Austen’s Pride and Prejudice and Persuasion, Charlotte Bronte’s Jane Eyre and Villette, and George Eliot’s Middlemarch and Daniel Deronda. The title of this dissertation derives from a phrase found in each of the six novels I examine—“she turned the conversation”—to suggest the subtle control female characters exercise through speech that allows them to achieve tangible forms of social agency. This dissertation argues that novelistic representations of speech mirror the paradoxical roles women historically faced as they balanced societal ideals for feminine conduct, the companionate marriage, and the increasingly popular principles attached to liberal individualism. By identifying the historical norms of speech imposed upon women of the nineteenth-century and applying that information to the dialogue of female characters to examine the ways in which they follow, challenge, subvert, and constitute those norms in specific contexts within the novel, my work illustrates how speech, as a cultural resource and practice, enacts social action and personal authority. In each chapter, I identify the most statistically distinct forms of speech assigned to female characters—forms substantiated through corpus linguistic methodology. These patterns reveal how fictional identities become constructed, power is translated into relationships, and gender ideology takes shape through spoken words. This project breaks away from a long-standing tradition in women’s literary criticism that equates one’s “voice” with individual power and, instead, demonstrates how different female characters similarly work within a system of language subject to institutional and ideological constraints to socially maneuver without upending the normative rules governing gender difference.
KEYWORDS: Nineteenth-Century Novels, Gender, Speech, Conduct Book, Individualism

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GENDERED CONVERSATION IN THE NINETEENTH-CENTURY BRITISH NOVEL

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For my loving Parents—William and Kathy Beach
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Chapter One: Introduction

*Turning Their Talk* is an interdisciplinary study of British novelists and language in the nineteenth-century, and particularly of the forms of speech female characters adopt, subvert, constitute, and challenge to enact personal agency. The title derives from a phrase found in each the six novels I examine--“she turned the conversation”—to suggest the subtle control female characters exercise through speech that allows them to wield power in their everyday discourse as their authors represent it on the page. Such “turns” materialize in forms of silence, humor, questions, and indirection—linguistic patterns that permit characters to achieve any number of desirable stances during social interaction. This dissertation argues that novelistic representations of speech mirror the paradoxical roles women historically faced as they balanced societal ideals for feminine conduct, the companionate marriage, and principles attached to liberal individualism. By investigating the historical norms accorded to women of the nineteenth-century and applying that information to the dialogue of female characters, I demonstrate how speech, as a cultural resource and practice, enacts social action and personal authority. Each chapter pinpoints the most statistically distinct forms of speech assigned to female characters—forms substantiated through corpus linguistic methodology. And these patterns reveal how a heroine’s spoken words construct a fictional identity, translate into forms of authority, and reflect as well as shape gender ideology. In feminist criticism, agency has often been considered a synonym for resistance to male dominance, an oppositional form of power metaphorically equated with the assertion of one’s voice. But this study pushes beyond the traditional metaphor to consider the diversity of linguistic resources that female characters draw
upon in contextually-specific ways as they project interactional stances such as cooperativeness, detachment, stability, respect, and curiosity—stances that show agency as more than an oppositional or resistant force. The dissertation demonstrates how female characters in the novels of Jane Austen, Charlotte Bronte, and George Eliot similarly work within a system of language subject to institutional and ideological constraints to socially maneuver without upending the normative rules governing gender difference.

The Questions

Why choose these particular novels? Jane Austen, Charlotte Bronte, and George Eliot all maintain a prominent place in the nineteenth-century British canon. This study follows a significant body of critical works that have examined the ways these female authors test and uphold nineteenth-century truisms about womanhood. The novels they wrote that I examine in the dissertation are all courtship and marriage narratives that represent the pressures placed upon female characters’ communication styles as they negotiate societal claims for proper femininity and individualism. Each novel opens to a heroine entering the charged arena of courtship, a space where social connections must be formed and tested and a window of time when young women seemingly had the most control over the direction their lives would take. Increasingly, the companionate marriage became commonplace during the Victorian period, so that matches were made for companionship and personal fulfillment as much as for status and power. The novels in this study show that female characters could exert some freedom in choosing a mate and, in doing so, could demonstrate sound judgment that showcased personal interpretive skills as well as a likeness of mind compatible with their future husband. But these characters also
were expected to adhere to feminine norms that often constrained self-expression. The tension between these two social claims surfaces in the linguistic strategies adopted by the heroines in each of the novels covered in this project.

To compare and contrast how different characters handle interactional agency, I purposefully chose to analyze two distinct novels from each author: Austen’s *Pride and Prejudice* and *Persuasion*, Bronte’s *Jane Eyre* and *Villette*, and Eliot’s *Middlemarch* and *Daniel Deronda*. I wanted to study heroines whose communication styles have been described in contrary terms; for example, Elizabeth Bennet is considered “vivacious” while Austen depicts Anne Elliot as one whose “word had no weight.” Does Elizabeth Bennet succeed in getting her own way more than Anne Elliot because she is more expressive? It turns out that is not quite the case. Linguistic evidence shows that these female characters share many more commonalities than not, for they all work within a system of language subject to similar institutional and ideological constraints that produces comparable methods for social maneuvering.

Austen, Bronte, and Eliot are all quite different writers and broadly represent different periods of time within the nineteenth-century. The first book in this dissertation, *Pride and Prejudice*, was published in 1813 when the social milieu of England was particularly stratified and a woman’s status largely derived from her family connections—a fact underlined by the linguistic strategies Austen’s characters employ to build solidarity among family members and friends. The last book in this dissertation, *Daniel Deronda*, was published in 1876 when a more competitive and urban setting promoted social performance as a prescription for femininity—a trend Eliot critiques through Gwendolen Harleth’s ineffective theatrical language. I don’t think one can take each writer as *the* ideal representative of a given time period or genre of writing. Each has their quirks and preoccupations. But by comparing and contrasting the novels to one
another, we can see what communication strategies the authors invoke to promote or challenge certain gender ideologies within the fictional realm of their writing.

What were the expectations for middle-class women’s speech in nineteenth-century Britain? Of course, it is impossible to know precisely how women in the past conversed in their everyday lives without an auditory record, but literature—both novels and advice books--help to construct a clearer picture of the expectations for women’s speech in that place and period of time. Written representations are consciously constructed works, but they are the only resources we have to clarify the patterns and rules governing historical forms of speech. While novels tend to clean up representations of speech—omitting fragments, grammatical errors, awkward pauses and topic turns that pepper actual conversations--and conduct literature typically presents idealized depictions of women in conversation, they both depend on the shared knowledge of social norms. These books, we can assume, both reflect and teach some of the social standards for speech that women and fictional characters could take up, reject, and subvert.

Versions of the Victorian conduct book originated long before the nineteenth-century, in tracts such as medieval courtesy literature that dramatized the gender roles in courtship (Ashley 25). These early English works prompted women to act, “piteous, meek, sweet tempered, and on this basis, [appear] desirable as a wife” (Ashley 6). In following centuries, the conduct book came to uphold more aristocratic values that might befit a lady at court. And by the mid nineteenth-century one can find some combination of these two strains of thought in conduct literature as it was read by a growing middle-class of women. In late eighteenth-century conduct literature, works by popular writers such as James Fordyce and John Gregory, stressed women’s moral purity as a way to define the bourgeoisie from what it considered an extravagant
aristocracy. But as the nineteenth-century unfolded, relations between the aristocracy and middle class, as Marjorie Morgan claims, “progressed from being confrontational to being conciliatory and integrative” (6). Advice literature, in both of these ideological veins sought to refine, as well as define, a woman’s judgment, taste, demeanor, dress, and speech.

Most all discussions of speech in advice books center on the goal of giving pleasure to interlocutors and particularly men, as they were the target audience for young women entering the marriage market. In late eighteenth-century and early nineteenth-century texts, authors warn female readers of “boundless loquacity” (Fordyce 89); “rambling from one subject to another” (The Polite Lady); “showing men the full extent of your knowledge” (Gregory 37). In each of these works, authors stress the importance of displaying a modest and pleasant demeanor through “respectful and earnest attention” (Chapone 127). Later Victorian conduct books written by authors like Sarah Stickney Ellis and Lydia Howard Sigourney, take up this same investment in pleasing conversation and amplify its importance by offering numerous directives to avoid unpleasant social exchanges. Ellis, for example, in Women of England warns readers against talking too much of their “pet hobbies” or speaking of “the commonplace,” of speaking “without regard to time, place, or general appropriateness,” or throwing out “random statements,” or monopolizing the conversation. Considering the specificity of instruction given, these script-like recipes for femininity logically led to opportunities for more overt social performances. By the mid-century, conduct literature, which had focused on domestic duties and morality, was surpassed by etiquette guides that aimed at helping readers avoid vulgarity in their appearance and speech. These guides codified conventional rules of behavior and pleasant speech, as a means to draw admiration from others, remained a primary concern.
While advice books often reinforced the expectation that young women should remain outwardly passive and polite, their directives also subtly suggested opportunities to push against the stereotype. For example, all writers stressed a cooperative model of speech, one where attentive listening and proper turn-taking could lead to appropriately pleasing exchanges. But by suggesting that women initiate turns in discussion by asking questions, women could assume some linguistic control using a socially sanctioned strategy. In 1829, conduct writer, Hester Chapone acknowledged the need for young women to “appear interested in what is said” by asking questions (127). She then goes on to suggest that by posing questions, one can reap the reward of garnering positive attention:

[I]f you understand the subject well enough to ask now and then a pertinent question, or if you can mention any circumstances relating to it that have not before been taken notice of, this will be an agreeable way of showing your willingness to make a part of the company; and will probably draw a particular application to you from some one or other. (127-128)

The conduct book reader’s own self-interests are never far removed from directives that emphasize supportive and pleasing conversation. In the novels, too, we find female characters who adopt and repurpose traditionally feminine expectations of speech to suit their own interactional aims. They do this through forms of silence, asking questions, and using indirection—tactics that all fall under the umbrella of stereotypical feminine discourse.

We cannot know whether women in nineteenth-century England actually followed the advice they were given, for conduct literature only offers us an indication of the norms for linguistic behavior that were in circulation during this time. These books may have been purely entertaining for some readers who found the stereotypes in them laughably unrealistic. But they are a primary source that helps us to understand the parameters built around socially acceptable
speech accorded to women—parameters that novelists were familiar with and used in their own
writings to construct their character’s identities in interaction.

**How does liberal individualism fit into this conversation?** While conduct literature
promoted stereotypically feminine ways of communicating through forms such as silence,
indirection, and politeness, another camp of nineteenth-century writers endorsed linguistic values
such as sincerity, disinterestedness, and dynamic debate which could all contribute to the
formation of a liberal individual. Victorian thinkers such as Herbert Spencer, Matthew Arnold,
and John Stuart Mill were deeply invested in liberal individualism, a political and philosophical
ideal imagined as a form of resistance to systemic powers in England—in particular, aristocratic
authority, popular opinion, and class discrimination. The ideal nation-state they imagined would
be filled with free subjects, “where the violence circulating within and without the corporate,
classed, and personal bodies of Victorian England could be quelled, and the diverse claims of the
social domain could then be thought into harmonious relation in the abstracted, self-governing
body of the liberal individual” (Hadley 65). Under this new system, self-development and
education become key goals for a liberal citizenship.

Part of the character formation that liberals like John Stuart Mill imagined involved a
willingness to listen to diverse opinions and give voice to one’s own, even at times playing the
devil’s advocate. Through the exchange of sincerely expressed and varied opinions, debate, he
believed, could lead to truthful insight: “There must be discussion, to show how experience is to
be interpreted. Wrong opinions and practices gradually yield to fact and argument: but facts and
arguments, to produce any effect on the mind, must be brought before it” (36). In the first
section of *On Liberty*, Mill fervently attacks those who comply with “mass opinion” and
“received opinion”—distinct outlooks that impede the development of individualism. The modes of speech his philosophical practices promoted were straightforward, conscientious, and argumentative—hardly conducive to the polite parlor-room talk outlined in conduct literature.

Women’s exclusion from political involvement curtailed full participation in the process of becoming liberalized individuals. Indeed, the individual that readers often envisioned and celebrated from a reading of *On Liberty*, according to Elaine Hadley, was, “an independent and principled figure, doing battle in a discursive public sphere...[a] hero who speaks with splendid autonomy the reasoned but also reasonable opinions that make him (or her) a person of character...in a vehemently contested social domain” (72). Hadley’s parenthetical inclusion of the female “her” in this role suggests the limited opportunities for women to enter a “discursive public sphere” or to “speak with splendid autonomy.” Yet we find appeals for sincerity and reasoned opinion made to women circulating during this time, and even earlier as they appear in the works of Mary Wollstonecraft who links plain speaking with civic virtue. In *Vindication of the Rights of Woman* (1792) she critiques the widely-held expectation that women should work only to please others in their conversations, and instead recommends honest discourse: “Out of the abundance of the heart how few speak! So few, that I, who love simplicity, would gladly give up politeness for a quarter of the virtue that has been sacrificed to an equivocal quality, which, at best, should only be the polish of virtue” (5:1). Though Wollstonecraft’s liberal ideas ran counter to popularly read conduct literature, her radical voice shows that alternative expectations for women’s speech existed and that an ideological tension between polite femininity and sincerity complicated women’s communicative practices.

Later, in the mid nineteenth-century, the topic of women’s sincerity and liberalizing speech practices were invoked in discussions of the companionate marriage and equal rights for
women. John Stuart Mill, in *The Subjection of Women* imagines that in the best of marriages, there are:

> [T]wo persons of cultivated faculties, identical in opinions and purposes, between whom there exists that best kind of equality, similarity of powers and capacities with reciprocal superiority in them—so that each can enjoy the luxury of looking up to the other, and can have alternately the pleasure of leading and of being led in the path of development.

(237)
The marriage contract, then, is one that allows two companions to enact a liberal education, to test their opinions through sincere and open dialogue in order to cultivate a stronger sense of individuality. In novels, representations of the companionate marriage and the courtship leading up to it contain elements of this paradigm, where we see female characters assert their opinions and test partners in conversation. But these forms of expressive speech (i.e. Elizabeth Bennet’s sharp wit, Jane Eyre’s periodic outbursts) always operate in tandem with more conservative and traditionally feminine linguistic practices.

**How do studies in contemporary linguistics contribute to our understanding of the novels?** Recent feminist linguistic studies, like more recent literary studies in gender, have drawn from the work of Judith Butler to consider gender as something constantly practiced as people perform acts recognized as implying or constituting an identity. According to Butler’s model, an individual begins life as a mix of possibilities and acquires gender as he or she drops either feminine or masculine qualities from a performative repertoire. This concept of performativity has been fruitful for linguists who study gender and language, for it captures the ongoing construction of character through language use in social interactions. The “performance turn” has led language and gender scholars to question how we balance established social norms that are imposed upon us and the agency with which we decide to follow or challenge those norms. Of course, contemporary linguistics frequently relies on recorded transcripts of
interaction that look far different from the dialogue created by female authors in Victorian England. But both forms of representation are socially constructed and mediated by constraints, both institutional and ideological, that frame individual action. By identifying the historical norms regarding language use in England during the nineteenth-century and then examining how authors handle them in novels, we gain a better understanding of how specific representations of speech translate into forms of authority and salient categories of gender. Rather simply than ask, “How do female characters speak?” I have approached the novels asking, “What kinds of linguistic resources do characters deploy to present themselves as certain kinds of women and to achieve interactional goals?”

The most prevalent social norms for women’s speech in England during the nineteenth-century derive from the two ideological strains I outline above: conduct literature politeness and expressive individualism. In each of the novels, heroines negotiate these stances as they interact with other characters, drawing upon a variety of strategies to socially maneuver. Rather than analyze all of the many conversational tactics employed by the protagonists, I narrow the focus to examine only their most frequently used forms of communication. The repetition of a certain tactic underscores its success in interaction, and/or the character’s preferred social positioning in relation to others. In order to identify the most predominant strategies in a linguistic repertoire, I draw upon corpus linguistic methodology, an electronic analysis of language data that compares the frequencies of certain words and phrases in different corpora. Though corpus linguistic studies typically analyze exceptionally large data sets filled with language, I created my own by separating (copying and pasting into a document) the dialogue assigned to each of the heroines from that of other characters’ and the narrators’ words. The linguistic computational program, Wordsmith Tools, then allowed me to use these sets of data to pinpoint the heroines’ most
frequently used words and phrases in conversation. By using this methodology, I could focus on analyzing specific strategies (i.e. Anne Elliot’s silence, Jane Eyre’s many questions, Gwendolen’s boosters) to see how they corresponded to or contradicted historical stereotypes for women’s speech and what they were able to accomplish by using certain forms. I could also compare and contrast each of the heroine’s styles of communicating to see how similarly or differently they work within the bounds that governed language practices in the literature.

This project crosses disciplinary boundaries in ways that may seem to unnecessarily tangle contemporary linguistics with historical and literary studies. Some might ask, “How can you impose modern day protocols for speech onto nineteenth-century fiction?” and to that I would answer, “I lean on sociolinguistic methodology and theory to help frame my analysis but all interpretations are based on what is actually found within the texts. Linguistic methodology helps to narrow down the search for potential variables in the speech of characters, but my examination of spoken language remains situated inside the fictional worlds that Austen, Bronte, and Eliot created. This project relies upon relational ties drawn between the novels, showing that the patterns of speech accorded to a heroine are distinctive, not because they are contrasted to contemporary data regarding women’s language use, but because they differ from the speech of other female characters studied in this project. For instance, Jane Eyre’s use of questions in conversation appears significant because none of the other female characters in the novel, or the other novels in this project, for that matter, carry such a high frequency of interrogatives in their dialogue. All my assessments of language derive from comparative findings within the novels.”

**What is the role of “agency” in this study?** The term “agency,” variously defined, has become commonplace in many disciplines of study. Feminists have tended to emphasize agency
as the deliberate resistance to a patriarchal status quo. One of the significant metaphors of feminism that follows the oppositional definition of agency has been that of voice which gained popularity in the late 1970’s. In feminist works by Tillie Olsen (*Silences in Literature*), Adrienne Rich (*On Lies, Secrets, and Silence*), and Carol Gilligan (*In a Different Voice*) the metaphor of “voice” was used to express both self-definition and power against a “silencing” cultural oppression. But since the 1990’s other critics have challenged the binary of voice and silence because it does not take into account the complex and often contradictory ways individuals enact agency. My project joins these newer approaches to show that agency is more than a “resistance to social norms” (Jolles 56). For agency to be meaningful, it is not necessary to be risky or antagonistic, nor does it need to be pioneering or anti-normative. The language women employ to show that they follow rules, customs, and traditions can be every bit as powerful as a stance of refusal, just as the authors in this project demonstrate through their female characters’ adherence to polite speech.

Sociolinguists have been particularly cognizant of the ways language is embedded into networks of sociocultural relations. Mikhail Bakhtin, in *The Dialogic Imagination*, reminds us that no word is ever neutral: “All words have the ‘taste’ of a profession, a genre, a tendency, a party, a particular work, a particular person, a generation, an age group, the day and hour. Each word tastes of the context and contexts in which it has lived its socially charged life” (293). The sociolinguistic emphasis on analyzing the context of utterances and the ways language and power are commonly intertwined in ever-shifting communicative practices has led scholars in the field to view agency as a social action. So for this project, I borrow sociolinguist Laura Ahearn’s loosely-defined interpretation of agency, “the socioculturally mediated capacity to act” (112),
which emphasizes agency as an ongoing practice that is socially and culturally negotiated and takes a multiplicity of forms.

One underlying assumption in this definition of “agency” is that people do things with words. Communicative practices show individuals making choices and acting in social settings for particular reasons. These practices, therefore, reflect and participate in shaping the ideological boundaries of one’s social and cultural context, whether they are intentional or not. The dissertation illustrates that the kinds of agency exercised through characters’ speech are not just anti-normative, but they are acts which allow for a variety of interactional stances—some of which effect significant changes in a character’s narrative arc and some of which merely help a character to better navigate a social exchange. In the dissertation, we find heroines enacting linguistic agency in a variety of ways, for example: taking control over a topic of discussion, building a sense of community through shared humor, avoiding faulty personal appraisals through silence, gaining a husband’s acceptance and favor with indirections, learning more about another character through leading statements, or delaying a marriage proposal through coy and vague language.

At a macro-level language works as any other social system subject to institutional and ideological constraints and forcibly limits the ways people—or characters--interact. But there is elasticity within this constructed system of signs that allows fictional female characters to employ speech in both conventional and unconventional ways that confer some measure of social agency, despite their social standing. The novels I examine show that what makes speech successful depends entirely on the contexts in which it is uttered—contexts that change and vary from one interaction to another. The authors have constructed characters that frequently shift their speaking styles to accommodate self-interests and face needs with different interlocutors.
“Face,” as Penelope Brown and Stephen Levinson, define it is “the public self-image that every member of a society wants to claim for himself” (61). Generally, people either work to save “negative face” which is “the basic claim to territories, personal preserves, rights to non-distraction—i.e. to freedom of action and freedom from imposition” or they linguistically attempt to maintain “positive face” which is “the consistent self-image or ‘personality’ (crucially including the desire that this self-image be appreciated and approved of) claimed by interactants” (Brown and Levinson 61). In any conversation, one will find characters moving between different poles of communication—expression and repression, politeness and assertiveness, directness and indirectness, sincerity and civility—in order to preserve both negative and positive face needs.

Like the ties to a woman’s corset these linguistic points are linked to one another, criss-crossed, and repeatedly used to help shape the ways female characters are represented to other characters in the novel and to the reader. To extend the metaphor a bit further, just as the corset these women must literally wear can be tightened or relaxed, some linguistic strategies, such as silence, can allow for breathing room if loosened, or if, for example, employed in a certain way that might avert unwanted attention. And other speech forms, such as Jane Eyre’s overuse of ‘sir,’ are more constrictive in their reinforcement of the gender hierarchy prevalent at this time. The corset can slacken or tighten—effectively shaping the way these characters are represented and form a socially constructed sense of selfhood, but the linguistic and societal parameters which constitute it are never completely erased.

The Chapters

Pride and Prejudice: Elizabeth’s Practical Humor
Readers and critics of *Pride and Prejudice* tend to celebrate the lively wit of Elizabeth Bennet, marking it as a sign of her individuality and linguistic freedom. At a time when wit had been widely proclaimed as a great danger to a young lady in courtship, Elizabeth freely admits to her “impertinence” through humor. But her use humor operates in nuanced ways and is not always as provocative as some might give her credit for. Through humor, Elizabeth carefully asserts her opinions and bolsters alliances with family members and friends, proving that she possesses a firm footing in and understanding of the small community to which she belongs. Her speech works to project an optimistic model of expressive individualism that balances self-expression and self-governance, without evincing much strain in achieving this equilibrium. Through this careful negotiation, Austen shows that language presents a repertoire of resources that, if thoughtfully employed, can grant female characters socially-accepted forms of agency that help them to succeed in marriage.

**Persuasion: Anne’s Judicious Silence**

Where *Pride and Prejudice* highlights the power and pleasures of witty repartee, *Persuasion* evinces more pessimism in the rewards of verbal communication. Quiet and subdued Anne Elliot seems like a much different heroine than the lively Elizabeth Bennet, yet both characters employ tactics in conversation to build solidarity within their respective speech communities and to, alternately, mark their distinct sense of moral and intellectual authority. While Elizabeth uses humor to accomplish this, Anne relies upon the ambiguity of silence. Though Anne has often been read as the most passive of Austen’s heroines because of her lengthy silences in conversation, she uses silence in strategic ways that help her to detach from
characters who spend their days with her complaining and gossiping of others and to detach from the pointed disregard of her suitor, Wentworth. At the same time, Anne’s speech patterns reveal little hedging and contain straightforward comments that stress her preference for sincerity in conversation. Anne’s speech demonstrates that silence in conversation is not just subordinating, but that it functions, as do her direct speech acts, to convey her independence and stability—interactional stances which signal a self-possessed form of individualism operating within the normative bounds of feminine politeness.

**Jane Eyre: Jane’s Engaging Questions**

Jane Eyre, outwardly calm yet full of deep-seated feeling, periodically breaks the tight control of her unspoken thoughts with assertive outbursts of speech, punctuating moments in the novel that have been frequently used to characterize “voice” as a sign of social agency. And though this style of communicating certainly helps shape the overall impression readers may have of Jane--a character unafraid to assert her will--one of the most distinct linguistic traits located in her dialogue is not exclamatory or boldfaced statements, but it is, instead, the interrogative form. Jane’s questions, when facilitative, indicate an interest in her interlocutors and a desire to build solidarity with them, as well as a traditionally feminine concern for maintaining face through politeness. But Jane’s questions can also be read as a means to control the floor, to redirect the topic of conversations, and to divert attention away from herself. Jane’s use of questions reveals the interactional ways she negotiates claims of proper femininity, moral certitude, individual will, and emotional containment.

**Villette: Lucy’s Subversive Silence**
Like Anne Elliot in *Persuasion*, Lucy Snowe relies on silence in most social settings. In *Villette* silence is named “restless,” “dead,” “triumphant,” “pleasant,” and “fresh” which points to its diverse functions. But Lucy, more than Anne, uses silence in subversive ways that grant her personal satisfaction from circumventing the delimiting parameters of speech. Through silence, Lucy masks her deficiencies in speech, evades limited readings of herself by other characters, and represses the intensity of feelings. As a socially sanctioned sign of Victorian femininity, silence allows Lucy to maintain a modest demeanor without revealing her competitive and highly sensitive interiority. Her silence and disjointed speech show us more clearly the novel’s resistance to being framed as a traditional courtship plot that hinges on a clear articulation of one’s selfhood through dialogic interaction. Rather, the novel illustrates that language can gain more significance through its deliberate suppression.

**Middlemarch: Dorothea and Rosamond’s Indirect Speech Acts**

While Bronte’s novels present heroines who gradually move away from society, George Eliot’s *Middlemarch* shows Dorothea Brook and Rosamond Vincy propelled into a social world they must come to understand and successfully function within, a society that becomes increasingly complex to navigate following their marriage vows, as their sense of personal agency diminishes. Dorothea Brooke, more than any female character in *Middlemarch*, qualifies spoken language with hedges and tag questions which render her statements tentative. This is surprising considering the fact that she is frequently described by the narrator and other critics as speaking “ardently” and “directly.” But her use of indirect speech points to a desire to connect with other characters as well as to influence them in order to fulfill her own “ardent” ambitions without completely disrupting the gender hierarchy. And though the ambitions of Rosamond
Vincy carry little resemblance to Dorothea’s “noble” social intentions, she, too, works to persuade and influence other characters through linguistic indirections. Though Dorothea, the self-effacing helpmeet who uses her instrumentality for the betterment of others, may be viewed as a foil to Rosamond, the self-absorbed social climber who uses others for her climb up the Middlemarch branches of society—the dichotomy is problematic, for both characters enter into relationships where they must negotiate their own self-interests as well as the interests of those characters around them—their husbands, their families, and those characters that make up their community. The indirections of Rosamond and Dorothea reveal just how intertwined their agency is with the men they choose marry, as both characters consistently work to individuate themselves in relational terms, by attempting to influence their partners’ actions without losing their hold on traditionally feminine expectations for behavior and language.

Daniel Deronda: Gwendolen’s Ineffectual Wit and Boosters

Eliot’s last novel is explicitly concerned with the limits of modernity in England which hinder individuals from meaningful social interactions and personal growth. More than any of the other novels examined in this dissertation, *Daniel Deronda* shows the constraining limits placed on both politely feminine and individualistic speech. Gwendolen, who ineffectually enacts both of these stances, remains fixed in competitive society promoting standardized verbal behavior that undermines sympathetic and sincere discourse. The negotiation of her paradoxical desires to socially perform as well as maintain personal autonomy linguistically surfaces through dissonant speech patterns that obscure her interiority and amplify her affectation in social settings. Gwendolen’s frequent use of boosters—exclamations and italics that signal her desire to be heard—and her attempts at ironic and witty discourse underline the effort she takes to draw
others’ attention to her speech. But they do little to positively affect her interactions with other characters or alter her punishing narrative trajectory.

The project begins with an Austen heroine who blithely manages to balance self-expressive forms of speech with politely feminine forms and for her effort is rewarded with a marriage to the most eligible of English bachelors. Austen shows that Elizabeth’s linguistic authority even extends to successfully transforming some of her future husband’s own communicative practices, as he drops moralizing and superior stances to be more open and polite in conversation. The ending chapter, however, holds a surprisingly more pessimistic outlook regarding the possibilities for self-expression and agency attained through speech. One might assume that as the nineteenth-century progressed and more opportunities for women opened, their speech strategies would expand, that the metaphorical linguistic “corset”—that socially and culturally constructed system of language norms—would loosen, allowing for more diverse and innovative tactics in social interaction. But George Eliot’s final novel reminds us that history develops unevenly and that while the rules governing social interaction might shift or evolve, they never fully disappear.
Chapter Two: Elizabeth Bennet: A Model of Humorous Provocation and Politeness

It is difficult to imagine, but existing records indicate that Jane Austen was not always a skillful conversationalist. Austen’s young neighbor, Charlotte-Maria Middleton, noted: “her keen sense of humour I quite remember, it oozed out very much like Mr. Bennett’s…We saw her often. She was a most kind and enjoyable person to Children but somewhat stiff and cold to strangers” (Family Record 178). Another neighbor of Austen, Mary Russell Mitford, writes a similar account of the author, describing her as a rigid, silent figure, more likely to prop up a wall than engage others in conversation:

[T]ill ‘Pride and Prejudice’ showed what a gracious gem was hidden in that unbending case, she was no more regarded in society than a poker or a fire screen or any other thin, upright piece of wood or iron that fills its corner in peace and quiet. The case is very different now; she is still a poker but a poker of whom every one is afraid. It must be confessed that this silent observation from such an observer is formidable…a wit, a delineator of character, who does not talk, is terrific indeed (Jane Austen: A Family Record 198-199).

Both critical acquaintances contrast Austen’s reticence to the “humour” and “wit” in Pride and Prejudice, the most lively and humorous of her works—the most unlike the author, herself. It is also interesting to note that Mary Russell Mitford attaches a certain amount of fear while being in the presence Austen, an author capable of employing her wit to delineate characters with sharp precision. If Mitford and other neighbors found Austen’s pen somewhat frightening, it is with good reason, as humor often functions as a linguistic strategy aimed at asserting one’s sense of power. Alternately, humor can also work as a strategy of solidarity, one that marks a speaker’s interest in aligning with other people in interactions. In Pride and Prejudice one may find humor used for both of these ends by the character Elizabeth Bennet.
Many readers and critics (Rachel Brownstein, Carole Moses, Marvin Mudrick, among others) have stressed the lively wit of Elizabeth Bennet as a sign of her individuality and linguistic freedom, but her use of irony and wit operate in various ways that often point to a more nuanced form of agency at work in her dialogue. In conversations, humor serves Elizabeth Bennet in several critical ways: it allows her to emphasize her opinions without sounding unnecessarily direct or didactic, it bolsters her alliances and relationships with other characters, it partially shields her vulnerability to the scorn of characters like Darcy, and ultimately, it highlights a finely tuned skill in critical interpretation. Elizabeth’s speech also happens to be curbed with positive politeness forms (i.e. boosters such as “oh!” and facilitative questions) that aim to build solidarity with others and place her on more equal footing with interlocutors of higher social status like Bingley and Darcy. Politeness enables Elizabeth to maintain a less vulnerable stance in interactions and to show that she can capably navigate the linguistic norms for proper feminine behavior. Her speech, therefore, works to project an optimistic model of expressive individualism that balances self-expression with self-governance without evincing much strain for working to achieve this equilibrium.

**Conduct Literature: How to be Humorous (or not)**

In late-eighteenth and nineteenth century England the cultural construction of women as “ladies” exerted a great influence on notions of propriety, behavior, and correctness. Conduct literature promulgated stereotypes of femininity that could be taken up and showcased through dress, comportment, and—importantly—speech. Middle-class women entering the heterosexual market were frequently instructed to project a modest reserve that would help them to attract a
husband and their speech, to mirror this modesty, was expected to be polite, succinct, and supportive (Yeazell 33). The female conversationalist who surfaces from the pages of self-help and advice literature at this time tends to translate into an idealized, not quite real, archetype—one who only rarely shows a sense of humor. It would be difficult to measure the extent of influence this literature actually had on women at the time, especially considering the fact that contradictory advice was given by various authors, as well as the fact that other forms of social control—those not written down on the page—were in operation. Still, the instructions for women’s speech found in these books was widely circulated and can illuminate how some of the societal pressures regarding courtship and femininity became manifest in expectations for communication.

The topic of humor was quite popular in women’s conduct literature during Austen’s time and, as critic Audrey Bilger points out, the debates within it “mainly revolved around questions of morality and control” (Laughing Feminism 15). A woman’s humor in conversation might be characterized as trivial folly on the one hand or, on the other, unattractively aggressive. Then, as today, laughter had the potential to destabilize social hierarchies and underscore uncomfortable truths about people and their contexts. The conservative conduct book writer, James Fordyce, objected to wit because it drew unnecessary attention to oneself, thereby inciting a woman’s vanity. It was also, he writes, capable of offending one’s audience:

Most certainly [wit] alone can never be a steady light; and too probably it is often a fatal one. Of those who have resigned themselves to its guidance, how few has it not betrayed into great indiscretions, at least, by inflaming their thirst of applause; by rendering them little nice in their choice of company; by seducing them into strokes of satire, too offensive to the persons against whom they were levelled, not to be repelled upon the authors with full vengeance; and finally, by making them, in consequence of that heat which produces, and that vanity which fosters it, forgetful of those cool and moderate rules that ought to regulate their conduct! (96)
Fordyce’s warning makes plain the evaluative component of humor that invites, in a somewhat risky manner, an audience’s active participation in conversation. He also boldly underscores wit’s provocative association with flirtation through his choice of words: “indiscretions,” “inflaming,” “thirst,” “seducing,” and “heat.” Fordyce’s *Sermons* bolsters a dichotomy between women who aim to be “the entertainer of an evening and a partner for life” (193), leaving little interpretive room for women who may have motives for humorous discourse other than sex or marriage. These kinds of expectations and the patriarchal ideology bolstering them would have made speech a fraught social space for women.

Other conduct writers, less stringent in their views, accepted wit as long as women softened its bite—particularly when conversing with men. For instance, Thomas Gisborne, in 1797, writes that a husband might find wit attractive in a wife as long as it remained tempered with gentleness and modesty:

> [I]t is not the wit [a husband] dislikes, but the abuse of it; it is the vanity, the ambition, the forward demeanour, and the sarcastic spirit by which it is accompanied. Let the wit be divested of these casual appendages; let it be characterized by gentleness and modesty, let it be exhibited only in the playful sallies of good nature; and she who is endowed with it will commonly find, that it holds in her husband’s esteem a due place among the attractions by which she is endeared to him (268).

Henry Kett, like Thomas Gisborne, writing in 1809, advises women who “excite mirth” to never do so at the “expense of benevolence or decorum” (*Emily: A Moral Tale* 277). Hester Chapone, too, echoes this sentiment, writing that women’s raillery should be delicate and good-natured:

> I would not condemn you to perpetual seriousness—on the contrary, I delight in a joyous temper...Delicate and good-natured raillery amongst equal friends, if pointed only against such trifling errors as the owner can heartily join to laugh at...is both agreeable and useful; but then it must be offered in perfect kindness and sincere good humour (168).
It is worth noting that Chapone follows this passage by suggesting young women treat men in the same manner as they would their young female friends, inferring that humor, if agreeable, can be extended towards the opposite sex—a more liberal view for that time period. Because Chapone emphasizes the importance of sincerity and wit used with good reason in conversations, her approach to women’s speech more closely aligns with Jane Austen’s than other conduct writers. Literary critic Patricia Howell Michaelson links this same authorial connection directly to the character of Elizabeth Bennet in *Pride and Prejudice* writing, “[Elizabeth’s] model may perhaps be closest to the politeness defined by Hester Chapone in *Letters on the Improvement of the Mind*…Like Chapone, Austen invites her reader to practice a form of politeness that recognizes the duty to please but combines that with the need to utilize both reason and wit” (207). This balance of pleasing through politeness and humor surfaces quite clearly in her dialogue which is peppered with both polite linguistic forms and quips.

Though one may find a solid connection between the ideals of Hester Chapone and Austen’s own models of propriety, her relationship to the conduct book was not straightforward. For instance, Emma Woodhouse discovers, to her own detriment, that wit can be a dangerous conversational strategy: when callously used to insult Miss Bates during a picnic, Emma suffers from social repercussions of the kind conduct writers invoked when warning of pointed jests. And yet, in *Pride and Prejudice*, James Fordyce, bears the shame of being made the preferential reading matter of the bumbling Mr. Collins. Paula Byrne argues that the key to the paradox is the distinction between theory and practice, writing, Jane Austen “valued good manners in action, but scorned those who did not practice what they preached” (298). More than this, though, her novels illustrate that codes of conduct cannot be reduced to a firm set of rules.
Austen’s texts present a society filled with characters who do best when they are able to practice as well as interpret irony and civility in their discourse. This is most evident in *Pride and Prejudice*. Well-meaning characters who fail to grasp irony—Mrs. Bennet and Mr. Collins, for example—may fare well in the narrative, but are hardly given the respect they would like, while characters who may value ironic stances but lack civility—Mr. Wickham, for example—suffer for their disrespect and insincerity. As critic Paul Sweeten notes, it is “only by displaying an appreciation for irony within the acceptable code of social behavior [that] characters are able to meet the high standard required to escape the ridicule of Austen’s narrator, and indeed of her heroines” (192). Austen’s characters—especially her heroines-- often walk a fine line between balancing humor and remaining properly polite: sensible characters must be able to laugh at the seemingly arbitrary social laws which govern their world without directly contravening those same laws.

In many ways, the novel seems to celebrate laughter. From the beginning of *Pride and Prejudice*, with its well-known first sentence, Austen makes clear that hers is a novel exploring the ironies of human perception and expectations, particularly in the context of courtship: “It is a truth universally acknowledged, that a single man in possession of a good fortune must be in want of a wife” (3). Austen, here, ironically plays with the words “truth” and “want” and seems to laugh at the kind of authority this philosophical-sounding maxim touts. And yet humor has its limitations. Lydia Bennet, the character who laughs most in the novel, signals her lack of self-reflection through excessive and trivial laughter. Mr. Bennet, whose wit influences Elizabeth’s own conversational style, seems happier producing cutting statements directed towards his family than spending time with them. These characters, among others, emphasize the risk and pressures of interpretation that accompany humor in discourse.
Why Humor? The Linguistic Take

The conduct literature from Austen’s time makes it clear that women risked more than men when introducing wit into their speech. If wit failed them, not only was their reputation at stake, but their ability to make a desirable match in marriage and secure a future could be jeopardized. This social risk has affected generations of women so that linguists and psychologists from the last century have attempted to explain in various ways why women are more hesitant than men to use humor. For instance, in 1905 Sigmund Freud argued that women do not need a sense of humor because they have fewer strong feelings to repress (95). In 1975 Robin Lakoff, in her influential and highly debated book, *Language and Women’s Place*, brought humor to the forefront of discussions on gender and speech by baldly claiming that “women don’t tell jokes” (81). She explained this by writing:

> [J]oke telling brings the teller and hearers together. You are nervous to some extent while a joke is being told: as the teller, for fear you’ll get it wrong; as the hearer, for fear you won’t get it. Both of these possible responses are dangerous because they would inhibit the formation of the bond, making it difficult or impossible for hearer and teller to relate satisfactorily to each other. (100)

Though broad in her claim, Lakoff’s explanation underscores one of the most consistent stereotypes about women today: they tend to be more supportive in their conversational style while men are more competitive (Fishman; Coates, among others). Echoing this assertion, linguist Mary Crawford, in 1989, provided questionnaires designed to gain a better understanding of the types of humor women use and their perceptions about gender differences in the use of humor and found that women’s humor “involves not only creative spontaneity but connectedness and compassion; it invites self-disclosure and reciprocal sharing of perspectives; it is dependent on the immediate social context” (160). More recent findings of sociolinguists
suggest that when women do use humor it is often in the form of anecdotes about one’s own, or one’s friends’ personal experiences (Hay 714). Building a sense of solidarity with interlocutors is a key aim for women who use humor in their speech—this linguistic strategy can be traced back to Austen’s time and it is one of the reasons we find Elizabeth Bennet exercising it-- but this is not its only social function.

When a speaker attempts humor in conversation they engage in a kind of social risk-taking. That is, the speaker risks being misunderstood by the interlocutor and so there must be a social reward for correctly using humor as a strategy. The most commonly identified function of humor has been viewed as the desire to build solidarity with others (Hay 710). Whenever a person’s attempt at humor succeeds, their status within the given audience is often positively affected. They have amused the hearer(s) and so demonstrated that they share a common idea of what is funny. This serves to create or maintain solidarity. But humor, also, has been analyzed as a means for: controlling others (Martineau and Collinson), creating conflict (Martineau), and coping (Pogrebin and Poole). The flip-side to building solidarity is asserting power through jest. Though solidarity and power may at first glance appear to be opposites, linguist Deborah Tannen, reminds us that each entails the other (167). To be powerful one must have the support of others behind them. Solidarity and power also emphasize the interpretive and evaluative load given to an audience through discourse.

Though humor serves a number of purposes in any social situation, this chapter focuses on the broad categories of solidarity and power—the two strategies researchers most often link to women and humor. Linguist Jennifer Hay has helpfully pointed out various functions of humor which help to clarify the complexity of irony and wit found in the language of Elizabeth Bennet. According to Hay, when a speaker employs humor for the overall purpose of building solidarity,
they often do so to 1) share something of themselves with others, 2) to highlight similarities or capitalize on shared experiences, 3) to clarify and maintain social boundaries from a position of inclusion, and 4) to tease (717-721). Each of these aims works to consolidate a speaker’s sense of social inclusion, whereas those who use humor to assert their own authority often succeed in excluding others. The power function of humor can be exercised to 1) foster conflict, 2) to control or influence the behavior of listener(s), 3) to challenge and set social boundaries, and 4) to tease (Hay 721-726). The inherent criticism in humor of this kind is what conduct writers like James Fordyce abhorred in women’s speech. It would be one thing to gently tease a friend or relative in a group of familiar faces, but another entirely to openly mock or challenge someone who, by all accounts, should be considered more authoritative. The critical bent is one reason why some researchers, as recently as 1992, have found that women, still, are more likely to use humor when by themselves and tend to avoid it in mixed gender groups (Goodman 296).

Looking at these strategies of humor helps to understand the kinds of social agency achieved through specific kinds of discourse. Though much of this research has been filtered through a modern lens, it allows for context-specific analysis of women’s speech in nineteenth-century literature. When looking at Elizabeth’s various forms of humor in Pride and Prejudice, one may find that she employs wit for cooperative conversations and to assert her individuality. Sometimes she achieves both of these interactional stances at the same time through her wit. Austen situates her heroine as both a member of an enclosed social community, aware of how conversations must be self-governed for the sake of that community, but also as a character whose subjectivity is reflected in her assertive self-expression. Her wit works to achieve both social inclusion and distinctiveness.
Elizabeth Bennet’s Wit as a Form of Solidarity

At the beginning of *Pride and Prejudice*, Mrs. Bennet reminds us that Elizabeth is, “not half so handsome as Jane, nor half so good-humoured as Lydia” (4) but it stands that Mr. Bennet distinguishes Elizabeth from his other daughters, singling her out on the sole basis of her wit: “They are all silly and ignorant, like other girls; but Lizzy has something more of quickness than her sisters” (4). Elizabeth’s “quickness” wins over Mr. Bennet just as it eventually wins over Mr. Darcy later in the narrative. She is rewarded for her assertiveness, for it lands her the most eligible of men and she becomes mistress of Pemberley, a great country estate that reinforces the patriarchal and class order in England. At the end of the novel, when Elizabeth asks Darcy why he chose to marry her, he responds, “‘For the liveliness of your mind, I did’” (275). Her quickness of mind, her honesty, her self-possession all signal an alternative form of desirability that, on the surface, challenges the passive, feminine figure found in much of conduct literature. And yet Elizabeth’s wit does allow her to relate with other characters and build with them a firm sense of solidarity, offering a unique form of politeness that conduct literature would certainly approve of. As much as her humor has been cited as a form of defense or as a source of power, it also works in important ways to show that Elizabeth is one who values her friendships, her family, and more broadly, her community. If Elizabeth’s witty speech is not implicitly setting her apart from lesser characters like Lydia and her mother, it is often demonstrating how connected she is to others, like her sister Jane.

Early in the novel Austen figuratively links the idea of Elizabeth’s independence with moral strength so that her liveliness is brought to good purpose. When Elizabeth walks across
the muddy fields to Netherfield by herself in order to nurse a bed-ridden Jane her assertive act provokes Miss Bingley to charge her with “an abominable sort of conceited independence” (27). In this scene Austen illustrates exactly how Elizabeth’s “independence,” like her spirited speech, is performed for a greater good—to generously connect with another person so that beside the arrogant Miss Bingley, Elizabeth’s impulsiveness reads as an admirable asset. Elizabeth’s “untidy hair, so blowsy!” and “dirty petticoat” and “brightened eyes” (27-8) visually represent the same individualism and active mind that are voiced through her ironic speech.

Elizabeth’s sense of irony, like the narrator’s, is evident at the very start of *Pride and Prejudice*. One of her first pieces of dialogue, ironic in intention, is shared with Jane in the privacy of their home when they discuss the qualities of Jane’s suitor, Bingley. Elizabeth insists Bingley is “handsome…which a young man ought likewise to be, if he possibly can. His character is thereby complete” (11). In a linguistic move similar to the narrator’s opening line, Elizabeth plays with the familiar expectations attached to courtship and reverses them to show a critical awareness of how one may be superficially judged as a future partner in marriage and more specifically, how she herself has been judged by Darcy to be lacking in looks. Though her comment underscores a lingering slight, it also works to engage Jane and reveal a shared appreciation of Bingley, an appreciation that reinforces their similar points of view. Elizabeth wraps up this portion of their discussion in a teasing, manner, saying to Jane: “I give you leave to like him. You have liked many a stupider person” to which Jane responds, “Dear Lizzy!” (11). The solidarity between the two sisters is made evident through Elizabeth’s teasing banter and Jane’s friendly retort and casual address, though Elizabeth’s “I give you leave” does hint at an authoritative edge in the relationship. The fact that she also seems to be controlling the flow and topic of conversation signals her authority as well.
If Elizabeth asserts some measure of authority and an ironic stance with Jane in conversation then it is in great part because the risk of losing face with this sister is rather low. Several linguists (Gibbs, 1986; Tolmach Lakoff, 1990) have argued that common ground, in the form of shared beliefs and knowledge, is important to understanding irony because it constrains the possible interpretations that the hearer could give to the speaker’s utterance (Pexman and Zvaigzne 144). Speakers who use irony, in other words, are more likely to direct it among close friends in order to lessen the risk of losing face. Had Elizabeth given the same statement, “You have liked many a stupider person,” to a more distant acquaintance such as Maria Lucas, she would risk offending her and risk appearing overly critical and either unaware or insensitive to the communal expectations for politeness. Instead, Elizabeth’s irony with Jane highlights a mutual understanding and trust. It is a strategy that Elizabeth uses with Jane throughout the novel to maintain their sense of solidarity. Even when news of Jane’s engagement to Bingley appears to have the potential of lessening their sisterly ties, Elizabeth keeps her irony intact, using it to convey her appreciation of Bingley and well-wishes for Jane: "If you were to give me forty such men, I never could be so happy as you. Till I have your disposition, your goodness, I never can have your happiness. No, no, let me shift for myself; and, perhaps, if I have very good luck, I may meet with another Mr. Collins in time." (253). The repetition of “no” and exaggerated qualifiers “perhaps,” “may,” “if I have very good luck,” and “in time” make Elizabeth’s irony quite clear. The last thing Elizabeth wants is to marry a man like Mr. Collins and so her statement also works to deflect any further questions Jane might raise about Elizabeth’s own unmarried state.
Elizabeth employs irony in a similar fashion when speaking with her Aunt Gardiner. For instance, when Mrs. Gardiner expresses a concern for Elizabeth’s attachment to Wickham, which is based on his lack of fortune, Elizabeth reassures her in a teasing manner: “Well, then, you need not be under any alarm. I will take care of myself, and of Mr. Wickham too. He shall not be in love with me, if I can prevent it” (106). Elizabeth’s ironic response works, here, to trivialize the relationship between herself and Wickham as well as show her aunt that she understands her point of view concerning the monetary motives involved in marriage. Though her humor certainly signals a desire for friendly rapport, it also can be read as a deflection of the topic at hand. When her aunt replies, “Elizabeth, you are not serious now” she responds with an apology: “I beg your pardon, I will try again” (106). This short exchange illustrates how Elizabeth’s wit does not always hit the intended mark but that she is quick to show deference to one with whom she wishes to be socially aligned. The fact that Elizabeth feels comfortable enough to tease her aunt does, however, suggest that they already do share a sense of solidarity.

Interestingly, most of Elizabeth’s raillery that aims to build camaraderie revolves around the topic of courtship and social conventions related to that endeavor. Her humor, in a general sense, then, signals a firm understanding of, and a firm footing within, the community she lives. Though she may put more linguistic effort into building her relationships with Jane and Mrs. Gardiner, her humor reveals an underlying form of solidarity already existent with most other characters in the novel, as they share common knowledge of the social customs that their shape interactions. For instance, in the first few pages of the novel we see Elizabeth employ humor to connect with other characters when she shares the story of Mr. Darcy’s public dismissal of her--- “‘She [Elizabeth] is tolerable, but not handsome enough to tempt me’” Darcy informs Bingley within earshot of Elizabeth (9). At one level, her decision to “tell the story…with great spirit
among her friends” (9) seems unnecessary. Why share such a failure? But her self-deprecation turns the joke back at Darcy so that others will laugh with her rather than at her. She gains the support of her friends and family so that by her next social outing, the general verdict of those around her, as expressed by Mrs. Bennet, is that: “‘everybody says that [Darcy] is eat up with pride’” (14). In this example of Elizabeth’s humor, it is clear that solidarity and power are entwined through the dynamics of Austen’s community.

Critic William Deresiewicz has insightfully argued that *Pride and Prejudice* is, more than anything else, a narrative about community: a story of communal expectations, communal conventions, and communal activities (503). Elizabeth, who Austen places at the center of this community, is only able to mock social convention because she is a member of the group that upholds it and has a thorough, if critical, understanding of it. In one of the more interesting scenes of the novel, Austen implicitly shows how social convention and irony work in tandem as Elizabeth and Darcy dance together, physically attuned to one another and executing socially practiced steps, while they, also, challenge each other’s wits. Austen describes most of their initial discourse through narration, as if its conventionality fails to warrant actual dialogue:

> She made some slight observation on the dance. He replied, and was again silent. After a pause of some minutes, she addressed him a second time with: --‘It is *your* turn to say something now, Mr. Darcy. I talked about the dance and you ought to make some kind of remark on the size of the room, or the number of couples.’ (68)

Elizabeth, in this scene, supports the cooperative norm by putting forth more effort than Darcy to express standard civility through small-talk. But when the conventional opening fails, Elizabeth turns the convention to her advantage by mocking it in an ironic fashion and actually accomplishes what the conventional language couldn’t: Darcy begins to engage with her. Yet, without their shared knowledge of the expected social protocol required of a setting such as the
one they find themselves in, her humor would be lost on him and the solidarity gained through the irony would not be achieved.

Throughout the novel, Elizabeth’s quick wit is set against Darcy’s seriousness. In terms of gender and social position they also are at odds. But for all of Darcy’s staidness, Austen shows that the two protagonists share a sense of humor—one that bridges many of their other differences. Critic Elvira Casal points out: “We never see Darcy laugh, but his smiles—which usually take place in the course of his exchanges with Elizabeth—suggest both a mind that is as quick as hers and a growing receptivity to Elizabeth’s love of laughter” (5). Though Darcy tends to explain himself rather than laugh at himself, he has no problem throwing a quip back at Elizabeth if given the chance. For instance, when, in a heated exchange, Elizabeth baldly tells Darcy, “‘[Y]our defect is a propensity to hate everybody,’” Darcy replies in kind, saying, “‘And yours,’ he replied with a smile, ‘is willfully to misunderstand them’” (43). That Austen tags Darcy’s retort with “a smile” is important, for it makes his underlying intention seem less antagonistic, and more of an effort at solidarity. He is one of the few characters who actually matches Elizabeth’s wit, showing humor to be one of the important qualities of mind that consolidates their relationship and bolsters one’s conviction that she is Darcy’s equal in all but social status.

**Elizabeth Bennet’s Wit as a Form of Authority**

Elizabeth’s humor works quite often to develop a rapport with those around her, but as evidenced in several of the examples shown above, solidarity may inadvertently draw social lines which reinforce an individual or group’s sense of authority. As much as Elizabeth is entrenched in the social practices of her community, she, like others in the novel, is also a distinct character.
with a unique subjectivity and her ironic language reflects that distinction. Her humor presents readers with a model of self-expressive individualism of the kind Nancy Armstrong describes in *How Novels Think*, wherein novelists created narratives that, “set the body on a collision course with limits that the old society had placed on the individual’s options for self-fulfillment, transforming the body from an indicator of rank to the container of a unique subjectivity” (4). In displaying Elizabeth’s wit, her intelligence, and her energy, Austen distinguishes Elizabeth as a character capable of shifting the social order—after all, she does marry up into Darcy’s strata despite her family’s lower social position and in so doing, transforms, as Armstrong claims, “former signs of rank” that had sustained a rigid class system, into “individualistic forms of expression” that improve both parties who enter into marriage (48). It is growth through contradictions, friction, and arguing that pushes both characters to gradually lessen their strongholds to specific communities and meet one another somewhere in the middle.

In the first half of the novel Austen places Darcy and Elizabeth in a number of contexts that emphasize the mental distance that separates them, while the second half of the novel reverses this and the two, who grow increasingly attuned to one another, are often kept apart by external circumstances. Before the characters can openly align with one another, however, Austen shows they must clash and break through one another’s misconstrued perceptions—a feat accomplished through pointed humor and irony.

While laughing *with* others or laughter at oneself frequently indicates a shared understanding or belief between speaker and audience, laughing *at* another person is a strategy of power and it is one Elizabeth employs with Darcy. Had Darcy not wounded her pride at their first meeting, Elizabeth’s interactional style with him would likely have been more deferential, more of the supportive kind she shows to Wickham when they first meet and acknowledge a
mutual disliking for Darcy. The fact that most of Elizabeth’s comments to Wickham affirm his own words is an early sign that their romance is doomed. Her supportive exclamations—“Good heavens!” “Indeed!” “This is quite shocking!” and “How strange!”—correspond to Wickham’s equally cooperative replies—“Yes,” “Oh, no!” “It is wonderful” (57-61) which suggests they both hear precisely what they want to hear from each other. As William Deresiewicz points out, “[Their] exchange becomes a kind of positive feedback loop, a conversational form of circular reasoning (“Darcy is wicked, therefore he does wicked things, therefore he is wicked”) (521) and it hardly pushes Elizabeth to reconsider her personal biases as Darcy’s exchanges eventually do. Solidarity, in this instance, is shown to be unhelpfully insulating and makes no real impression on Elizabeth, except that she later remembers the exchange as one with shades of impropriety: “She perfectly remembered everything that had passed in conversation between Wickham and herself, in their first evening at Mr. Philip’s…She was now struck with the impropriety of such communications to a stranger, and wondered it had escaped her before” (150). It is only after Darcy reveals to Elizabeth his past history with Wickham that she understands he had only the appearance of sincerity and of moral substance in that exchange.

Though Elizabeth’s verbal sparring with Darcy would likely have been labelled by some conduct writers such as James Fordyce as “improper,” Austen privileges it above the self-satisfying speech of Wickham because it challenges both figures to take stock of their value systems. This linguistic strategy that honors directness and reason can be located in the more progressive work of Mary Wollstonecraft. Written during the French Revolution, Wollstonecraft’s A Vindication of the Rights of Women (1792) argues that women should abandon the trivial pursuits and false sentiments that society values and instead be educated to use their reason and thereby prove themselves equal to men. Though her rhetoric is more caustic
than any of the language found in Austen’s novels, Wollstonecraft, like Austen, identifies humor in *A Vindication* as an important strategy for illuminating a woman’s critical reasoning skills, as she writes:

[I]f a judicious person, with some turn for humour, would read several [novels] to a young girl, and point out both by tones, and apt comparisons with pathetic incidents and heroic characters in history, how foolishly and ridiculously they caricatured human nature, just opinions might be substituted instead of romantic sentiments. (135)

Elizabeth, like her father, finds pleasure in this same kind of humor that delights in calling attention to “anything ridiculous” (9). Mr. Bennet’s general philosophy, that “we live, but to make sport for our neighbours, and laugh at them in our turn” (263) shows a critical awareness of the ways in which characters think and behave. But Elizabeth and her father’s wit provoke different reactions depending on context: when Elizabeth laughs with her father at the follies of neighbors, friends, and family the two grow closer through their shared experience and understanding, but when Elizabeth aims her wit towards those, like Darcy, who first connects laughter to a lack of respect, the result is ensuing conflict.

The idea that any one character is above being laughed at, for Elizabeth, is itself laughable. In an early scene at Netherfield, Miss Bingley claims that she could not possibly tease or laugh at Mr. Darcy: “‘Tease calmness and temper and presence of mind! No, no—I feel he may defy us there. And as to laughter, we will not expose ourselves, if you please, by attempting to laugh without a subject’” (42). Elizabeth’s response is telling: “‘Mr. Darcy is not to be laughed at!’ cried Elizabeth. ‘That is an uncommon advantage, and uncommon I hope it will continue, for it would be a great loss to me to have many such acquaintance. I dearly love a laugh’” (42). Miss Bingley’s statement holds the implicit assumption that Darcy’s social and intellectual superiority is beyond reproof while Elizabeth’s reply counters that assumption and underscores her belief in the power of laughter. By suggesting they should laugh at Darcy,
Elizabeth implies that she knows his defects in character well enough to point them out and create, through critical laughter, a linguistic sign of personal intimacy and authority.

Elizabeth, herself, admits to using humor as a strategy of power to her friend Charlotte early in the novel: "But if [Darcy eavesdrops] any more I shall certainly let him know that I see what he is about. He has a very satirical eye, and if I do not begin by being impertinent myself, I shall soon grow afraid of him" (18). Elizabeth’s defense against Darcy’s “satirical eye” is her own admitted “impertinent” offense put into motion soon after the tactic is declared. At the same social gathering, when Sir William Lucas insists Darcy and Elizabeth dance together, she politely refuses but Mr. Darcy, “with grave propriety, requested to be allowed the honour of her hand” so that Elizabeth responds, smiling, “Mr. Darcy is all politeness” (20). This piece of verbal irony is sufficiently vague enough, like a lot of feminine irony, to be read straight as a polite refusal to dance, but it also harkens back to Darcy’s previously impolite comment that she was “not handsome enough to tempt” him. It highlights the fact that sincerity and politeness do not always go hand-in-hand: though Darcy may politely offer to dance under the duress of Sir Lucas, his politeness does not necessitate a desire to dance. The dramatic irony Austen indulges here is that Darcy does, indeed, want to dance with Elizabeth but remains unaware that her ironic independence is motivated by antipathy towards him. Contrary to the “satirical eye” Elizabeth attributes to Darcy, her own eyes are described by Darcy in the same scene as: “a fine pair of eyes in the face of a pretty woman” (20). The perceptual disconnect between these two continues to build when Darcy and Elizabeth are pushed together at Netherfield because of Jane’s illness.

It is at Netherfield that the bulk of Elizabeth’s ironic jabs towards Darcy occur. It is, here, too, that we can begin to see the two characters shift their language use as they respond to
the verbal tests at hand. In one of their most dynamic encounters, Elizabeth and Darcy debate the topic of laughter in a way that shows how humor and irony permit power to be exerted, shared, and undercut. Throughout the scene Elizabeth maintains her distance and dominance by throwing ironic comments at Darcy, while he falls back on his privileged education to moralize to her in general terms. But as the two argue, they begin to adopt one another’s speech styles which signals a budding effort to mentally align with one another.

At the start of their disagreement, Darcy readily acknowledges the punitive effect of laughter when it is aimed against someone: “‘The wisest and the best of men—nay, the wisest and the best of their actions may be rendered ridiculous by a person whose first object in life is a joke’” (42). Darcy aligns himself with “wisest and the best of men” while implicitly placing Elizabeth in the more demeaning role of jokester. Elizabeth responds to this barb directly and differentiates the kind of humor she enjoys from the baser form of laughter he refers to: “‘Certainly,’ replied Elizabeth—‘there are such people, but I hope I am not one of them. I hope I never ridicule what is wise or good. Follies and nonsense, whims and inconsistencies, do divert me, I own, and I laugh at them whenever I can. But these, I suppose, are precisely what you are without’” (43). She aligns herself with him by agreeing to the initial part of his statement and the italics on them and do emphasize her desire to draw a contrast between herself and the callous jokester he invokes. Elizabeth also couches her language a bit more after being challenged by Darcy, using qualifiers “I hope,” “I own,” and “I suppose” which soften her irony. Darcy responds, as he frequently does, in a more general and didactic manner: “Perhaps that is not possible for anyone. But it has been the study of my life to avoid those weaknesses which often expose a strong understanding to ridicule” (43). Jan Fergus, insightfully, notes that in this scene, Darcy’s fallback defense is to generalize, for “Generalization is the dominant discourse of
eighteenth-century moralists, almost exclusively a male discourse” (106). Any character’s language too sure in its authority is suspect in an Austen novel, and Darcy’s high moral ground here registers an inflated sense of self that Elizabeth mocks when she responds to him, saying, “Such as vanity and pride” (43).

In a manner similar to the way Elizabeth differentiates her preferred form of humor, Darcy distinguishes between the two terms “vanity and “pride,” saying: “‘Yes, vanity is a weakness indeed. But pride—where there is a real superiority of mind, pride will be always under good regulation’” (43). At this, Austen tells us “Elizabeth turned away to hide a smile” (43). Following a code of proper politeness, Elizabeth hides her laughter for his sake. Her following remark, on the surface, is also properly polite, but biting in its irony: “I am perfectly convinced…that Mr. Darcy has no defect. He owns it himself without disguise” (43). The statement is sufficiently civil and given in such a way that, as Brown and Levinson put it, when describing irony: “it is not possible to attribute only one clear communicative intention to the act. In other words, the actor, leaves himself an ‘out’ by providing himself with a number of defensible interpretations” (211). Elizabeth is adept at employing irony which stays within polite bounds of discourse, but the pointedness in these particular words is not lost on Darcy. In a show of some solidarity, Darcy abandons the high-minded rhetoric and the generalizations he began the debate with and begins to use language that contains more qualifiers, more personal pronouns and language that resembles Elizabeth’s initial defense for herself:

“No,” said Darcy, “I have made no such pretension. I have faults enough, but they are not, I hope, of understanding. My temper I dare 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 offences against myself. My feelings are not puffed about with every attempt to move them. My temper would perhaps be called resentful. My good opinion once lost, is lost for ever.” (43)
Just as Elizabeth earlier stated “there are such people, but I hope I am not one of them,” Darcy, here, echoes her by saying “I have faults enough, but they are not, I hope, of understanding.” His speech also contains qualifications and hedges such as, “I ought,” “I believe,” and “perhaps”—which marks a strong contrast to his initial retorts that showed no vacillation or tentativeness. Elizabeth’s irony is so effective at deflecting the authority Darcy assumes through his moralizing generalizations that he abandons his rhetoric to employ hers which is more personal.

This is a small, but important, scene that demonstrates how, through humor, Elizabeth tests Darcy and how Darcy comes to test Elizabeth but, despite their discord, each modifies their language in order to curb the antagonism crackling between them. Through their verbal sparring they begin to align, first their speech, and eventually their perceptions shift of one another, showing the reforming effects laughter can produce.

The kind of power Elizabeth wields through humor subverts the rigidity of the class system she is a part of; for, despite her status as the second daughter to a man whose estate is entailed to a distant cousin, she verbally challenges and changes a man whose fortune and birthright outrank all other characters in the novel. But speech does have its limitations for Elizabeth. Though she achieves stances of solidarity and authority through her humor, they occur only within the confines of conversation. Those characters whose speech carries the most weight in the novel are those characters who possess the power to act on their words.

From the first page of the novel, Austen makes it plain that Mr. Bennet, the family patriarch, controls what information and what actions his family members may undertake. When Mrs. Bennet and her daughters ask questions wanting to learn of Mr. Bingley’s arrival in town, it is Mr. Bennet they go to, the sole man who controls what counts as ‘intelligence.’ His word is
what signifies and what effects change in their lives. This point is elaborated when Mr. Bennet must refuse Mr. Collins’s proposal for Elizabeth. When Elizabeth rejects Mr. Collins’s marriage proposal he remains incredulous so that she must refuse him several times:

“...I am very sensible of the honour of your proposals, but it is impossible for me to do otherwise than decline them” (80)
“I am perfectly serious in my refusal. You could not make me happy, and I am convinced that I am the last woman in the world who would make you so” (80)
“I thank you again and again for the honour you have done me in your proposals, but to accept them is absolutely impossible. My feelings in every respect forbid it. Can I speak plainer?” (81)

Though she speaks quite plainly and reiterates her refusal in several ways, Collins will not accept her word until Mr. Bennet offers his: “‘An unhappy alternative is before you, Elizabeth. From this day you must be a stranger to one of your parents. Your mother will never see you again if you do not marry Mr. Collins, and I will never see you again if you do’” (83). As Susan Fraiman nicely puts it: “Like a woman writing under a male pseudonym, Elizabeth’s credibility depends on the father’s signature” (72). Elizabeth’s words hold only a fraction of the actual weight her father and future husband carry. Though she may gain discursive power by allying and identifying with the type of wit her father employs, that authority remains contingent on the receptivity of other characters. This is why Elizabeth, like other female characters in the novel, works on multiple levels to show she is a cooperative speaker.

Elizabeth Bennet’s Positive Politeness

One of the most striking things about Austen’s characterization of women’s speech in *Pride and Prejudice* is her diminution of linguistic traits that work to avoid conflict. Elizabeth, like other female characters in the novel, has very few hedges in her speech. This stylistic
feature suggests that though female characters may show concern with the degree to which they are being heard, the content of their speech is not something they are worried about. Elizabeth’s direct and challenging statements also reflect this bold approach to language.

In many ways, however, Elizabeth is attuned to how she must manage politeness with sincerity. Like her humor, which works to build solidarity, one can find stylistic forms in her dialogue that also point to a concern for supporting others in interaction. In this regard, Elizabeth follows one of the most prevalent message in conduct literature of Austen’s time: please others through conversation.

In 1759, Thomas Marriott wrote an entire book on pleasing titled *Female Conduct: being an essay on the art of pleasing* and in it wrote: “Love, what he [your husband] loves, what he dislikes, disdain /With him, still sympathize, in Joy, or Pain; Mark well, for what, he most esteems himself” (26). Marriott directs his advice towards married women and stresses the supportive role they should take in backing a husband’s interests, giving an early nod toward the growing popularity of a companionate marriage. Writing a bit later, James Fordyce expands upon a similar view, but includes young unmarried women in his directive, whose conversation should “animate the dulness” (93) in social discourse. Samuel Richardson, too, touches on the topic of pleasing in conversation, writing, “Conversation, where it is rightly managed, must be so conducted, as to let each member have a share in the pleasure and applause it affords” (14-15). Instructions such as introducing topics of discussion and allowing others to hold the floor follow the cooperative model which prompted women to please others in their speech.

But the cooperative norm then, as it does today, adhered to the rungs of a hierarchical society. Patricia Howell Michaelson points out that, “The [cooperative] norm assumes that cooperation remains appropriate to the social roles of the participants; turn-taking does not mean
reciprocity when the conversationalists are not equals” (50). Showing proper cooperation, therefore, requires a nuanced understanding of social positioning—this is something Austen shows Elizabeth Bennet to be fairly adept at recognizing. For instance, at the Netherfield Ball, Elizabeth cooperatively introduces several topics for conversation while dancing with Darcy, even though he supplies curt answers and seems to prefer silence. It is through her initiative that they begin to converse and connect with one another. This cooperative norm is also helpful when Elizabeth wants to gloss over her mother’s pointed disrespect to Darcy. In an earlier scene, when her mother makes no pretense in insulting Darcy to his face, Elizabeth takes on the role of mediator: “‘Indeed, mamma, you are mistaken,’ said Elizabeth, blushing for her mother. ‘You quite mistook Mr. Darcy’” (32). She then tries to redirect their conversation, much as she does later in the novel when Bingley and Darcy visit Longbourn and her mother, again, aims an insult to Darcy, telling Bingley: “‘Thank Heaven, [Wickham] has some friends, though, perhaps not so many as he deserves’” (242). Austen writes that Elizabeth “knew this to be levelled at Mr. Darcy…[and] it drew from her…the exertion of speaking, which nothing else had so effectually done before; and she asked Bingley whether he meant to make any stay in the country at present” (242). Recognizing Darcy’s social clout, Elizabeth works cooperatively to show proper respect and a desire to please, effectively separating herself from her impolite mother. Though she challenges Darcy, she also supports him through conversations like this and it is through her careful balance of politeness and provocation that Elizabeth manages to straddle both feminine expectations with individualistic ideals.

In other ways, too, Elizabeth illustrates a willingness to build camaraderie with characters employing specific linguistic forms. For instance, she often asks facilitative questions that support conversation to keep it going. Today, as in Austen’s time, people frequently assess the
strength of a relationship by how much verbal interaction takes place and if talking is one of the key strategies for connecting to others, then, questions serve the important role of generating discussion, for they require a response and ensure at least minimal interaction (Holmes 43). In the novel, female characters ask many more facilitative questions than men—122, while men only ask 25. Of the 122 facilitative questions asked, Elizabeth’s total number comes to 58. Often when Elizabeth asks questions that invite an addressee to speak up, she is practicing politeness and looking for information at the same time. For example, at Hunsford, when Darcy and Elizabeth seem “in danger of sinking into total silence” Elizabeth asks her companion questions meant to engage his interest and satisfy her own. Austen writes that Elizabeth, needing to “think of something” to say and “feeling curious to know what [Darcy] would say on the subject of their hasty departure…” observed: ‘How very suddenly you all quitted Netherfield last November, Mr. Darcy! It must have been a most agreeable surprise to Mr. Bingley…He and his sister were well, I hope, when you left London?’” (129). Though she frames the question in a courteous and even respectful way, Darcy’s answer, as usual, is vague and succinct and so she asks the same question in a different formulation to keep the conversation going: “‘I think I understood that Mr. Bingley has not much idea of ever returning to Netherfield again?’” (130). Cushioned with, “I think I understood,” the question is leading and does, indeed, lead her to a more direct answer. This kind of questioning is not uncommon in the novel. Elizabeth’s supportive elicitations are also frequently directed towards Jane and just as her teasing humor attempts to build solidarity, questions, too, work for this same purpose. Here are a few examples: “What could be more natural than [Bingley] asking you [to dance] again?” (11); “But you—how are you?” (205); “But are you pleased, Jane? Shall you like to have such a brother?” (270). Elizabeth’s questions point to the nurturing relationship the two sisters share and the
interactional effort it takes to establish such a rapport. It also reveals a side to Elizabeth that is not just confrontational, but that is cooperative and friendly-- one that mitigates her more direct and critical statements.

Another linguistic sign of Elizabeth’s supportive discourse is the particle “oh!” which falls at the beginning of her sentences. A discourse marker like “oh” is sometimes thought to be “empty” or a simple verbal filler in conversation. However, “oh” is a distinct feature of women’s speech in the novel and it often signals a character’s emotional involvement in the discourse of another character. In the novel, female characters use the “oh!” form 82 times while men characters only use it twice, showing a significant disparity in usage according to gender, reiterating the stereotype that women are often more supportive in their discourse. Elizabeth employs it when speaking with Jane in a teasing manner: “‘Oh! you are a great deal too apt, you know, to like people in general’” (11) and in sympathy, “‘Oh! no, my regret and compassion are done away by seeing you so full of both’” (163). To Mrs. Gardiner she exclaims: “‘Oh! what hours of transport we shall spend!’” (113) when expressing her delight in looking forward to their journey in the Lake District. Even with Darcy, she finds a way to boost the conversation with “oh!” One of the more amusing examples of Elizabeth using, “oh!” is with Darcy at Netherfield when he asks her to dance a reel: "‘Oh!’ said she, ‘I heard you before, but I could not immediately determine what to say in reply’” (38). In this case, “oh!” works doubly to show Elizabeth is, indeed, attentive to what Darcy has said and to make up for her awkward silence following his first question. The emotive particle, “oh!” appears 32 times in Elizabeth’s speech.

In a similar fashion, Elizabeth has many exclamations in her dialogue which often suggest her demonstrative involvement in those she converses with. Never a “neutral” piece of punctuation, the exclamation point generally registers emotion of some kind—surprise, pleasure,
fear, ire. When considered in relation to gender, exclamation points stereotypically index “emotionality” or “excitability” (Hiatt 39). Though Austen caricatures women, like Lydia and Mrs. Bennet, by giving them exclamations to excess, Elizabeth’s speech contains 95 of them and they often indicate her investment in connecting to another character in a friendly manner. There are many examples of this in the novel: to Jane she says, “My dear Jane! You are too good” (99); to her father, she shows her interest in his humorous narrative of Mr. Collins, “Oh! I am excessively diverted. But it is so strange!” (263); to Charlotte, she teases: “You are a very strange creature by way of a friend!—always wanting me to play and sing before anybody and everybody!” (18); to Wickham, she expresses her shock at Darcy’s treatment of him: “Indeed!” (59), “Good heavens!” (59), “This is quite shocking!” (59) “How strange! How abominable!” (61). Elizabeth’s exclamations signal a number of stances—some that challenge polite norms, “That is a failing indeed!” (43) she says to Darcy at one point— but her need to emphasize certain words and stress her feelings most frequently underlines a strong desire to be heard and recognized by interlocutors through appropriately supportive discourse.

Elizabeth’s frank statements and pointed wit have led many readers to identify her speech as a more masculine style that breaks away from conduct book norms, but the frequency of her positively polite questions and boosters tends to counter this claim and renders her speech appropriately supportive. While this strategy works in her favor, helping her to connect with other characters and soften her ironic stances, it concurrently signals a lack of authority. The male characters interacting with her such as Darcy and Bingley hardly employ the same number of supportive boosters or cooperative forms, which means they maintain their social distance due to gender and their higher social status.
Conclusion

While Elizabeth and Darcy dance at the Netherfield ball, she says to him: “‘We are each of an unsocial, taciturn disposition, unwilling to speak, unless we expect to say something that will amaze the whole room, and be handed down to posterity with all the eclat of a proverb’ ” (68). Though Darcy’s conversational style may actually correspond to this description in the first half of the novel, he begins to bend, through Elizabeth’s influence, so that by the end of the narrative he purposefully displays a more genial demeanor towards her family and other characters. Elizabeth, on the other hand, begins the novel quite social and willing to speak her mind, and confident in her evaluative abilities, but as she questions her talent for judging other people, she tends to curb her wit. In the second half of the novel Elizabeth turns more contemplative. After accepting Darcy’s marriage proposal the two characters begin to talk of Mr. Bingley and, though Elizabeth “longed to observe that Mr. Bingley had been a most delightful friend—so easily guided, that his worth was invaluable,” she decides instead to “check herself…she remembered that [Darcy] had yet to learn to be laughed at, and it was rather too early to begin” (269). The final pages intimate that though she will continue to tease and provoke Darcy after their marriage, she will rely on his judgment, his knowledge of the world, to inform her own perceptions. On the surface this registers a real loss for Austen’s heroine who seemed so sure of herself at the story’s start. But throughout the novel, from beginning to end, Elizabeth has been shown to adjust her language, more than Darcy or other male characters must do, in order to uphold traditionally feminine claims of politeness that tend to dampen one’s voice. In some sense, her social interactions have always been framed through patriarchal expectations.
Even her wit originally derives from pleasing a father whose own sense of superiority is gained by laughing at others.

Elizabeth’s own expectations never really extend beyond a traditional, enlightened understanding of marriage. Austen provides the reader with several bad examples of marriage, but by the end of the novel she seems to affirm it as a practical social good that allows women to hold some authority through their ability to teach and influence a partner in the ways of social interaction. What better teacher for Darcy than a character who excels in negotiating polite linguistic forms with individualistic assertiveness? With both of these speech styles, Elizabeth is able to show that she is a firm member of her community, yet she can distinguish herself when necessary. With her polite forms of speech and her humor, both, she indicates a keen interest in other people and supporting their discourse. Through humor and politeness, she draws out information and shields herself from the egoistic attacks of characters like Miss Bingley. These forms also allow her to challenge the authority of a figure like Darcy who clings, perhaps too tightly, to his privileged background. Though Austen presents a female protagonist who deviates from the strict norms of conduct books, she still stays just inside the polite bounds of discourse so that her speech, effectually, represents an optimistic model of expressive individualism that combines polite discourse with self-assertiveness.
Chapter Three: Anne Elliot’s Strategic Silence and Sincerity in *Persuasion*

*Persuasion*, Jane Austen’s last novel, was published posthumously in December of 1817 and like her other narratives, this one ends with a happy union of two well-matched and admirable characters. Their journey towards marriage, however, is far from smooth. Eight years before the central action of the novel begins, we learn that Anne Elliot, under the persuasion of her family and motherly mentor, Lady Russell, rejects the marriage proposal of young naval officer, Frederick Wentworth. Their initial courtship, described by the narrator in several paragraphs which emphasize its setting in the past tense, concludes with keen feelings of regret on Anne’s part and disillusionment for Wentworth. Therefore, when they meet again, after years of separation, the tone of the exchanges between Anne and Wentworth is decidedly somber. Gone are the verbal barbs and ironies that Elizabeth Bennet and Mr. Darcy trade so skillfully. In fact, *Persuasion* contains the least amount of dialogue of any Austen novel altogether. Much of the narrative rests upon the thoughts of Anne Elliot, a character who is more inclined to keep those thoughts to herself than not. Where *Pride and Prejudice* shows a range of speech strategies that index a positive form of female individualism, *Persuasion* evinces less confidence in the rewards of verbal communication.

Austen’s heroine in *Persuasion*, Anne Elliot, initially described as one whose “word had no weight” (5) has often been read as a passive character by critics and readers alike because of her lengthy silences in social settings; but, silence, for Anne, works in several important ways. Silence establishes Anne’s constancy and perceptiveness amid a chorus of characters whose
interactions often are comprised of complaints, gossip, and self-interested confidences; silence allows Anne to superficially detach herself from the pointed and silent disregard of Wentworth and eventually earn back his trust; and silence signals a unique form of autonomy from her family with whom she often chooses not to engage in conversation. At the same time, Anne’s speech patterns reveal little hedging and a great many direct statements which stress a preference for sincerity in discourse—a mode of communication that reflects the values of a growing bourgeois class in England. Anne’s speech shows us that silence in conversation is not just oppositional or subordinating, but that it works, as do her direct speech acts, to project independence and stability—interactional stances which convey a self-possessed form of individualism that works within the normative bounds of feminine politeness.

Conduct Literature: Civil Silence v. Sincere Speech

One of the chief criticisms of women’s speech found in conduct literature from the eighteenth century and on into the nineteenth and twentieth century is that women simply talk too much. Volubility was often thought to indicate a weak mind or, alternately, a relaxed moral character. In The Polite Lady from 1798, a mother warns her daughter to, “[b]eware of rambling from one subject to another, which is always a sign of a weak and confused head” (94). James Fordyce, writing in 1766 in Sermons to Young Women, rails against women’s talkativeness: “But what words can express the impertinence of a female tongue, let loose into boundless loquacity? Nothing can be more stunning, except where a number of Fine Ladies open at once—Protect us, ye powers of gentleness and decorum, protect us from the disgust of such a scene” (89). The curative for this supposed noisy social malady took the form of direct appeals to silence.
As early as 1614 one can find a document on marriage and domestic life titled “A Godly From of Householde Gouernment” (Armstrong and Tennenhouse 8) that lays out the respective duties for husband and wife in two columns, making it quite clear that women were expected to keep quiet:

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Husband</th>
<th>Wife</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Deal with many men</td>
<td>Talk with few</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Be ‘entertaining’</td>
<td>Be solitary and withdrawn</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Be skillfull in talk</td>
<td>Boast of silence</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

The tripled emphasis on silence found here is a recurring prescription located in other historical texts that describe women’s language (or lack thereof). The conduct literature of Austen’s time, like the column above, often assigned silence as a specific strategy for pleasing men in courtship and domestic affairs. For John Gregory, writing in 1774, women pleased others best by simply being good listeners: “The great art of pleasing in conversation consists in making the company pleased with themselves. You will more readily hear than talk yourselves into [men’s] good graces” (38). Gregory also links modesty to silence, writing, “modesty…will naturally dispose you to be rather silent in company…People of sense and discernment will never mistake such silence for dullness. One may take a share in the conversation without uttering a syllable” (33).

To elucidate the difference between silences that signal dullness and those that show discretion, writers such as Hester Chapone offered specific instructions for silently showing an interlocutor interest in conversation: “When you are silent your looks should show your attention and presence to the company” for “a respectful and earnest attention is the most delicate kind of praise, and never fails to gratify and please” (127). Hannah More, writing in 1777, similarly noted the strategic value of silence when visually cuing one’s interest in a topic:

How easily and effectually may a well-bred woman promote the most useful and elegant conversation, almost without speaking a word!!...A woman, in a company where she has
the least influence, may promote any subject by a profound and invariable attention, which shows she is pleased with it, and by an illuminated countenance, which proves she understands it. This obliging attention is the most flattering encouragement in the world to men of sense and letters. (40-1)

Though most conduct writers would not have had women “sit like statues, without sense or motion” (127) as Hester Chapone puts it, the majority recommended silence for the pleasure it affords other speakers in conversation—particularly the pleasure given to men, as evidenced in these examples. In *Persuasion* we see this same speech situation when men such as Captain Benwick, Captain Harville, and Charles Musgrove open up to Anne Elliot who quietly and attentively listens to their discourse, periodically interjecting her thoughts only after being directly addressed. Though her silences often signal more than just a desire to please, the comfort Anne’s silence instills in other characters is one clear benefit to come from her taciturn nature, a benefit expounded on with great detail by conduct writers who advocated modest behavior.

Writers like Fordyce and Gregory communicated some of the most conservative views of women’s speech in the late eighteenth-century by asking women to strategically employ pleasing forms of speech and, even more often, silence, for their own purposes. Despite their conventionally patriarchal outlook, the advice in their books grants women some power in choosing silence as a means to an end, however limited that end may be. Critic Patricia Howell Michaelson reiterates this point, writing, “even when [conduct book writers] recommend silence, they put it in the context of women’s agency” (54). Though this cannot be considered an anti-normative form of agency that overtly resists female suppression, it does allow for some modicum of social action and personal success located within the bounds of social convention. Rather than simply silencing women, these writers offer silence as a tool for gaining the respect
of peers, pleasing family, friends, and elders, showing mutual understanding with an interlocutor, and impressing young men.

Still, more progressive writers at the time, such as Mary Wollstonecraft, objected to such emphasis placed on pleasing manners for the purpose of winning a husband and the recommended dissimulation performed to achieve this goal. If popular conduct book writers could give strategies for constructing a certain kind of selfhood through speech, then speech, itself, could take on a suspect form of concealment. Silence, for instance, could be read as a sign of modesty or, on the other hand, it may well mask a person’s deficiencies in mind or character. In her 1792 *Vindication of the Rights of Women*, Wollstonecraft outlines a clear debate between writers and thinkers who encourage women to simply please other people and those, like herself, who believed women should develop interactional skills that highlight their intelligence and sincerity. Though her primary target is the French thinker Rousseau, Wollstonecraft also attacks the works of Fordyce and Gregory with great spirit. She directly challenges the superficiality of taste and sensibility that Fordyce advocates, writing:

Dr. Fordyce's sermons have long made a part of a young woman's library; nay, girls at school are allowed to read them; but I should instantly dismiss them from my pupil's, if I wished to strengthen her understanding… I should not allow girls to peruse them, unless I designed to hunt every spark of nature out of their composition, melting every human quality into female weakness and artificial grace. I say artificial, for true grace arises from some kind of independence of mind. (5:2)

Wollstonecraft similarly dismisses Gregory for the “varnish of fashion” he would have young women acquire. More pointedly, she challenges a lack of openness in interaction: “[It is] this system of dissimulation, throughout [Gregory’s] volume, that I despise. Women are always to SEEM to be this and that—yet virtue might apostrophize them” (5:3). Wollstonecraft, instead,
promotes sincerity, constancy, and rationality as a counter to the more appearance-driven expectations outlined by Gregory and Fordyce.

The marked division of thought between Wollstonecraft and these conduct writers points to a larger historical conflict at play at England during this time as the growing middle class adopted values that contrasted with aristocratic forms of politeness and fashion meant to please other people. This same conflict comprises one of the central dramatic tensions Austen sets up for readers in *Persuasion* as Anne Elliot negotiates her place among a warm and informal naval community and her aristocratic family who holds tightly to outdated social pretensions. The stylistic contrast in these two camps can be located in Wollstonecraft’s *Introduction to Vindication*, in the discussion of her own writing and style of argumentation:

> I aim at being useful, and sincerity will render me unaffected; for wishing rather to persuade by the force of my arguments, than dazzle by the elegance of my language, I shall not waste my time in rounding periods, nor in fabricating the turgid bombast of artificial feelings, which, coming from the head, never reach the heart. I shall be employed about things, not words! and, anxious to render my sex more respectable members of society, I shall try to avoid that flowery diction which has slid from essays into novels, and from novels into familiar letters and conversation. (1:1)

In this passage she sets the terms “useful,” “sincerity,” “unaffected,” “force,” “heart,” and “respectable” against words associated with the increasingly stigmatized aristocracy such as “dazzle,” “elegance,” “waste [of] time,” “fabricating,” “artificial” and “flowery.” Her writing reflects a growing trend in the late eighteenth century among bourgeois men to adopt straightforward speech in their everyday conversations. Wollstonecraft’s husband, William Godwin, also openly advocated for sincerity in speech and dedicated an entire chapter in his 1793 *Political Justice* to naming its many merits:

> How would the whole of [the evils in society] be reversed by the practice of sincerity? We could not be indifferent to men whose custom it was to tell us the truth. Hatred would
perish from a failure in its principal ingredient, the duplicity and impenetrableness of human actions. No man could acquire a distant and unsympathetic temper” (Chapter VI).

This form of speech is particularly evident in the straightforward discourse of the naval community in *Persuasion*. For instance, Austen tells us that though Admiral Croft’s “manners were not quite of the tone to suit Lady Russell,” his “goodness of heart and simplicity of character” delighted Anne (91). Patricia Howell Michaelson notes that, “by the end of the eighteenth century, civility came to be associated with aristocratic and French artificiality or with female dissimulation; the discourse on bourgeois speech championed manly sincerity” (57). However, the linguistic expectations for middleclass women at this time were not so clearly cut.

Though sincerity and civility might seem, on the surface, to promote two opposite modes of behavior—one straightforward and the other oblique—they are not necessarily incompatible goals, especially when considering the fact that women would have been placed in a variety of speech situations that most likely called for both. Conduct writer, Jane West, who wrote specifically for the middleclass woman, acknowledged the need to practice a range of speaking styles in order to demonstrate discourse competence among other people. In her *Letters to a Young Lady* (1806), West conjures a musical metaphor to make this point: “Conversation was never so happily allegorized as by a resemblance to a collection of musical instruments; and I believe we never return from a pleasant intellectual concert, without acknowledging that our gratification proceeded from its *variety* as well as its *sweetness*” (10-11). The italics placed on “variety” and “sweetness” attest to the value found in women’s speech that was kind as well as contextually appropriate. For West, the merit in these two interactional aims allows for the erasure of sharp distinctions between civility and sincerity: “[Only] among the rougher forms of society [is it] not infrequent to hear civility and sincerity contrasted, as if they were in their natures irreconcilable” (24-5). While West’s advice to young women draws from earlier conduct
manuals, she advocates for those values, such as pleasing, that are associated with norms for upper-class civility, alongside appeals for bourgeois sincerity. This blending of speech strategies produces a model of polite interaction that closely aligns to the one that Jane Austen projects onto Anne Elliot who wisely pleases others through her silences and speaks with sincere direction. Indeed, for West, the “most fundamental law of politeness” is showing “attentive silence to a speaker” (21), much as Anne Elliot does throughout the novel when interacting with a range of different characters.

**Why Silence? The Linguistic Take**

It is frequently said that women are silenced. And the conduct literature examined above is a small sample illustrating how persuasive and powerful voices have historically urged silence for women. Many writers today have addressed the extent to which women’s voices and perspectives have been silenced by the sexism of society as a whole (Cameron 1998; Elgin 2000; Spender 1989). The feminist metaphor of silence has held that silence is a chosen or enforced form of passivity, but in many contexts it can be read as an individual’s assertion of authority. Silence is not always just the absence of a voice or expression and, in fact, sometimes signals more power than mere words. Linguist Susan Gal, drawing from Michel Foucault’s work on public and private confessions in *The History of Sexuality*, notes: “In religious confession, modern psychotherapy, bureaucratic interviews, oral exams, and police interrogation, the relations of coercion are reversed: where self-exposure is required, it is the silent listener who judges and who thereby exerts power over the one who speaks” (171). Though the power dynamic between a confessor and silent authority figure is, perhaps, one of the more dramatic
examples of silence’s dynamism, it, like speech, is never a neutral form of communication in social situations. Silence has many faces and can be read, for example, as being strained, awkward, deferential, reverent, charged, startling, or ominous. The ambiguity of silence requires that its meaning be understood through the context in which it occurs.

Thomas Carlyle is thought to have been the first person to write the phrase, “Speech is silvern, silence is golden” (Kenny 4). Silence can be “golden” or helpful when a person wants to be indirect or polite, leaving other speakers to take their conversational turn. Linguist Adam Jaworski also notes that “silence gives the hearer time to think of a response to what has been said before, and it can be used as a conflict-avoidance strategy. It is easier to undo silence than it is to undo words” (24). On the flipside, silence has also been coined “dead” and when its usage fails a person in communication, it can have serious consequences. Jaworski writes that “one’s failure to say something that is expected in a given moment by the other party can be interpreted as a sign of hostility or dumbness” (25). Often, linguists, in their discussions of silence, point to both its negative and positive functions. One of the first authors to address the pragmatic operations of silence, Vernon Jensen, in 1973, wrote out the following table which stresses its positive and negative values:

A. A linkage function: Silence may bond two (or more) people or it may separate them
B. An affecting function: Silence may heal (over time) or wound.
C. A revelation function: Silence may make something known to a person (self-exploration) or it may hide information from others.
D. A judgmental function: Silence may signal assent and favor or it may signal dissent and disfavor.
E. An activating function: Silence may signal deep thoughtfulness (work) or it may signal mental inactivity.

The multiplicity of the functions listed here, though not exhaustive, points to the many ways silence can be interpreted by interlocutors in conversation. In *Persuasion*, Anne Elliot utilizes
silence for a variety of reasons, as she moves from one circle of family and friends to another, finding herself transplanted into “little social commonwealth[s]” which “dictate [their] own matters of discourse” (31).

Throughout the novel Anne experiences continual displacement, moving from Uppercross Cottage to the Musgroves’ Great House and then to Bath, with short visits in between to Winthrop and Lyme. This frequent topographical shuffling is indicative of her disjointed social position among different classes and kinds of people. The fact that Anne ably adapts to each change of scene, however, attests to her communication skills—the most important of these skills is her ability to strategically use silence. In its ambiguity, silence allows Anne to hold onto a constant and stable way of interacting as she maneuvers among characters of different ages, social backgrounds, and self-interests who read her reticence in different ways. Anne’s family reads her reticence as a form of passivity, but it works in a literal and figurative way to actively separate herself from them. Characters at Uppercross Cottage and the Great House interpret Anne’s silence as a sign of her willingness to listen to their complaints without bias, mistrust, or the expectation that they should reciprocate her civility. For Captain Benwick and Captain Harville, Anne is an attentive listener, one whose silence encourages friendship and open communication. For Wentworth, Anne’s silence conceals their shared history and feelings for one another. Unwilling to reveal her past history, either to other characters or to the reader, Anne retains some control over her narrative through silence. It is through these varying functions that Austen shows her fluency in silence.
Anne Eliot’s Patient Silences

In the beginning chapters of *Persuasion* Austen presents the character of Anne Elliot as a “nobody” in her own family, a middle sister no one felt “an inclination to listen to” (98). Anne’s peripheral presence at Kellynch Hall is exacerbated by the fact that she has yet to marry. Though her sister Elizabeth also remains unmarried, she assumes some authority by “presiding and directing” (6) Kellynch Hall. Anne, on the other hand, lives more indeterminately. She resides in a form of limbo, belonging neither to the house of her father, nor the house of the husband she has yet to find. Her frequent silences early in the novel have often been read by critics as form of self-abnegation, an isolating penance enacted for a past misdeed. The “one short period of her life” (34) when she was listened to by Captain Wentworth has seemingly compounded her taciturnity. Just as Elizabeth Bennet curbs her wit after realizing she has misjudged Darcy at Pemberley, Anne Elliot counteracts an early error in judgment—her rejection of Captain Wentworth—by holding back her voice. Critic Laura Mooneyham has pointed out, “Anne’s silence after her broken engagement with Wentworth is parallel to the responses of other Austen heroines after the recognition of error” (168). Using this framework, Mooneyham and other critics such as John Wiltshire, Ann Astell, and Julia Giordano have come to read Anne’s story as an upward progression, an education in learning to speak up and lay a claim to happiness: “Anne’s search for happiness, her transition from passive suffering into a more roused struggle against fate, must lie in her breaking through the barrier of silence” (Mooneyham 166-7). While Anne’s preference for silence may express some resignation to a life without affection, a capitulation to the loss of Wentworth, it is never just a sign of passive suffering, never just a barrier to be overcome. Instead silence works as a useful strategy when interacting with other characters who might choose to ignore her, to complain to her, or to lie to her. Silence allows
Anne’s father and older sister have for many years pointedly ignored her so that by the age of twenty-seven, she has grown accustomed to silence within the barren rooms of Kellynch Hall. Because her father and sister either defer to presumed social superiors or, alternately, expect to be deferred to in conversations, their attitude towards Anne, who doesn’t quite fit either category, prompts the description: “her word had no weight; her convenience was always to give way;—she was only Anne” (5). “Only Anne”—the lack of a surname, here, represents a clear independence, a deliberate separation, from her father and all of the value placed upon the connections that his heritage entails: rank, property, and pedigree. Though Anne is certainly born into a family of great means and class, she never embraces the role of an aristocratic daughter in the same way Elizabeth does. Instead, Anne shows a marked independence from traditional, paternal authority, relying on the advice and company of her mother’s trusted friend, Lady Russell, more so than her father.

At the age of nineteen, Anne demonstrates an early form autonomy from Sir Walter by deciding to end her engagement, not to appease her father’s displeasure with the match, but because Lady Russell persuaded her it was “indiscreet, improper, hardly capable of success” and also, principally, for Wentworth’s “own advantage” (21). At the age of twenty-eight Anne’s indifference to filial propriety is even stronger, and it often surfaces through her own deliberate reticence. For instance, while staying with her family in Bath, Anne silently disdains the company of Lady Dalrymple and instead chooses to visit Mrs. Smith who Anne befriended in school earlier in life. She feels no need to inform or ask for Sir Walter’s permission to visit Mrs. Smith and when, later, he expresses his great disapproval, Anne silently ignores him: “She made
no reply. She left it to himself to recollect, that Mrs. Smith was not the only widow in Bath between thirty and forty, with little to live on, and no surname of dignity” (114). Anne’s silence here is charged with moral implications, though it is doubtful Sir Walter reads them, or the doubleness in her meaning, as he himself is a widower of a certain age living without his customary excess. Despite her father’s instruction, Anne continues to visit her friend without worry, effectively side-stepping his order and overbearing presence through her silence.

As readers, we wait to hear Anne’s voice until Chapter Three, after a lengthy introduction to the Elliot family is established and other characters have had some share of dialogue. This literal absence on the page signals Anne’s emotional distance from Sir Walter and the materialistic concerns which have landed him into a great deal of debt. Indeed, when Lady Russell is called to advise Sir Walter on his debt, she first consults Anne “who never seemed considered by the others as having any interest in the question” (9). Though her family never asks for Anne’s opinion on their financial straits, it is also true that Anne chooses not to voice her thoughts directly to them; instead, she leaves the task to Lady Russell, altogether avoiding a conversation likely to incite their anger. In this case, Anne’s silence works as a strategy of evasion. Her scheme for retrenchment is much more vigorous than anything Sir Walter or Miss Elliot are prepared to sacrifice, signaling a form of “self-denial” in expenditures that mirrors other forms of self-denial in the novel: “Every emendation of Anne’s had been on the side of honesty against importance. She wanted more vigorous measures, a more complete reformation, a quicker release from debt, a much higher tone of indifference for everything but justice and equality” (9-10). In these opening chapters, Austen establishes Anne’s character as trustworthy, as well as frugal—with both money and her words, a clear contrast to those family members who surround her.
Though Anne would probably prefer to keep different company from her family, she remains locked in a society that is often unable to properly or sincerely converse. Anne tells Mr. Elliot that her idea of good company is that, “of clever, well-informed people, who have a great deal of conversation” (108) and yet we rarely see her find this kind of companionship. Anne’s position as the isolated heroine would seem more pitiable had Austen not provided such negative representations of voice in the novel where speech is characterized as “insipid” (164) or “highly imprudent” (29) or “a buzz of words in [one’s] ear” (168). Those who surround Anne frequently complain, gossip, talk over other characters, unnecessarily boast, and spout empty civilities. Anne’s silences, in contrast, constitute a more stable and rational mode of behavior. Jeff Nunokawa, insightfully notes Anne’s tendency toward social “awayness”—an interactional strategy that allows her to mentally separate from the “noise” of other characters: “The noise that engulfs even the gentry…may be taken as an extreme instance and apt emblem for a devaluation of speech in the novel, a devaluation that finds both cause and consequence in a tendency not to care much about what one says or hears” (16-17). Because speech is devalued, silence takes on even more importance in the novel.

While Anne hardly participates in any conversation at Kellynch Hall, her visit to Uppercross turns toward the opposite extreme. Between the Musgrove family at Uppercross Hall and their son and daughter-in-law at the Cottage, Anne finds a number of characters only too eager to share their thoughts and feelings with her, airing their personal complaints with loquacious candor. Though Anne is appealed to here, which is a marked difference from her position at Kellynch, there is a sense that these characters err in being much too open and informal. One by one, they take their grievances, not to the person who has caused them, but to Anne who could “do little more than listen patiently, soften every grievance, and excuse each to
the other” (34). Anne makes for an appealing audience because of her kindness and her taciturn nature. Those who confide in Anne interpret her silence in whichever way they like, which, in effect, gives her a central and unique perspective to the noisy troubles that swirl around her. Anne’s own troubles, however, are never actually voiced, as she seems more content to let others do the talking.

As the conduct literature indicates, one of the most egregious breaches of cooperative speech norms established during this time is excessive volubility—a linguistic pattern held by a number of characters at Uppercross. Mary Musgrove, aside from being the most garrulous female in *Persuasion*, is assigned dialogue that contains more exclamation points, boosters, empty adjectives and petty complaints than any other character. Her language, similar to the dialogue of Mrs. Bennet and Lydia in *Pride and Prejudice*, represents an exaggerated form of women’s speech that marks an unreasonable and overly emotive temperament. This “garrulity” found so often in Austen’s lesser characters is noted by critic Marylea Meyersohn as “irrational social discourse” (35). But Mary is not the only character to spew out lengthy monologues to Anne. Early in her stay at Lyme, Anne listens with polite interest to Henrietta Musgrove as she rambles on about the sea air and about neighbors Anne hardly knows, asking questions without waiting for replies, and through all of this, Austen tells us, “Anne smiled more than once to herself during this speech” (75) showing both her intellectual distance from Henrietta as well as the amusement she takes in silently listening to her chatter. In Bath, Anne’s visits to Mrs. Smith take on a similar cast, as she sits and listens patiently to local gossip and the lengthy history told of William Elliot, interjecting comments only where they seem most appropriate. Though Mrs. Smith asks Anne questions to prompt discussion, Anne is aware that her friend, “through the short cut of a laundress and a waiter,” already hears more “than Anne could relate” (139).
Anne’s speech simply reaffirms Mrs. Smith’s previously deduced knowledge, underlining the fact that her friend places as much, if not more, import on “news,” rather than Anne’s own perspective.

In this noisy community, Anne stands alone, the silent listener, whose behavior mirrors the comportment recommended in conduct literature. Hester Chapone’s instructions to listen attentively to speakers, to draw out conversation through a pleasing silence, could have been modelled after Anne who does this throughout the narrative. Time and time again, we find Anne working to put other interlocutors at ease: at Uppercross Cottage Anne’s “perseverance in patience and forced cheerfulness…produced nearly a cure on Mary’s” (29); and in Lyme Anne dispels some of Captain Benwick’s grief, as “the engaging mildness of her countenance, and the gentleness of her manner, soon had their effect; and Anne was well repaid the first trouble of exertion” (73). Her silence recommends her to those who show less respect than they are given, as she works to be of “use” to others: as a detached observer, an attentive listener, and a calm presence among a number of characters who converse without always reciprocating her civility.

Because verbal communication in *Persuasion* is frequently indirect and presented in such a negative light, non-verbal actions tend to punctuate the narrative, often conveying more information, more feeling than speech. Critics such as James Thompson, Linda Bree, and Judy van Sickle have noted the power Austen assigns to physical signs and looks that communicate an array of stances different characters in the novel take—particularly those of Anne and Wentworth. Judy Van Sickle writes that the novel’s great strength is due to, “Austen’s success in sustaining the credibility of a renewed emotional attachment through physical signs…seductive half-glances, conscious gazes and slight bodily contact” (43). For most of the novel we hardly ever hear Anne and Wentworth speak to one another, a fact which makes their
few emotionally charged exchanges stand out in stark relief. Ronald Hall writes that before their encounter in the octagon room, prior to the concert, “their entire direct-speech dialogue with each other would, if brought together, occupy about one page of print” (143). Though little is said between the characters, much is communicated: silence becomes the medium through which Anne and Wentworth best communicate.

Anne and Wentworth, we are told, had once conversed quite openly and often. Before the broken engagement, they “would have found it difficult to cease to speak to one another” (46). But Wentworth’s long-held resentment over Anne’s rejection locks them into a position of silence. When they first meet at Uppercross Cottage, having been separated for over seven years, Wentworth sets the tone of their encounter by ignoring Anne as much as possible and speaking not a word to her. His only acknowledgement of her presence is “a bow” when “her eye half met [his]” (44). Following his lead, Anne respects the silence and cold courtesy Wentworth seems to desire, but beneath her circumspect surface, Austen reveals a different picture—an Anne Elliot whose internal monologue can barely contain the force of her emotion. After their first meeting, Anne says to herself in repeated exclamations: “It is over! It is over!...The worst is over!” (44). Her initial reaction is one of a pattern with Wentworth, where emotion escalates, surfacing through agitated “sighs” and “blushes.” If Anne were forced to speak more often earlier in the narrative, she could likely betray feelings Wentworth might happily scorn. Silence, then, is a refuge for Anne and protects her from disclosing too much of herself too soon. It is, also, a sign of respect for Wentworth and their shared past, a past that neither character chooses to disclose to those family and friends who surround them. At the narrative-level, the silence Wentworth enforces early in the narrative also serves to heighten those words and feelings that remain unspoken between the two.
In this same scene, Anne listens to Captain Wentworth speak, listens to those around her converse, but Austen never offers details of what specifically is stated; instead, speech takes the form of a vague “voice”: [Anne] “heard his voice; he talked to Mary, said all that was right, said something to the Miss Musgroves…the room seemed full, full of persons, and voices” (44). The word “voice” suggests that speech has been reduced to a bodily function, a mere form of sound, and that the specifics in polite speech are not as important as those non-verbal communications exchanged between the two characters. Even later in the novel, when Anne and Wentworth meet unexpectedly at Bath, both characters put forth effort to politely converse but neither seems to make sense of what is actually spoken: “Mutual enquiries on common subjects passed: neither of them, probably, much the wiser for what they heard” (127). When their paths collide without warning, Anne relies on looks, rather than words, to unravel Wentworth’s stance in the interaction: “He looked very well, not as if he had been suffering in health or spirits, and he talked of Uppercross, of the Musgroves, nay, even of Louisa, and had even a momentary look of his own arch significance as he named her; but yet it was Captain Wentworth not comfortable, not easy, not able to feign that he was” (127). The double emphasis placed on Wentworth’s “looks” allows Anne to read more than what speech can reveal.

Throughout the novel, Austen illustrates Anne’s special ability to interpret visual cues from Wentworth, a talent which speaks to her constant understanding of, and regard for, him, as well as her skills in perception and sensitivity. When observing him discuss the late Dick Musgrove, Anne notices: “a momentary expression in Captain Wentworth’s face…a certain glance of his bright eye, and curl of his handsome mouth…but it was too transient an indulgence of self-amusement to be detected by any who understood him less than herself” (49). This same perceptive construal occurs in later chapters as Anne and Wentworth maintain their silence.
Following the admiring “look” Mr. Elliot gives Anne on the steps at Lyme, Wentworth, we are told, responds with his own meaningful look: “He gave her a momentary glance, a glance of brightness, which seemed to say, ‘That man is struck with you, and even I, at this moment, see something like Anne Elliot again’”(76). The dialogue attached to Wentworth’s expression points to the specificity in Anne’s ability to read him without the benefit of speech. At many other points in the narrative, Anne reads emotion in Wentworth’s face which other characters are unable to see. Unlike Elizabeth and Darcy, this couple has known each other well enough, long enough, to correctly interpret certain looks and gestures.

Yet speech is still essential to the evolving relationship between Anne and Wentworth. There could be no real narrative without it. Though Anne says very little to Wentworth and he says very little to Anne, Wentworth speaks a great deal to other characters while Anne silently listens. At Uppercross, Wentworth claims the limelight, boasting of his feats in the navy, which relegates Anne to the periphery of social gatherings. However, one great advantage to Anne’s silence is that it allows her time and space to learn more about the man she let go seven years ago. Ronald Hall points out: “that dialogue is not merely talk, but communication involving the silence of listening. Without this, dialogue becomes merely a series of alternating monologues” (148). The narrative implies that for Anne and Wentworth to successfully communicate through speech, they must listen to each other first. While Anne’s attentiveness as a listener is established early in the novel, Wentworth gradually shows his increasing interest in Anne and his listening through nonverbal communication—his lifting of little Charles from Anne’s back at Uppercross Cottage, his request that the Croft’s offer Anne a ride home after her long walk, his dropping of the pen at the White Hart. By the time Wentworth overhears Anne speaking to Captain Harville, defending woman’s constancy, his claim that “a word, a look will be enough”
(173) to answer him is quite credible. Austen rewards Wentworth’s careful listening, as the
overheard conversation between his friend and Anne leads him to a happily accepted proposal of
marriage. Patricia Howell Michaelson comments on this aspect of Wentworth’s growth as a
character, writing that the ending to *Persuasion* “posits a gender-neutral norm” where “Anne
learns and grows as a character through her listening; so must Wentworth” (215). Rather than
read Anne’s narrative ending as proof that she has “found” her voice, Austen’s conclusion to
*Persuasion* suggests that men and women, together, communicate best when cooperatively
listening and equally sharing in social interaction. However, is also implied throughout the novel
that an essential component to meaningful communication involves believing and trusting that
one’s words are, indeed, sincere.

**Anne Elliot’s Directness**

In his journal, Jane Austen’s brother James wrote about language, saying, “Language” is
often thought to be “the Art of expressing our ideas” then amends this by writing, it can more
often be “the Art of concealing our ideas” (McMaster 172). The concern for openness in
language is a subject Jane Austen addresses in many of her novels, including *Persuasion*. It is
evident that in her fictional world, the garrulous and uncooperative speakers are painted as
foolish or unfeeling, but those characters who lie, conceal, and misrepresent themselves earn the
more pointed label of villain. In *Persuasion* the clear villain, marked for his insincerity, is
Anne’s cousin, William Elliot.

Mr. Elliot, who works to ingratiate himself with Anne’s family, shares linguistic traits
with a similar scoundrel, Mr. Wickham, in *Pride and Prejudice*. Both men “talk well” and are
described as being “agreeable” but little virtue can be found beneath the polish of their speech. Mr. Elliot, whose “tone, his expressions, his choice of subject, his knowing where to stop” all seemed indicate a “discerning mind” (103), displays much more interest in talking with Anne than other members of her family do. On Anne’s first evening in Bath, he eagerly converses with her, “wanting to compare opinions [on Lyme],…to give his own route, understand something of hers, and regret that he should have lost such an opportunity of paying his respects to her” (143). This focused attention could have won over Anne’s confidence, but unlike her father or Elizabeth, she demonstrates a keen perception by instinctively mistrusting her cousin’s intentions: “Mr. Elliot was rational, discreet, polished, but he was not open… [Anne] felt that she could so much more depend upon the sincerity of those who sometimes looked or said a careless or a hasty thing, than of those whose presence of mind never varied, whose tongue never slipped” (116). Talk in this context—speech that, on the surface, appears polite or elegant-- is not the most accurate sign when reading the motivations and makeup of another person. This fact is borne through the novel by the stress given to nonverbal actions that more accurately communicate a character’s intentions and feelings.

Anne’s preference for sincere and open speech is also reflected through her attachment to the naval community—a speech community whose language conveys an informal warmth that is sharply contrasted to the cold reserve and elegance of her own aristocratic family. The naval families at Lyme offer Anne friendly hospitality that contains none of the aloof detachment required by the polite company at Kellynch Hall. The men and women she encounters associated with the navy are perfectly open and sincere. Though, at times, they may sound more gruff or direct than is fashionable—Admiral Croft’s “Phoo! Phoo!...what stuff these young fellows talk!”(47) is but one example---they do not conceal themselves through facile language.
They repeatedly show a desire for inclusive and intelligent discourse. For instance, at even at Uppercross a clear gender binary is established through conversations that men and women separately hold: “The Mr. Musgroves had their own game to guard and to destroy, their own horses, dogs, and newspapers to engage them, and the females were fully occupied in all the other common subjects of housekeeping, neighbours, dress, dancing and music” (31). The talk among the Musgroves tends towards the banal and expected topics accorded to the two genders, but the naval men and women are not so divided, as they sustain a more equitable relationship in their conversations, and through their lives more generally. Mrs. Croft, for example, accompanies her husband on his sea voyages, participates in negotiating the lease of Kellynch Hall, and at a social gathering reprimands her brother for “talking so like a fine gentleman…as if women were all fine ladies, instead of rational creatures” (51). This remark from Mrs. Croft reveals the extent to which Austen had come to appreciate women who converse with intelligence and sincerity. It also highlights the ideological split located in conduct literature between those who promoted elegant manners and those who, like Wollstonecraft, insisted women speak with reason.

But Anne is not like Mrs. Croft. Though she values the openness and plain speech of Wentworth’s sister, finding “[h]er manners were open, easy, and decided” (35), Anne is a different kind of communicator. More reticent, more gentle, she speaks with both the polite civility engrained at Kellynch and with a directness that underscores the value she places in sincere speech. Anne’s feelings and thoughts are quite often conveyed through gestures, looks, and unspoken words which could be read as a passive or a tentative form of communication. But it would be a mistake to label Anne’s speech as unsure. When Anne Elliot chooses to converse, she does so with a directness that belies her uncertain future and ever-shifting surroundings.
Linguistic forms that mark tentativeness in speech are often referred to as hedges or mitigators, for they show that a speaker is less than completely committed to the content of what they have said (Eckert and McConnell-Ginet 184). In *Language and Women’s Place* Robin Lakoff identifies hedges as characteristic of women’s speech, as they tend to “hedge” their bets with qualifiers like “sorta,” “well,” and “kinda,” mitigating the possible unfriendliness or unkindness of a statement (79). Women, she argues, express their social insecurity, as well as their propensity to be more polite than men through their hedging. And while there may be some truth in this perception, hedging also serves some useful functions. When a speaker wants to show their deference to an interlocutor or to soften a bald statement, hedges can help achieve this in interaction. Hedges, however, are found with little frequency in the speech of Anne Elliot. This means that Anne’s speech, though polite and intermittent, is direct and straightforward—a linguistic sign of her constancy and sincerity.

The most frequent hedges in Anne’s speech are listed in the table below:

Table 3.1 Anne Elliot’s Hedges

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Hedge</th>
<th>Word Count</th>
<th>(% of total speech)</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>perhaps</td>
<td>10</td>
<td>(.239)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>seem*</td>
<td>5</td>
<td>(.119)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>well</td>
<td>3</td>
<td>(.071)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>I daresay</td>
<td>3</td>
<td>(.071)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>I suppose</td>
<td>3</td>
<td>(.071)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>I think</td>
<td>3</td>
<td>(.071)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>probably</td>
<td>2</td>
<td>(.047)</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

*note: seem* stands for: seem, seems, seemed*

Her most recurrent hedge is the qualifier “perhaps” and she uses it most often in her conversations with Captain Harville—once when discussing Benwick’s extended period of grief and twice more when discussing woman’s constancy at the White Hart Inn. Anne’s firm defense
of women who hold onto a lasting attachment in this scene prompts her to use bold phrases such as “I will not allow it” and “[I feel] authorized to assert” and “[this] exactly explains my view” (169-70). Anne is not mincing her words; her assertiveness holds the conviction of her own long-standing feelings for Wentworth. Yet she tempers this assertiveness with the rare insertion of “perhaps” and “probably”—even once prefacing a statement with “if I may be allowed the expression”(171). It makes sense that Anne’s most qualified passage in the novel is also her most argumentative speech. But still, hedging appears only sparsely throughout her dialogue.

To offer a sense of contrast, we could look at the speech of Elizabeth Bennet who is considered Austen’s most direct and assertive heroine. The table below shows the frequency of the same hedges used by Elizabeth throughout *Pride and Prejudice*:

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Hedge</th>
<th>Word Count</th>
<th>(% of total speech)</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>perhaps</td>
<td>16</td>
<td>.119</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>seem*</td>
<td>6</td>
<td>.044</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>well,</td>
<td>7</td>
<td>.052</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>I daresay</td>
<td>6</td>
<td>.044</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>I suppose</td>
<td>6</td>
<td>.044</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>I think,</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>.007</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>probably</td>
<td>3</td>
<td>.022</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Though the percentage of hedges found in Elizabeth Bennet’s dialogue is slightly lower than Anne’s—they are certainly comparable. Like Anne, Elizabeth most frequently employs the hedge “perhaps,” but her use of it is usually attached to more ordinary, run-of-the mill conversations; for instance, it often prefaces conjecture about other characters:

“But, perhaps, Mr. Bingley did not take the house so much for the convenience of the neighbourhood as for his own” (130)
“But, perhaps, his sister does as well for the present, and, as she is under his sole care, he may do what he likes with her” (134)
“Mr. Darcy may perhaps have heard of such a place as Gracechurch Street” (104)

Anne Elliot’s qualifications come into play when a real face threatening act—her opposition to Captain Harville—might cause serious offense, but she holds her own with Harville by persuasively arguing with bold declaratives and a few softening words so that by the end of their debate, Harville tells her “‘You are a good soul’…putting his hand on her arm, quite affectionately” (171). When negative politeness is called for, Anne shows herself capable of using it and with a variety of characters—her father, Mrs. Smith, Mr. Elliot, Mary, and the Musgroves—but her speech only occasionally registers polite deference through hedges. Both heroines, through their lack of hedging, demonstrate a preference for open and straightforward speech. Though Elizabeth is typically considered the liveliest and most assertive heroine in Austen’s canon, Anne Elliot shares her directness.

As mentioned earlier, past critics have praised the ending of *Persuasion* as one in which Anne’s voice becomes more assertive; Janice Swanson, for example, writes, “Anne’s maturation is directly connected to her self-determination and self-possession in a verbal sense, to her gradually mastered poise and effectiveness in speaking” (2). But the “voice” Anne supposedly finds as the narrative progresses is actually quite candid at the start of the novel. For instance, the first time we hear Anne speak in the novel she boldly contradicts her father and Mr. Shepherd, by defending those men enlisted in the navy: “The navy, I think, who have done so much for us, have at least an equal claim with any other set of men, for all the comforts and all the privileges which any home can give. Sailors work hard enough for their comforts, we must all allow” (15). The response to this polite reprimand is immediate: “‘Very true, very true. What Anne says is very true,’ was Mr. Shepherd’s rejoinder” (15). Shortly after this scene Anne travels to Uppercross Cottage and on her first day of the visit Mary impolitely asks her, “[W]hat
can you possibly have to do?” (28). Anne answers her question at length and with specificity: “A great many things, I assure you. More than I can recollect in a moment; but I can tell you some…” (28). Mary’s blunt question begets an equally straightforward answer from Anne, albeit more polite. Anne illustrates a certain level of confidence through sincere speech in the novel’s early chapters.

By the time Louisa falls from the steps at Lyme, Anne has proven herself a natural organizer and commands the scene with a directness that prompts everyone to find their proper role in assisting the unconscious Louisa. When fear and shock cause Wentworth to become tongue-tied, Anne, with practicality, calls for a surgeon and Wentworth responds using almost the exact words as those uttered by Mr. Shepherd previously at Kellynch Hall: “‘True, true, a surgeon this instant’” (81). Both Wentworth and Mr. Shepherd double the word “true” in response to Anne’s speech, stressing the point that her words ring with “truth.” The emphasis Austen places on “truth” surfaces with the frequency of its lexemes found in the novel: “truth,” “truly,” “true,” and “trust” appear 60 times throughout the text of *Persuasion*. In this society where drawing rooms and concert halls only allow for a minimum of shallow conversation, truth and directness in speech take on more importance, particularly in relation to courtship. As Ashley Tauchert rightly says in *Romancing Jane Austen*: “If Catherine, Elinor, Lizzy, Fanny, Emma, Anne—and even Marianne—could have simply *told* the men they fancied what was troubling them, or *asked* what they needed to know, we would not have Austen’s work to worry about” (131). For all of the obstacles that prevent Anne from speaking of her own feelings openly to Wentworth—his own angry silence, the constant company around them, the polite addresses expected in social settings—Anne manages to convey her sincerity through speech.
Her word, which Wentworth distrusts at the novel’s beginning, is re-established through sincere and trustworthy discourse as he listens to Anne and gradually comes to respect her again.

Conclusion

*Persuasion* is one of Austen’s more diversely populated novels, as it includes a lawyer, a nurse, a baron, a viscountess, an impoverished widow, an admiral, several captains, clergymen, and a number of wives and daughters. At the center of this assorted cast is Anne Elliot who must navigate many different conversations that call upon different linguistic strategies for getting along with others. Throughout the novel, from beginning to end, Anne manages to reconcile propriety with sincerity in her speech which engenders both trust and friendship. By the novel’s conclusion, Anne’s various friends make up one happy speech community:

The evening come, the drawing-rooms were lighted up, the company assembled. It was but a card party, it was but a mixture of those who had never met before, and those who met too often…The Wallises, she had amusement in understanding them…With the Musgroves there was the happy chat of perfect ease; with Captain Harville, the kind-hearted intercourse of brother and sister; with Lady Russell, attempts at conversation, which a delicious consciousness cut short; with Admiral and Mrs. Croft, everything of peculiar cordiality and fervent interest…(179)

Anne’s happiness after reconciling with Wentworth is appropriately mirrored through the speech of those characters who helped bring about their reunion—knowingly or not. Anne and Wentworth’s communications, no longer mediated through these characters, are open and frequent. Austen writes that Anne’s character “was now fixed on [Wentworth’s] mind as perfection itself, maintaining the loveliest medium of fortitude and gentleness” (176). The “fortitude” and “gentleness” Wentworth admires in Anne is firmly established through her speech and her silence.
Anne excels socially by enacting the advice conduct writer Jane West gave in 1806, to not offend or mislead…to avoid egotism and affectation, contradiction, slander, and flattery (14-15). Just as West suggests, Anne manages to demonstrate polite civility, often by patiently listening to other characters’ chatter in silence without voicing any of her own complaints. Though her silence may seem a form of docility or a sign of her past regret from refusing Wentworth, it helps Anne to maintain a comfortable distance from her family, to listen and learn about those people around her, and to show her respect to other characters. At the same time, speech plays an important role in Anne’s story. Anne values the rational sincerity that Wollstonecraft advocated for women and she demonstrates this through directness in dialogue. Her infrequent hedging points to an assurance in speech, born by the knowledge that what she says precisely reflects her thoughts and feelings. By the end of the novel, there can be no doubt that Anne Elliot’s speech acts, as well as her silences, do, indeed, carry a great deal of weight.
Chapter Four: Jane Eyre: Questioner and Caviller

Writing several decades following Jane Austen, in the 1840s, Charlotte Bronte minimized the polite English found in Austen’s novels, claiming with open criticism that her characters failed to express the wells of emotion and desire that women feel. After reading *Emma* in 1850 she wrote to W. S. Williams: “What sees keenly, speaks aptly, moves flexibly, it suits her to study, but what throbs fast and full, though hidden, what the blood rushes through, what is the unseen seat of life and sentient target of death—*this* Miss Austen ignores” (*Selected Letters* 161). Bronte disavowed the surface politeness that so often directs human interaction in Austen’s work and created heroines who frequently speak with directness or, alternately, keep their thoughts to themselves. Where Austen’s heroines like Elizabeth Bennet seem stretch the limits of self-expression, Bronte’s novels tend to amplify the social constraints placed upon women’s speech so that her heroines’ individualism is turned into something more self-restrained. Yet both novelists present female protagonists who carefully negotiate the polite norms expected of them with verbal signs of personal authority. Bronte’s protagonists like Jane Eyre, outwardly calm yet full of deep-seated feeling, periodically break the tight control of their unspoken thoughts with assertive outbursts of speech, punctuating moments in the text that have been frequently used to characterize “voice” as a sign of social agency. And though this style of communicating certainly helps shape the overall impression readers may have of Jane--a character who openly asserts her will--one of the most distinct linguistic traits to be located in her dialogue is not exclamatory or boldfaced statements, but it is, instead, the interrogative form. From her first statement in the novel—a question directed to Mrs. Reed—to her last piece of dialogue at Ferndean, Jane asks questions. Rhetorical questions, facilitative questions, antagonistic
questions, tag questions, appeals and requests comprise almost one quarter of Jane’s entire speech in the novel.

Jane employs a much higher percentage of questions in social interaction than any of the other female characters covered in this dissertation. At the narrative level, her many questions work to heighten the sense of self-conflict and self-division found within her written interiority. But in her interactions with other characters, these questions function in several pragmatic ways: when facilitative, questions indicate an interest in an interlocutor and a concern for maintaining face--they function much like the boosters found in Elizabeth Bennet’s speech which work to build solidarity with a speaker. But Jane’s questions can also be read as a means to control the floor, redirect the topic of conversations, and can impose on a hearer’s face in an attempt to divert attention away from her own. Literary critics like Janet Freeman, Rosemarie Bodenheimer, and Joan Douglas Peters have pointed to the assertive individualism of Jane Eyre that emerges in her moments of forceful or, alternately, controlled, speech, but a closer look at Jane’s use of questions reveals a more nuanced construction of a female in courtship—one who consistently negotiates the claims of proper femininity, moral certitude, individual will, and emotional containment through her interactions. Rather than reading Jane Eyre’s story as a narrative of marrying up the social ladder and gaining a voice, the preponderance of questions Jane asks and their various functions point to multiple representations of femininity and individualism that challenge the idea of sustained parity achieved through a companionate marriage and the courtship which leads up to it.
Conduct Literature: The Value of a Well-Placed Question

As the nineteenth century advanced, conduct literature continued to promote feminine concepts of gentility that eighteenth century writers had advocated for, but in addition to this, Victorian writers placed even more emphasis on the moral influence granted to women through their work in the home (Poon 26). Frequently constructed as guardians of morals, women were often expected to superintend their language as well as others’ speech. In 1844 Woman’s Worth wrote: “there is nothing, whether it be in temper, manner, or speech, which [a woman] cannot restrain” (50-1). The word “restrain” here reflects an increasingly accepted expectation that women curb their speech-- a social pull that clearly surfaces through the language of Jane Eyre. Yet this small tract also grants women the power to control others’ speech, which is also an important function of language that emerges in the novel.

Even though social rules placed on women’s speech were amplified in Bronte’s time, the same principles from the eighteenth century carried over such as the interactional goals of pleasing others and conveying modesty. Attentive silence and modest, but pleasurable, conversation were reiterated. If a woman were to ask questions in conversation, they were meant to be supportive. The aim for most middle-class women, particularly those on the marriage market, was to draw out a speaker and demonstrate their interest by interjecting into the conversation relevant questions that might prompt more discussion.

Though asking questions is one of the more obvious ways to show one’s attention to the conversation at hand, conduct books made it clear that the interrogative mode was not always an easy or straightforward approach. Conduct writers sometimes offered inconsistent advice so there was not a single code or recipe for how to ask questions of others. Writing in 1776, James Fordyce anticipates the more specific instructions to come in the early nineteenth century.
regarding the use of questions in conversation: “It is hard if you cannot distinguish, and teach your daughters to distinguish between good breeding and pertness, between an obliging study to please and an indecent desire to put themselves forward, between a laudable inquisitiveness and an improper curiosity” (99). The fine line demarcating “laudable inquisitiveness” and “improper curiosity” depended entirely on the interlocutor and context of the speech: the number of questions asked, the tone of the questions, and the content of one’s inquiries all would have contributed to their perceived suitability. The social risk involved in asking questions is one reason so many conduct writers endorsed indirection—and particularly with regard to asking questions. Conduct writer, Jane West, echoes this sentiment in Letters to a YoungLady writing:

Now, though information certainly adds a thousand delicacies ‘to the feast of reason and the flow of soul,’ it should be like the charms of our general mother, ‘not obvious, not obtrusive, but retired.’” (9)

Asking questions in order to obtain information was meant to be managed in the same respectful way information was expected to be given: indirectly.

Writing several decades following Fordyce, Hester Chapone in 1829 also acknowledged the need for young women to “appear interested in what is said” by asking questions (127). She goes on to qualify this, writing:

[If you understand the subject well enough to ask now and then a pertinent question, or if you can mention any circumstances relating to it that have not before been taken notice of, this will be an agreeable way of showing your willingness to make a part of the company; and will probably draw a particular application to you from some one or other. (127-128)

Chapone recommends an understanding of the topic under discussion before risking one’s face with an impertinent question which means questions would not necessarily be asked to gain information, but for facilitative purposes that show one’s support and solidarity with the speaker.
Though Chapone’s advice underlines a cooperative norm, where both speakers are “applied” to, not all conduct advice was so liberal.

Sarah Stickney Ellis similarly noted in her popular conduct book, *Daughters of England*, the importance of showing interest in what a speaker says without giving away one’s lack of understanding or knowledge pertaining to the topic of discourse. Though some education in subjects typically associated with men—politics, religion, science—could be helpful prior to an actual courtship, asking questions related to those topics for the sake of learning proves risky:

> An attentive listener is generally all that he requires; but in order to listen attentively, and with real interest, it is highly important that we should have considerable understanding of the subject discussed; for the interruption of a single foolish or irrelevant question, the evidence of a wandering thought, the constrained attitude of attention, or the rapid response which conveys no proof of having received an idea, are each sufficient to break the charm, and destroy the satisfaction which most men feel in conversing with really intelligent women. (42)

While Hester Chapone admits to the preferred possibility of a reciprocal exchange, where both interlocutors ask questions of one another, Stickney Ellis instead warns that one misplaced or uninformed question might break the pleasure a man takes in his own conversation. Talk in this context is meant to be one-sided. The inequity built into conversations of the kind Stickney Ellis refers to is one of the key dramatic tensions of the narrative that Bronte develops as Jane works to engage those taciturn characters around her with questions.

The great majority of Jane Eyre’s questions ask interlocutors for some kind of social information which pertains to “new private domain information of a factual and specific nature” (Freed 626). These kinds of questions ask about speakers, their lives and the people and events with which they are familiar. In the case of Jane, these questions underline her transient and ambiguous social status. Neither a “master” nor exactly a “servant”—rootless and without immediate family—Jane’s interrogatives demonstrate a desire to more thoroughly understand her
surroundings: the people, practices, and history that constitutes them. In asking questions she works to bond with people, just as conduct literature exhorted young women to do; but at the same time, her lack of information sets her apart. Her curiosity, too, is condemned by some characters as too “inquisitive” and “improper.” Indeed, when *Jane Eyre* was first published a critic from *The Christian Remembrancer* wrote that, in the novel:

> There is an intimate acquaintance with the worst parts of human nature, a practiced sagacity in discovering the latent ulcer, and a ruthless rigour in exposing it, which must command our admiration, but are almost startling in one of the softer sex. (*Jane Eyre* 450)

The condemnation of Bronte’s quest for “discovery” and the “exposure” of human nature—a goal the author similarly bestows to her heroine, reiterates how the pursuit of knowledge and intellectual curiosity remained, for many readers, masculine qualities.

Not all of Jane’s questions fit the norms for feminine conduct. Few of them are indirect—a stylistic trait that would have given fuel for detractors and critics. Her antagonistic questions and those that prod into the private business of others are quite few—but they would also have been seen as running counter to instructions found in the advice literature. But the majority of her questions do show her working to socially align through conversation and in this sense, Jane does uphold the general view found in Victorian conduct literature that talk should be supportive, despite the fact that other characters are far less accommodating for her.

**Why Ask? The Linguistic Take**

Based on the instructions women received in conduct literature to support conversations and show interest in interlocutors, it is not surprising that the use of questions in conversation has been stereotypically seen as a characteristic of women’s speech for generations. In the past
decades linguists have taken a closer look at women’s question-asking behavior and have typically explained it as a sign of: 1) their hesitancy in speech, 2) their inclination to take on a conversational workload, and 3) their concern for showing cooperativeness.

The first linguist to write about women’s frequent questions, Robin Lakoff (1975), pointed out that in conversations women frequently use more questions than men and, more specifically, she identified the tag question as a sign of their tentativeness in speech. A tag question, “midway between an outright statement and a yes-no question” (48), lessens the force of an utterance and gives the addressee leeway to disagree with the speaker or to extend the conversation. For example, rather than simply declare, “It is a beautiful day” one might add a tag, “It is a beautiful day, isn’t it?” and thereby give the hearer more impetus to agree and respond to the speaker. Her original study, which was solely based on personal observations, has since been taken up by other linguists and examined in more detail with a consideration for the multiple ways questions can be interpreted in specific interactional contexts. For example, Janet Holmes (1995) and Deborah Cameron and et al. (1988) have pointed out that tag questions—one of the key linguistic features in Lakoff’s original argument-- actually perform a range of functions: a tag can facilitate conversations, it can soften a bald declarative, it can signal one’s uncertainty, or it can be challenging. In the novel, Jane has a low percentage of tags, a total of 16 tag questions, more than half of which are directed to Mrs. Fairfax and Rochester. Most often, Jane’s tags follow a request for information, but Bronte structures them to sound as if Jane only seeks confirmation of what is already known to her:

To Mrs. Fairfax: “She was greatly admired, of course?” (135)
To Mrs. Fairfax: “He is rich, is he not?” (136)
To Rochester: “I have your permission to retire now, I suppose?” (173)
In questions such as these, Jane assumes to have knowledge and a form of authority that functions in a manner slightly different from what Lakoff originally described. Jane’s questions are clearly meant to elicit specific kinds of responses, and in this way work to control the topic at hand, showing that tags are not always purely supportive or deferential.

In another influential study examining women’s use of questions, Pamela Fishman (1980, 1983) claimed that women carry a disproportionate conversational workload compared to men. She found that in the private conversations of three heterosexual couples men dominated their partners through the strategic use of both silence and interruption while the women tried to keep conversation going by asking questions. However, in *Jane Eyre*, the question of who carries the conversational workload is not evident by simply looking at which character has more interrogatives. Rochester actually asks many more questions of Jane than she does of him, and through this interrogative mode, he works to control their talk. He authoritatively tells Jane “it is not your forte to tell of yourself, but to listen while others talk of themselves” (116). Jane, as Rochester’s patient listener, is framed as his “refreshment” and his “cure” and in this way carries a different kind of conversational load, one that in some senses grants her the authority of a confidante but one that also reiterates the traditional expectation shown in conduct literature that women should draw out men’s talk without expecting the favor to be returned.

While Fishman and Lakoff prescribe a deficit in social power to account for women’s question-asking behavior, other linguists such as Deborah Tannen (1990) have argued that women and men simply learn different communicative styles and that the one women more often take up is cooperative. Questions, according to Tannen, are devices that signal a speaker’s desire to share the floor. Jane’s questions do not always function in this way, but at times she does show a particular desire to befriend others and opens the floor to learn more about certain
characters. After Jane leaves Gateshead, for example, she enters a space where social exclusion is not a given way of life and begins to ask more questions that show a desire to connect and cooperatively talk with characters such as Helen.

These three primary explanations for women’s recurrent use of questions—hesitancy, conversational workload, and cooperation—are still examined today to better understand the ways in which social inequality filters through everyday language use. But in addition to examining questions as a sign of women’s tentative and supportive speaking styles, more recent studies (Freed and Ehrlich 2010) have turned toward the opposite direction to examine ways in which asking questions may reify the authority of speakers who hold positions of power.

In institutional discourse, those who ask the questions often direct and control conversation: lawyers cross-examining witnesses and clients, doctors asking patients for a list of their symptoms, teachers quizzing students, journalists interviewing other people—in all of these contexts the questioner controls, to a great extent, the flow, tenor, and content of the conversation. Questions asked in these kinds of contexts, John Heritage points out, can set up a specific agenda, they may have embedded presuppositions, or they may “prefer” certain responses, in other words, they may be designed to favor a certain kind of response over another” (42-52). The most obvious examples in Jane Eyre to demonstrate questioning of this kind are when the apothecary, Mr. Loyd, and Brocklehurst put questions to Jane as a young girl, but it is also true that Jane, herself, asserts control in her interactions by questioning characters such as St. John in ways that presume certain responses. For example, when St. John visits Jane at her school house, Jane persistently grills him to discover his personal thoughts of Rosamond Oliver. Having experienced her own love affair, she assumes a kind of personal knowledge and experience that prompts her to probe into St. John’s.
In some contexts, such as the ones mentioned above, the questioner controls the floor, but in others, the act of imparting information may very well frame one as an expert and the questioner as someone inferior in knowledge. Deborah Tannen reminds us that “to the extent that giving information, directions, or help is of use to another, it reinforces bonds between people. But to the extent that it is asymmetrical, it creates hierarchy (511). In the novel, this dynamic clearly surfaces when Rochester, early in their relationship, commands Jane to talk, to ask him questions and engage him in an attempt to converse and build a stronger bond. But at the same time he also stresses to her his age and experience-- “I claim only such superiority as must result from twenty years’ difference in age and century’s advance in experience” (114)—which frames him as an “expert” in order to keep the hierarchy intact. Asking questions, therefore, is not just a function of soliciting information or factual knowledge, but like other social moves, it frames a person in a certain way that must be contextually determined.

Questions can achieve any number of goals in interaction: they may be used to gain factual knowledge, to show personal interest in an interlocutor, to express one’s sense of humor, to make a request of someone, to ask for some kind of clarification, to turn the topic of conversation, and they may do one or more of these functions all at the same time. Looking at specific strategies of the interrogative form—both functional and expressive-- helps to understand the kinds of social agency achieved through fictional discourse.

Though Jane’s language has frequently been characterized as a unique form of “fierce speaking” (31) most of Jane’s speech is tempered with polite, if direct, forms of speech. She has a total of thirteen challenging questions which are confrontational in nature and provoke angry and equally emotional retorts from interlocutors. But Jane is only rarely antagonistic in her questioning and generally asks questions in an approachable manner. However, she is direct.
Rarely does Jane hedge in her questions. She only ever utters “I suppose” or “perhaps” in seven of them and she has a total of five “softening” questions which mitigate the potential negative effect of something like a criticism or a bald request: “Adele may accompany us, may she not sir?” (226). Throughout the novel Jane makes a total of 23 requests, questions that ask for permission to take for herself food, money, time, and information. The great majority of questions ask for social information—knowledge that will help her to successfully navigate the different settings and characters she encounters. While money and rank elude Jane until the close of the novel, much of her social capital is negotiated through information—knowledge that she picks up in order to understand other characters and knowledge that she withholds to keep her own sense of autonomy intact. Information of this kind allows Jane to facilitate conversations that help her to develop connections with others and it alternately allows Jane to control the ways in which others respond to her in interactions.

**Jane Eyre as Facilitator**

Throughout *Jane Eyre* Bronte frames her heroine in images of isolation: Jane as the silent observer to Miss Temple and Helen’s learned conversations, Jane sitting at the window of Thornfield listening to Rochester’s happy guests converse, Jane banished to the red room while her relatives go on about their lives below. Surveillance of others is one of her most frequent occupations and it underscores her position of social exclusion. While Jane does not always mind playing the outsider and often makes the best of these situations, Bronte makes it clear that this character is essentially a woman who does not belong. In her own words, she is “a Governess—disconnected, poor, and plain” (137). Social discourse, therefore, is one accessible
means for Jane to gain some sense of self-validation while being mired in settings that reinforce her subordinate position in society. Though she is often isolated from other characters, her speaking voice is never an isolated entity. Even when alone, Bronte frequently presents Jane’s thoughts as dialogue between the abstracted qualities of Reason and Fancy. Her identity is one forged through conversations with others that give her thoughts shape. One of her narrative tasks, therefore, is to locate those who will converse with her—a task which proves difficult over the course of the novel.

Carla Kaplan’s insightful examination of conversation in *Jane Eyre* pulls away from reading Jane’s story as a metaphor for “finding one’s voice” and instead argues that the novel is, instead, a record of Jane’s keen longing for an interlocutor, a search for someone to credit her versions of her own life (72). The ideal of talk that Kaplan conjures for Jane is both mutually gratifying and subject-affirming, but what dialogue of this kind actually looks like on the page is not clear. Kaplan argues that Jane, as a character, finds her most idealistic listeners and conversationalists in the form of Diana and Mary Rivers. In the novel Jane, herself, writes of their shared conversations, noting that there was “a reviving pleasure in this intercourse, of a kind now tasted by me for the first time—the pleasure arising from perfect congeniality of tastes, sentiments, and principles” (298). Yet hardly any of the conversations between the three characters appear in dialogue; specific words, phrases, questions and topics are few and generalized. In fact, most of the recorded conversations in the last third of the novel are, instead, between St. John, their brother, and Jane. The ideal of mutually gratifying speech proves to be as elusive in the novel as the similar ideal of a sustained equality in personal relationships.

In conversations people frequently show a desire to align with one another and they do this in different ways, but speakers always have their own intentions, frames of reference, and
sense of social standing that is consistently negotiated as talk occurs. Though Jane certainly demonstrates a keen desire to converse with other characters throughout the novel--after all she does proclaim early in the narrative, “Speak I must” (30)--the function of Jane’s talk serves many purposes which correspond to the contexts at hand. As Chris Vanden Bossche writes, Jane’s “narrative strategically deploys the languages of class [and I would add to this, a range of linguistic forms, including interrogatives] as a means of constituting contingent identities capable of dealing with the dilemmas her circumstances present to her as she seeks to achieve autonomy, kinship, and social inclusion” (56). Though there is plenty of textual evidence to show that Jane values talk and attempts to engage multiple characters throughout the novel, she manages to socially position herself in a number of ways—as an employee, friend, cousin, pupil, fiancée, etc.—as she works to converse with others. In any given interaction, Jane may project a variety of stances and even some that appear contradictory.

One of the primary stances Jane takes in the novel is that of facilitator. Throughout the novel Jane takes pleasure in conversing with those who may teach her or entertain her. She enjoys Bessie’s “fireside chronicles” (35) and her “remarkable knack for narrative” (24). At Lowood she describes a “memorable evening” where Helen and Miss Temple “converse of things I had never heard of: of nations and times past; of countries far away…of books: how many they had read!” (62). In her first months at Thornfield, Jane’s loneliness stems from not finding companions “of a descriptive or narrative turn” (94). Because human relationships are often measured by verbal interaction questions take on the important role of generating and sustaining discussion, something Jane is shown to want. Facilitative questions, those that work to elicit talk from other people, are especially important for this function.
The fact that Jane asks so many questions throughout the novel is one clear indication of her need for talk. Indeed, this feature of Jane’s speech is one of the most linguistically distinct, as she asks a total of 385 questions. To give a sense of contrast, Elizabeth Bennet—far from being a reticent heroine—asks a total of 144 questions in *Pride and Prejudice*. The total percentage of Jane’s interrogatives in dialogue is greater than those of Elizabeth:

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th></th>
<th>Total Number of Questions</th>
<th>(% of total speech)</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Jane Eyre</td>
<td>385</td>
<td>22.9%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>E. Bennet</td>
<td>144</td>
<td>14.2%</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Both characters are shown to linguistically work in order to be heard and to build solidarity with interlocutors, but they do this in different ways. In order to engage characters and to amplify her voice, Elizabeth Bennet frequently employs boosters such as exclamations, italics, and the “oh!” particle which all give her speech emotional contour. Jane Eyre, on the other hand, has few boosters in her dialogue. Instead, she poses questions that similarly signal interest in what an addressee will say.

To Rochester: "Do you, sir, feel calm and happy?" (238)
To Mrs. Reed: “How are you, dear aunt?” (196)
To St. John: "Any ill news?" I demanded. "Has anything happened?" (321)
To Helen: "Is your book interesting?"... “What is it about?” (41)

In questions such as these, Jane adheres to conduct book norms that promoted showing polite interest or concern for an interlocutor. Yet these questions also encourage other characters to attend to her own face needs. Janet Holmes notes that questions can be interactionally powerful
because they demand a next utterance, and so “they are ways of ensuring at least a minimal interaction” (39). Bronte, herself, refers to this linguistic norm in the novel when Jane asks a visiting St. John “Why are you come?” and St. John replies, “Rather an inhospitable question to put to a visitor; but since you ask it, I answer simply to have a little talk with you” (321). By asking questions which facilitate conversation—even “inhospitable” ones—Jane linguistically works to have her own voice attended to. The trouble is, many of those who answer Jane’s questions do so with minimal effort.

Bronte makes it clear from the beginning chapter that Jane’s critical bent for questioning is not appreciated. Her first utterance in the novel, a question directed to her Aunt Reed, is ignored and she is told: “Jane, I don’t like cavillers or questioners” (5). Despite the early warning, Jane continues to ask questions of those around her. When she arrives at Lowood, friendless and knowing little of her new environment, Jane persistently questions Helen Burns. She begins in a friendly, facilitative manner: “Is your book interesting?” “What is it about?” and then she sharpens the conversational focus to inquiries related to the school that will help her understand it: “Do we pay no money? Do they keep us for nothing?” “Who was Naomi Brocklehurst?” (42). In their first two conversations, Jane asks a litany of questions, a total of 37, and yet Helen hardly asks any of Jane. Helen’s answers, though responsive, are succinct. At one point Helen firmly tells her: “You ask rather too many questions. I have given you answers enough for the present: now I want to read” (43). The narrative effect of Jane’s one-sided questioning is an increased sense of her social isolation and ambiguous status among family members, fellow students, and teachers.

Other scenes in the novel reveal a similar dynamic in conversation where Jane consistently asks questions only to ask more that beg for elaboration. The limitations placed on
interactions of this kind may be due, in part, to Jane’s frequent use of “response-restricting” interrogatives. According to Janet Holmes, “response-restricting” questions are intended to “elicit a short specific response” and often can be answered with a simple “yes” or “no” (48). For example, asking “Have you had a good morning?” will elicit less of a response than, “What has your morning been like?” Of Jane’s 385 questions, 133 are posed so that a simple “yes” or “no” would suffice as a response. Here are a few examples of Jane’s “yes/no” questions that show she employs them with a range of different characters:

To Helen: "Do you like the teachers?" (43)
To Bessie: "Did she send you here, Bessie?" (77)
To Adele: "Was it your mama who taught you that piece?" (87)
To Rochester: "Are you injured, sir?" (96)
To Mrs. Fairfax: "Mr. Rochester is not likely to return soon, I suppose?" (139)
To St. John: "Is this portrait like?" (316)

Though response-restricting questions tend to stifle discussion, giving the impression that the questioner is not interested in further exploring or understanding an issue, the fact that Jane keeps repeating questions of this kind suggests the reverse—a desire to engage and learn from others. But more than this, the repetitive questioning underscores the measured reserve found in most of characters Jane meets.

As Jane shifts from one geographical location to the next, she asks others for information that will help her to adjust to unknown environments. The “yes/no” questions, much more recurrent in these transitional scenes, reflect a desire to bond through shared information, but at the same time, reiterate her unstable social position. As the questioner, Jane most often assumes a less authoritative stance in interaction, as she is one who lacks the knowledge of day-to-day life in her surroundings. Yet she also asks most of the “yes/no” questions to characters who are socially lower on the rung than herself—those characters like Bessie, Mrs. Fairfax, Hannah, and
the old Thornfield butler who aren’t expected to fraternize and possibly view her questions as a means to control the floor.

When Jane encounters Bessie en route to Thornfield, she asks her a number of questions to solicit information about her family: “Well, and what of John Reed?”; “What does he look like?”; “And Mrs. Reed?”; “Did she send you here, Bessie?”; “What foreign country was [Mr. Eyre] going to, Bessie?”; “Madeira?”; “So he went?” (77-8). Extracting information from her old friend proves difficult. Bessie is not unfriendly, but as a servant of the Reed household, she delays volunteering or elaborating upon the personal details of those who pay her. This scene similarly echoes the following one, in which Jane first meets with a prevaricating Mrs. Fairfax and with persistence, asks her questions about their employer: “Is Mr. Rochester an exacting, fastidious sort of man?”; “Do you like him? Is he generally liked?”; “Is he liked for himself?”; “But he has no peculiarities? What, in short, is his character?”; “In what way is he peculiar?” (89). Mrs. Fairfax does not expound upon Rochester’s personal qualities because for her, his social ones suffice: “he has a gentleman’s tastes and habits” (89) she tells Jane. But Jane wants to know about the makeup of Rochester—his personality, history, and his idiosyncrasies. She shows herself much more willing to think critically of those characters around her as individuals, whatever their social status may be. Her questions, therefore, underline both her social separation from characters like Mrs. Fairfax and Bessie, yet also her ties to the working class. She depends upon the information that servants are willing to share with her, and yet she uses it in ways that help her to directly interact with those she considers her equals.

Throughout the novel, Jane linguistically tries to connect with other characters and she does this through questions, the great majority of which ask for social information. But even though Jane works to facilitate conversation—exerting more effort to do so than other
characters—her questions often serve more than one purpose. Eckert and McConnell-Ginet point out that the term facilitate, “sounds as if what the facilitator is doing is basically helping the other(s) achieve their goals…[but] eliciting the other’s explicit response can also be an exercise in wielding power” (170). Jane’s facilitative questions certainly provide opportunities for an addressee to speak up and participate in an exchange, but they can also signal her desire to control the floor and assert some form of authority.

Jane Eyre in Control

The idea of control, and self-control in particular, is a recurrent theme in Jane Eyre that has been given a good deal of critical consideration (see Kucich, Shuttleworth, Lane). While visiting with St. John Rivers, Jane mentally censures the man’s rigid self-discipline: “‘with all his firmness and self-control,’ thought I, ‘he tasks himself too far: locks every feeling and pang within—expresses, confesses, imparts nothing’” (316). But while Jane disdains the rigid self-constraint of St. John, in various ways she, too, reveals a firm investment in controlling her own self-image. This concern visibly materializes when she forcibly draws comparative portraits of herself and an imagined Blanche Ingram--a punitive reminder of her subordinate relation to Rochester and Blanche: “the contrast was a great as self-control could desire” (137). But Jane’s desire for control also emerges in her spoken dialogue, in those statements and questions that work to direct her interlocutor’s responses—both verbal and perceptive.

Jane’s efforts to control talk can be viewed in a number of ways: as a means to divert attention away from herself and also as a way to draw others’ notice; a way of gathering social information and of disclosing it; a way to stand apart from other characters and a way to socially
blend; a way to demonstrate personal feminine propriety and at other times to overstep the traditional bounds of polite discourse in order to assert authority. At times Jane’s attempts to control conversation produce the desired effect and her interlocutors respond in the manner Jane aims for, but other times her controlling questions and discourse miss the mark.

At the beginning of the novel Jane’s voice is characterized as bold, uncontrolled, and fierce. But in these brief moments of “uncontrolled” candor Jane’s voice actually works at its utmost to not only control the direction of conversation, but to control, too, the perceptions of those she engages. At Gateshead Jane verbally lashes out against her Aunt, her cousin, and the servants, and in doing so, uses questions that challenge her interlocutors in an unconventional way. These questions underscore how, at an early stage, Jane actively seeks other characters’ perspectives and words to better understand her own position in the world, but even as she asks others for a sense of self-definition, their rhetorical and antagonistic tone implicitly challenges that viewpoint:

To Aunt Reed: “What does Bessie say I have done?” (5)
To Abbot: “Master! How is he my master? Am I a servant?” (9)
To Aunt Reed: “How dare I, Mrs. Reed? How dare I?” (30)

These few verbal clashes account for more than half of Jane’s antagonistic questions—a total of eight. Of the two supportive and information-seeking questions she asks at Gateshead, we are told, one is uttered only because “[w]onderful civility…emboldened [Jane] to ask a question” of Bessie (15). By reverse logic, this suggests Jane’s challenging questions in these opening chapters counter overwhelming incivility from her interlocutors. She characterizes these antagonistic exchanges as “battles” to be won and as moments when emotion “claims mastery” (215) over her, as if a force outside of her body has wrenched control away. Feminine propriety would seem to demand an excuse for these aggressive outbursts. After she asks Mrs. Reed one
of these angry questions, she explains her verbal behavior, writing, “it seemed as if my tongue pronounced words without my will consenting to their utterance: something spoke out of me over which I had no control” (22). And yet these questions, more forceful than anything else she utters, work to influence those who demean her repeatedly.

Linguist Janet Holmes has asserted that “antagonistic elicitations may act as a means of gaining status” but that they are also risky: “if they are convincingly refuted they may lead to loss of face by the challenger” (47). These are the most face-threatening questions one can pose and their effect on Jane’s addressees is not always successful. Her aunt orders her to not “cavil or question” (5), Abbot reminds her that she is “less than a servant” (9), and Aunt Reed later retorts, “What is the matter with you?” (31)—all these responses fail to offer Jane a sustained sense of social credit. But rather than obviously bend to the expectation that she “speak pleasantly” Jane shores up these experiences and sets herself apart from the Reeds by establishing herself as possessing a clearer moral code. In contrast to Eliza who is painted as “headstrong and selfish” and Georgiana who is “spoiled” and “universally indulged” (12), Jane uses her degraded position to assume a mantle of moral superiority. This mental separation quickly transforms into a physical one when Jane, having challenged her Aunt for the last time, is given a fleeting sense of having “gained a victory” (31) and then is hastened to Lowood School: a positive outcome of her antagonistic questioning.

When Jane arrives at Lowood she asks sociable and inquisitive questions of those around her which points to her own early sense of wanting to share likenesses with other girls at the school. But once Jane settles into her environment, she tells us that she gradually takes up a subdued demeanor and way of interacting that conforms to the subordinating respectability engrained there. She learns French, drawing, and becomes devoted to “duty and order” (71)
following the influence of Miss Temple. Her speech under this regime of acquiescence is described in narration more often than it appears in dialogue and so the effects of it and the form it takes in her later years at Lowood is not precisely clear. But if her controlled speech at Thornfield is any indication of her verbal education then we can assume that the “rules and systems” (72) learned at Lowood help her when entering into a relationship with Rochester, a relationship that carries strange echoes of the combative exchanges she experienced at Gateshead.

The courtship of Rochester and Jane is infused with references to their likeness—a trope in many romantic myths that talk of two individuals merging together (Kaplan 87). Intimacy in this context would seem, on the surface, to level the playing field between two individuals locked in a class-driven, gender-driven hierarchy. Despite their many differences, Jane tells us that Rochester is “of her kind” and that, “I understand the language of his countenance and movements; though rank and wealth sever us widely, I have something of my brain and heart, in my blood and nerves, that assimilates mentally to him” (149). Language, here, is idealistically presented as a medium that reflects the equality between two socially unequal figures. Rochester, too, comments in a similar vein, saying to Jane in his proposal, “My equal is here, and my likeness. Jane will you marry me? ” (217). Though both characters profess to be alike, to share the same qualities of mind and feeling, their interactions reveal a different dynamic—not one of mutuality but, instead, one of competing, if similar, interests.

While Jane never overtly defies Rochester, she can hardly be described as wholly submissive to him. Conversation, itself, is quite often presented as a game that involves personal pleasure taken from strategizing linguistic control in discourse. Shortly after their engagement, Rochester tells her: “Encroach, presume, and the game is up” (223). Their courtship, which
Bronte frames here as a game to be won or lost has Jane “pursuing plans” (253) to keep Rochester controlled through the “needle of repartee” (233). Both characters tend to treat their discourse as a battle of wills—as an opportunity to correctly interpret the inner makeup of the other while holding fast to their own sense of autonomy.

Never is Jane more fiercely assertive than when she challenges those characters who threaten her autonomy. The second and last cluster of Jane’s antagonistic questions occurs at Thornfield as she asserts, once again, her independence—this time to Rochester. Jane’s stormy self-defense includes a total of five rhetorical questions:

‘Do you think I can stay to become nothing to you? Do you think I am an automaton?—a machine without feelings? and can bear to have my morsel of bread snatched from my lips, and my drop of living water dashed from my cup? Do you think, because I am poor, obscure, plain, and little, I am soulless and heartless?’ (215-6)

Rosemarie Bodenheimer claims that in this garden scene Jane “asserts her equality with Rochester in a new kind of ‘fierce speaking’” (393) but her speech here sounds remarkably familiar in tone, diction, and syntax to the emotional charge directed to Mrs. Reed earlier in the novel. She even credits, once again, another out-of-body source to account for her bold speech: “I am not talking to you now through the medium of custom, conventionalities, nor even mortal flesh—it is my spirit that addresses your spirit” (216). Striping away the “conventionalities” of language, of her social circumstances, she asserts her equality with Rochester, but rather than change the subject or dismiss her as previous interlocutors do, he rises to the occasion and agrees in this particular moment that they are, indeed, equals.

Janet Holmes has pointed out that an effective challenge is “likely to attract admiration from others who regard interaction as a competitive activity, and so increase the social status of the challenger” (47). If we look at Jane and Rochester’s interactions as a competitive field of verbal play, in this moment of antagonistic fervor Jane manages to check her “opponent” and
win his admiration, win, even, his hand in marriage, which in turn elevates her social status, if only briefly. Though some critics such as Janet Freeman point to this moment as a powerful instance of bold self-assertion, Jane’s fervent challenge, as forceful as it sounds, can also be read as a personal form of verbal capitulation. Early at Thornfield Rochester tells her: “The Lowood constraint still clings to you somewhat; controlling your features, muffling your voice, and restricting your limbs” (118). His description is not far off the mark. But rather than view Jane’s “muffled” voice as just a sign of passivity, it should alternately be looked upon as a form of resistance, a measured form of agency that runs counter to Rochester’s patronizing assumption that she will eventually “speak too freely” and break through “the close-set bars of a cage” (119).

Rochester, the one character who most obviously enjoys conversing with Jane and asks numerous questions of her, seems to do so primarily to affirm his own sense of selfhood. Jane tells us that with Rochester, she “talked comparatively little, but…heard him talk with relish” (125), which is a statement that underlines the traditionally expected imbalance of conversational exchange between men and women. Her company satisfies his own personal need for social refreshment: “The more you and I converse, the better; for while I cannot blight you, you may refresh me” (122). The questions he asks of Jane often beg for some comment on his own person: ‘You examine me, Miss Eyre,’ said he: ‘do you think me handsome?’” (112) and “Now, ma’am, am I a fool?” (112). In moments of discourse such as this, Jane responds in a way that only partially adheres to the advice of Jane West in *Letters to a Young Lady*:

It sometimes happens, that comparative strangers will ask our opinions on their conduct; this, however, is rarely done, except when they have made up their minds upon the subject, and wish to strengthen their resolution by these unfairly collected suffrages. On such an occasion, it is wrong to sacrifice our integrity to insidious vanity. Silence is the wisest mode; but if we must speak, our opinion should be ingenuous, only couched in respectful language. (49-50)
Conscious of the expectation for a sufficiently polite response to Rochester’s first bald question, Jane writes, “I should, if I had deliberated, have replied to [his] question by something conventionally vague and polite; but the answer [‘No, sir’] somehow slipped from my tongue before I was aware” (112). Again, Jane’s blunt response is couched as a “slip of the tongue”—a reaction without proper or conscious control. But a moment later, when Rochester asks her if he is a fool, Jane answers more carefully: “Far from it, sir” (112). This short exchange captures the consistent push and pull of polite discourse that Jane balances throughout the narrative as she veers between direct disclosure of self and polite evasion exerted to mask her thoughts and feelings.

Jane’s questions, like her polite statements, can frequently be looked upon as a form of speech that softens, even as it shapes, what she refers to as her “iron shroud” (344). When Jane returns to Thornfield after having visited her dying aunt, she admits to donning a self-imposed “veil.” In this scene of homecoming, she struggles to “control the working muscles of [her] face” and fights to suppress “what [she] had resolved to conceal” (208). It is this retaining and withholding of self that comprises Jane’s system for managing Rochester. Just as Rochester repeatedly thwarts Jane’s own readings of him by lying to her and disguising himself, Jane frustrates Rochester by contradicting his expectations and circumventing direct appeals and questions. Their courtship is comprised, as Sally Shuttleworth has noted, of “erotic excitement produced by evading interpretive penetration, while a sense of selfhood is actively created by the demand for disclosure” (29). Interrogatives infusing their interactions function as strategies of both self-disclosure and evasion. The more time Jane spends with Rochester and comes to know him as he comes to know her, the more her efforts at evasion amplify to avoid providing a precise reading of the self. Jane’s increased number of interrogatives—those that are negated
and those that ask for elaboration—after she becomes engaged to Rochester, reflect her growing concern for maintaining face as well as her desire for autonomy as he pushes his own ideas of domestic feminity onto her.

Before their engagement Jane politely questions Rochester to not only learn more about him but also to keep her own private sense of self intact. For instance, after Rochester asks Jane, “[A]m I a fool?” she quickly answers and then redirects the conversation: “Would you, perhaps, think me rude if I inquired in return whether you are a philanthropist?” (112). Rochester responds, “There again! Another stick of the penknife, when she pretended to pat my head” (112). Polite questioning is directly acknowledged by Rochester as a tactic of defense and form of verbal dueling as Jane turns to conventional discourse less likely to put her on the spot. A bit earlier in the novel, when Rochester asks Jane if she is fond of presents, she replies with a similarly vague response and question:

“[Presents] are generally thought pleasant things.”
“Generally thought? But what do you think?”
“I should be obliged to take time, sir, before I could give you an answer worthy of your acceptance: a present has many faces to it, has it not?” (103).

Jane, again, evades Rochester’s probing questions by asking one of her own, but in this case her question doubly works to control his response through its negation.

Negative questions like the one above and others that begin with “Isn’t it…?” “Doesn’t this…?” “Don’t you…?” are, according to John Heritage (2002), “quite commonly treated as expressing a position or point of view” (1428). They function as a means to solicit a specific kind of response and in this way may control the direction of conversation. Brown and Levinson have also pointed out that negative questions which presume “yes” as an answer “are widely used as a way to indicate that [a speaker] knows [a hearer’s] wants, tastes, habits, etc. and thus partially
redress the imposition of a face threatening act” (122-3). In the novel Jane has only fifteen negated questions, but most of them are directed to Rochester and most, significantly, occur after she accepts his proposal of marriage.

To counter Rochester’s increasingly autocratic language and possessive commands that directly follow her acceptance, Jane turns the topics of conversation onto his own limitations—his mysterious past and dealings with women-- and asks him to elaborate on them. Jane, in a stronger position of power now, asks that he satisfy her curiosity. “Curiosity is a dangerous petition: it is well I have not taken a vow to accord every request”—counters a “disturbed” Rochester (223). It is the disclosure of personal knowledge that has the power to curb Rochester’s confidence, an act which reinforces the fact that in this fictional domain made up of half-truths and evasion, information remains an important currency of power. Jane, wanting to satisfy her curiosity, but convey her own personal understanding of his character, poses negated questions that implicitly work to have her viewpoint aligned with his as she pushes for a specific kind of response:

To Rochester: Don’t you think I had better take advantage of the confession, and begin and coax and entreat--even cry and be sulky if necessary--for the sake of a mere essay of my power?” (223)

To Rochester: “Do you think Miss Ingram will not suffer from your dishonest coquetry? Won’t she feel forsaken and deserted?” (224)

To Rochester: “Did it not seem to you in the least wrong to live in that way, first with one mistress and then another?” (266)

Rochester’s general response to Jane’s interrogative mode in these examples is to deflect and redirect the focus back onto her shoulders-- the same tactic Jane often employs for him. These questions in the form of reprimands construct Jane as a character who exerts moral authority, the kind of which advice literature promoted for the betterment of home and family. While Jane’s
questions can hardly be described as deferential, their meaning projects a principled ethos which works, just as many polite linguistic forms do, to uphold traditionally feminine concerns. At the same time, these questions exert a great deal of personal control in order to shape a more equivalent relationship between herself and Rochester.

Once Jane’s curiosity is mollified by the ghostly figure of Bertha who then becomes the knowable, pitiable wife of Edward Rochester, their relationship temporarily dissolves and Jane leaves her “Master” and home at Thornfield. Their game of prevarication and control would seem to end at this point when self-disclosure has ruptured all ties, but Jane’s evasion of self and controlling questions continue in a different setting and with a character purported to be her equal, one who is, indeed, her relative. The relationship between Jane and St. John is not so dissimilar to the one she and Rochester share in that Jane continues to try and balance proper respect towards her cousin and yet maintain her sense of selfhood as he gains influence over her and “takes away [her] liberty of mind” (339).

After Jane arrives at Morton she begins life anew as a school teacher, residing in a modest cottage alone, with a small community of neighbors and pupils who, the most “estimable” among them, are characters like Jane: “desirous of information, and disposed for improvement” (312). Among these working people, Jane becomes “a favourite” (312) and her speech reflects the confidence and sense of autonomy developed in this remote neighborhood. For instance, it is here that Jane takes pleasure in questioning St. John after learning of his history with Rosamond Oliver and presents a portrait of her in order to draw out his thoughts of the woman:

To St. John: “Is the portrait like?” I asked bluntly (316)
To St. John: “But what of the resemblance? Who is it like?” (317)
To St. John: “Would it comfort or would it wound you to have a similar painting? When you are at Madagascar, or at the Cape, or in India, would it be a consolation
to have that memento in your possession? or would the sight of it bring recollections calculated to enervate and distress?” (317)

In this scene Jane comfortably questions St. John and probes into his personal thoughts. She explains her forthright speech writing: “I could never rest in communication with strong, discreet, and refined minds, whether male or female, till I had passed the outworks of conventional reserve, and crossed the threshold of confidence” (319). Again, it is “confidence,” one’s knowledge of self and one’s trust, which Jane seeks as she questions and interacts with St. John. Her questions indicate an awareness of his attraction to Rosamond, an awareness of his discomfort, and yet she persists. Through this determined questioning, Jane frames herself as an authority in matters of love, but her authority does not extend far beyond the personal and affective sphere in relation to St. John.

In the following scene, we find these two characters in reversed positions as St. John uses his own knowledge of Jane’s inheritance to assume a different kind of authority—one associated with more traditionally masculine domains of knowledge. In this case, St. John’s information sets him apart from Jane in a powerful way that emphasizes the inequality of their relationship. Rather than simply disclose the details of Jane’s good fortune, St. John stalls and offers them to a questioning Jane, piece by piece. Narratively this works to add dramatic suspense and build up anticipation for the Reader, as well as for Jane, but it also places St. John in the role of a substitute benefactor and agent of change. Jane, as the questioner, is now forced to beg for the particulars of what he knowledge he may decide to impart:

“It is a very strange piece of business,” I added. “I must know more about it.”
“Another time.”
“No: to-night—to-night!” and as he turned from the door I place myself between it and him. He looked rather embarrassed.
“You certainly shall not go till you have told me all!” I said.
“I would rather not, just now.”
You shall—you must!” (326-7)

Jane’s entreaties to St. John, bald declaratives rather than questions, work to leverage her authority so that he will share more information regarding her inheritance. While all of his news does, indeed, eventually come to light, this scene reiterates how knowledge, the possession of it and the circulation of it, remains a strong instrument of power and prestige.

Once Jane enters the fold of the Rivers family and divides her share of the Eyre legacy, her spirited speech and her interrogatives wane. Wealth and social inclusion do not prevent her from remaining subordinate to the family patriarch who makes her feel that in order to please him, she must “disown half [her] nature, stifle half [her] faculties, wrest [her] tastes from their original bent” (339). Selfhood is no longer a topic to evade in discourse, but something purposely severed from Jane as she, once again, assumes the position of pupil. At Lowood, and again at Moor House, Jane accommodates her speech for the sake of pleasing an instructor who assumes control in interactions and, again, this passivity is reflected in the passive voice of the narrator who describes the linguistic transformation. But at Moor House Jane is not so docile that she permits St. John to marry her or to dictate the parameters of her speech; indeed, she is bold enough to interrupt and contradict him repeatedly. Here, as in all the chapters of her narrative, we see Jane veer between polite subordination and bold assertiveness. She directly acknowledges this pattern in her discourse writing:

I have never in my life have known any medium in my dealings with positive, hard characters, antagonistic to my own, between absolute submission and determined revolt. I have always faithfully observed the one, up to the very moment of bursting, sometimes with volcanic vehemence, into the other… (341)

In this passage Jane implicitly suggests that her language merely responds to what other characters may say to her, how other characters may treat her which, whether her response is “revolting” or not, places her in a position of subjection. But in many scenes of the novel Jane
takes control and initiates discourse, as well, in ways that shape the content and tone of talk that falls at, and between, the poles of “submission” and “revolt.”

**Conclusion**

Feminist critics (Freeman, Douglas Peters, Bodenheimer, Rosenthal Shumway) have tended to classify *Jane Eyre* as a verbal *bildungsroman* that charts Jane’s dialectical/dialogical movement between geographic settings associated with fervent rebellion and social repression to illustrate that words are “the instrument by which Jane Eyre learns to understand and master the world” (Freeman 690). These readings suggest that Jane’s voice, over the course of the novel, evolves to become something greater than what she owned at beginning of her story. While the metaphor of “finding one’s voice” has worked powerfully over the last several decades to communicate the social and political inequities women have experienced through the patriarchal status quo, it over-simplifies the ways in which women actually use language. One critical cost of adhering to the metaphor of voice in literary criticism is that it obscures other meanings of silence and speech that may reveal, in more nuanced ways, exactly how authority, subjection, or any number of social stances translate through conversations.

The individual growth of any character in a novel is frequently as uneven a trajectory as their ascribed use of language. In discussing the female *bildungsroman* Susan Fraiman complicates traditional definitions of the genre by identifying “counternarratives” of heroines that “cut across the seemingly smooth course of female development” (xi) and asserts that the “stories of middle-class female protagonists…tend to insist that personal destiny evolves in dialectical relation to historical events, social structures, and other people” (10). Formation here is “foisted” upon female characters so that their own identity is dependent upon what others,
what the world, makes of them. Though Fraiman focuses her study on secondary plots and
doubling figures that break up the typical progression of individual development, rather than
speech, her argument underscores the basic tensions to be found in the dialogic work characters
undertake as they push against and appeal to other characters in forming their identities. Jane’s
narrative path is not straightforward and her speech is never a strictly positive or negative entity.

The set conditions of inequality in the novel, the fact that Jane is a woman, ward,
student, then a governess and teacher, limits the number of her utterances that reveal any sense of
authority beyond the social roles she has been dealt. The sheer number of questions that Jane
asks other characters who fail to ask her questions in return stresses these social limitations. But
within the parameters of the discourse she is given, she flexibly employs language to project
certain social stances that correspond to her desires for social inclusion, kinship, privacy, moral
authority, and detachment. The interrogatives Jane issues help her character to respond to and
steer discourse that reflects upon her identity as she navigates various contexts and climes. At
times her questions correspond to the traditional feminine expectation that talk be supportive and
cooperative, at other times her questions overtly work to control the direction of topics and the
responses of other characters, and often she manages to concurrently reach both of these ends
with the same questions.

The last two questions Jane asks in the novel are directed to Rochester, after she has
found him at Ferndean, as he discloses his narrative of the night the two of them telepathically
communicate from two distant settings. After he tells Jane that he called her name three times
and heard her voice in return, Jane probes into his story, “did you speak these words aloud?” and
“was it last Monday night: somewhere near midnight?” (381). Rochester offers up the details of
this supernatural incident but Jane, curiously, withholds her own version of that night, writing, “I
listened to Mr. Rochester’s narrative; but made no disclosure in return. The coincidence struck me as too awful and inexplicable to be communicated or discussed” (381). Though Jane wants to prevent Rochester from unnecessary pain by telling the story, her suppression raises some doubt in the possibility of actually finding complete discursive satisfaction in her communication with Rochester. At this closing juncture, where Jane and Rochester supposedly coexist with symbolic parity through Rochester’s damaged body and Jane’s inheritance, Jane purposely withholds her words as she does before they are even engaged. Her withdrawal affirms an understanding that language remains an instrument of power between them, even when it remains unspoken—a fact that Bronte expands upon in her last novel *Villette*. 
Chapter Five: Lucy Snowe: “Nestling Under the Wing of Silence”

Lucy Snowe, Bronte’s frosty protagonist in *Villette*, is a famously tightlipped heroine. As a protagonist she shares several key commonalities with Jane Eyre, for both are solitary characters, orphaned as children, who end up travelling to unknown environs in order to secure a paid living through the limited means available to them: teaching. Both of them, situated as unattractive outsiders, observe with intelligence and sensitivity the social behavior and actions of those characters who surround them. But where Jane demonstrates a desire to participate in the “joyous conversational murmur” others might offer her, Lucy much more often repels and sidesteps overtures for friendly conversation. In *Jane Eyre*, Jane insists, “Speak I must” and her many questions put to other characters underline the force of her desire for conversational rapport. These questions also reveal the effort she takes to control her own self-representation through speech and a belief that talk will satisfy her desire for companionship and self-validation. But in *Villette* Bronte turns a more pessimistic eye towards speech and the rewards to be found in spoken words. Just as Jane Austen, in her final novel, *Persuasion*, moves away from the easy repartee and bold self-expression found in *Pride and Prejudice* to an implicit confidence in Anne Elliot’s sincere and silent communications, so too, does Bronte’s last novel give credence to the silent heroine.

In *Villette*, silence, rather than speech, becomes Lucy’s favored medium for communication. Speech, which is described in the novel as “brittle, unmalleable, and cold as ice” (53) binds Lucy to interactions that consistently reproduce the social hierarchies built around her. Within the structure of everyday talk, the imbalances and biases that stem from Lucy’s position as a poor, parentless, and plain female character surface in ways that render self-expression through speech less intelligible. Throughout the novel Lucy’s bemoans her “traitor
tongue” which “trips” and “falters” when conversing with other characters—a physical manifestation of her linguistic and social inferiority. The biting comments and sharp observations that Lucy easily rolls off in written narration hardly ever translate so persuasively in her dialogue. And like the other heroines discussed in this dissertation, Lucy veers between communication forms that conform to feminine speech outlined in conduct literature as well as more individualistic forms that highlight her subjectivity. Speech, however, will only do so much for her. It is through the less “brittle” and more “malleable” medium of silence that Lucy most successfully negotiates the claims of both feminine propriety and liberal individualism to enact measures of social agency.

In *Villette* silence is named “restless,” “dead,” “triumphant,” “pleasant,” and “fresh” which attests to the diverse functions of silence in the novel. The severity of Lucy’s repressed and thwarted feelings, signaled through her frequent silences, have often been read as a sign of her powerlessness. Yet her silence is never alone submissive; rather, it indexes a variety of stances that allow her to conceal her deficiencies in speech, evade limited readings of herself by other characters, and contain the intensity of her feelings. Silence, however, is not just a defensive strategy in interaction, it also places Lucy, at times, in a position of authority— as someone others choose to confide in, as someone respected through her held silence, as someone who exerts power over characters. Lucy’s silences and disjointed speech shows us more clearly the novel’s resistance to being framed as a traditional courtship plot that hinges on a clear articulation of one’s selfhood through dialogic interactions. Rather, the novel suggests that language gains more significance through its deliberate suppression.
The Limits of Speech for Lucy Snowe

In Bronte’s last novel, more so than in *Jane Eyre*, we see speech contested as a fixed category of self-identification that Lucy Snowe grapples with when speaking to other characters. Her strong preference for silence counters speech as a discursive practice that reiterates the asymmetrical relationship between women and men, for within the structure of language lies the social assumptions and expectations for performing gender that shape as well as limit one’s social agency. Linguists Penelope Eckert and Sally McConnell-Ginet reiterate this point writing, “both language and gender are fundamentally embedded in social practice, deriving their meaning from the human activities in which they figure. Social practice involves not just individuals making choices and acting for reasons: it also involves the constraints, institutional and ideological, that frame (but do not completely determine) those individual actions” (5). As a female expected to patiently listen, to sound agreeable, to defer through polite honorifics, to stick to contextually appropriate topics of discussion, Lucy, like other female characters, is expected to sacrifice saying what she would like to state, with directness, for the sake of sounding properly feminine. The inherent tension in wanting to speak out with frank sincerity and the deep dread of social repercussions that follow such an action materializes in Lucy’s frequently faltering speech. In the middle of the novel imaginary Reason reminds her, “You converse imperfectly. While you speak, there can be no oblivion of inferiority” (255). Lucy’s reluctance to converse with others in both English and French signifies a greater apprehension in being socially construed as a certain kind of individual—particularly of an “inferior” sort.

Lucy’s limited verbal presence in the opening chapters of *Villette* indicates, from the outset of the novel, a pronounced skepticism in spoken language. Within the Bretton household Lucy is positioned as an outsider—one who “hears,” “studies,” “observes,” and “beholds” but
one who rarely speaks. Like Jane Eyre, the first words we hear Lucy utter come in the form of a question: “Of what are these things the signs and tokens?” (8) she asks. This is a question which, as critic Karen Lawrence notes, positions her as “first and foremost a decoder of signs, an interpreter of other people and events” (448). It is through other characters and her observations of them, rather than her own dialogic interactions, that Lucy gradually becomes known. Instead of divulging her history or recounting conversations she shares with other characters in the Bretton household, Lucy as narrator holds back. Her talk, in its scarcity, signals her early misgivings of speech. It is a skepticism that does not diminish as the novel progresses, for even as the novel closes, we read of Lucy lamenting an evident “weakness and deficiency” in possessing “the total default of self-assertion” (491).

When Lucy chooses to speak, she often describes her voice as filled with anxiety and trepidation—unease that underlines a personal distrust of spoken language. When called upon to talk extemporaneously, Lucy frequently struggles to find the desired words. During her short employment with Mrs. Marchmont, when asked a question on the topic of love, Lucy recounts that, “I could not answer: I had no words” (46). Though Mrs. Marchmont appeals to Lucy, placing her in the authoritative role of “chaplain” in this scene, the power accorded to her is hollow, for the lady proceeds to answer her own question without actually paying attention to Lucy’s non-verbal response: “It seemed as if she thought I had answered [the question]” (46) and proceeds to say what is on her mind. Lucy’s words, it can be implied here, lack the substance to make an impression.

As the novel progresses, Lucy’s voice emerges with more frequency, but the “impromptu faculty” (422) often eludes her. As critic Patricia Murphy indicates, “When Lucy does compel herself to speak, her comments are typically marked by delay, awkwardness, and irresolution, a
propensity Lucy bemoans when recognizing that she ‘had no flow, only a hesitating trickle of language, in ordinary circumstances’” (25). Lucy’s verbal agility is further complicated in her first months in Villette because she is unable to speak or comprehensively understand French. The social disadvantage of this linguistic limitation becomes immediately evident when M. Paul and Madame Beck acknowledge, during their first meeting with Lucy, that “one may then speak plainly in her presence” (74) without fear of causing offense or divulging private information that might compromise the speaker. Without the proper knowledge to speak or to understand their native tongue, Lucy is relegated to the position of a nonentity. Language, here, is indirectly acknowledged by Bronte to be a clear conduit to and a reflection of personal power. And though Lucy gradually gains the respect of those at school like M. Paul, even he, Lucy writes, understands that “however I might write his language, I spoke and always should speak it imperfectly and hesitatingly” (532). When it comes to interpreting and translating texts for M. Paul, Lucy ably proves her knowledge of the foreign language in a written form, copying out the words of other writers—but when she must speak for herself, unrehearsed words that represent her own thoughts, she struggles, in both English and in French.

Lucy’s talent for reading and translating books points to the novel’s broader appreciation of written words, rather than spoken ones. In the same way Lucy relishes learning and reading for her work at Rue Fossette, that same investment in written words is extended to letters written by those characters she cares for most. Letters offer Lucy private communications that do not require her to speak in ways that consistently reinforce the gender and class biases built into language. Critic Ivan Kreilkamp insightfully notes that:

There is a tension implicit in Villette between a commonsensical valuation of the letters Lucy receives as second-best companions for actual presence, speech, the fullness of human companionship, and a very different sense that these letters are not substitutions for what Lucy desires, but are themselves the final object of her desire. (341)
This point bears consideration when we see Lucy’s extreme distress over a missing letter—“I had saved it all day—never opened it till this evening: it was scarcely glanced over: I cannot bear to lose it. Oh, my letter!” (275)—transcend any comfort to be drawn from the fact that the letter-writer, himself, stands before her, voicing his concern and sympathy. Lucy, it would seem wants, not Dr. John, but his writing which she chooses to lock up and conceal, much as she does her voice. For Lucy, personal letters are tokens for which she dreams of at night, is haunted by during the day, and feels drawn to like a magnet (265). With M. Paul’s letters, too, Lucy finds “real food that nourished, living water that refreshed” (544). Personal letters offer Lucy a tangible sign of another person’s care and love that simultaneously shields her from having to hold her own in conversations where she lacks the “impromptu faculty” and where that same care and love may become overshadowed by other self-interests that typically emerge in talk.

However much Lucy may wish to communicate through letters, she cannot escape the expectation of conversation and is forced to speak with other characters. As a character in a play, however, Lucy excels. Lucy’s speech, at its most confident, occurs when she is given a script to perform in front of a large audience for Madame Beck’s fete—when prompted to use words not of her own making. Approached by M. Paul to play a leading male part, Lucy responds in a way that illustrates her unstable grasp of speech, for while her thoughts blare, “Non, non, non!” she tells us that “her lips dropped the word ‘oui’” (148). Lucy’s linguistic apprehension, signaled through her uncontrolled and involuntary acceptance of the role, also appears in her initial moments on the stage until she embraces the chance to represent someone else—the role of a man who speaks with the boldness, competitiveness, and wit not socially sanctioned for females. Lucy writes, “that first speech was the difficulty: it revealed this fact,
that it was not the crowd I feared so much as my own voice...When my tongue once got free, and my voice took its true pitch, and found its natural tone, I thought of nothing but the personage I represented” (155). Performing a man’s part emboldens Lucy to speak up, as well as “rise inwardly” (155), to use direct and expressive language not condoned for women in their everyday talk. As she performs, Lucy savors the chance to experience the full emotional spectrum of spoken language without concern for how it might misrepresent or expose her, for the words she utters do not function, as they typically do, as personal signs of her own interiority and social standing. In the role of a foppish man, dressed in half women’s clothing and half men’s garb, Lucy stands comfortably in an ambiguous space where gendered norms blur so that her performance expands the possibilities of social variation within her typical linguistic repertoire. Moments of expansive self-expression in Villette, however, are fleeting. Just as quickly as Lucy finds herself assigned a part in the school play, the performance ends and she vows to never again “be drawn into a similar affair” explaining that it “would not do for a mere looker-on at life” (156). More comfortable putting aside the play’s script, Lucy’s renunciation of the theater here symbolically points to a similar, but broader, discomfort in performing more conventional linguistic scripts, like the kind found in women’s conduct literature, that bind her to actions and attitudes that constrain self-expression.

The kind of self-expression Lucy prefers and, in fact, employs often, is sincere and direct. The pet names given to Lucy by Ginevra such as “Crusty Diogenes” and “Timon”—ancient Greek figures noted for their frank cynicism—attest to her bluntness in speech. She openly acknowledges her preference for directness when discussing it as the one merit to be found in the coquette Ginevra:
‘Yes,’ said [Ginevra], with that directness which was her best point—which gave an honest plainness to her very fibs when she told them—which was, in short, the salt, the sole preservative ingredient of a character otherwise not formed to keep. (342)

Lucy reciprocates this sincerity in her conversations with Ginevra who appears to Lucy as a younger friend and student in need of education and moral improvement. Other characters of higher social standing receive far less of the blunt criticism Lucy doles out to Ginevra, but her speech still maintains a fair amount of candor in conversations with others. Though she frequently tags her own speech as “hesitating” or “faltering,” the phrases she produces in conversation, when she feels comfortable speaking up, actually evince little hedging.

Within the minutiae Lucy’s dialogue, her predilection for directness is evident, for she has hardly any hedging to curb her spoken thoughts:

Table 5.1 Lucy Snowe’s Hedges

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Lucy’s Hedges</th>
<th>Word Count</th>
<th>(% of total speech)</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>I think</td>
<td>16</td>
<td>(.127)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>perhaps</td>
<td>13</td>
<td>(.103)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>I suppose</td>
<td>8</td>
<td>(.063)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>seem*</td>
<td>6</td>
<td>(.047)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>well,</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>(.007)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>I daresay</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>(.007)</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

(seem* includes the lexemes seems and seemed)

The percentage of hedging words and phrases in her dialogue ranks lower than that of Elizabeth Bennet and Anne Elliot, and is roughly equivalent to that of Jane Eyre. Because hedges only rarely surface in Lucy’s spoken language, the text suggests a certain candidness imbued in those words she chooses to utter that belies her own, admitted, lack of faith in speech.
Lucy’s belief in direct speaking mirrors the ideal of sincere speech found in many Victorian conduct books and in Liberal thought as well. But balancing frank honesty with polite discourse could be a difficult negotiation in actual practice. The mid-nineteenth-century *Punch* cartoon by John Leech titled ‘Speak as You Think’ reiterates the paradox of polite and direct speech by featuring a fashionable lady and gentleman at a party who speak all too sincerely:

‘Are you going?’
‘Why Ye-es. The fact is, that your party is so slow, and I am weally so infernally bored, that I shall go somewhere and smoke a quiet cigar.’
‘Well, good night. As you are by no means handsome, a great puppy, and not in the least amusing, I think it’s the best thing you can do.’ (*Pictures of Life and Character* 142)

Leech’s satire speaks to the strain people felt to speak with sincerity without sacrificing civility—a strain shown in Lucy Snowe’s language. Lucy’s sincerity hardly maps onto the bland version of femininity constructed in many of the Victorian conduct books. According to Marjorie Morgan, “sincere behavior as described in conduct books was an ideal or fiction reflecting an urgent need to believe that people could express themselves sincerely while strolling on the street, browsing a shop or visiting in a drawing-room, rather than a securely felt conviction that they could do so” (81). In *Villette* we find men, like M. Paul, who without any evident repercussions, speaks much more easily with frank sincerity than Lucy. The unease with which Lucy feels in speaking with sincere candor, as she would likely prefer to do in many contexts, surfaces through her deliberate silences that quell personal thoughts concealed for the sake of others and, at times, herself. As a form of self-protection, silence covers her linguistic blunders and apprehensions.

The directness with which Lucy would like to speak is particularly difficult to muster in the academic sphere where sincere and straightforward speech are valued as a masculine attributes. When M. Paul asks Lucy to prove to two learned gentlemen her knowledge of
Classics, French History, and other subjects, her voice promptly freezes when put on the spot: “Though answers to the questions surged up fast, my mind filling like a rising well, ideas were there, but not words. I either could not, or would not speak” (443). Defiance (“would not”) and fear (“could not”) prevent her from voicing the precise information that would acquit her. Lucy’s silence in this scene is as much a defensive, as it is a defiant, reflex that allows her to escape gendered categorization based on speech—the emotional kind that would render her as a figure too emotionally feminine and the straightforward masculine kind that would sound much too aggressive. After she asks to be dismissed from the unexpected examination, she explains her inarticulateness, writing:

I wish I could have spoken with calm and dignity, or I wish my sense had sufficed to make me hold my tongue; that traitor tongue tripped, faltered…had I been a man and strong, I could have challenged that pair on the spot—but [I felt too much] emotion, and I would rather have been scourged, than betrayed it. (444)

The excess of emotion that Lucy suffers in this moment—a feminine fault to her own eyes— is checked and restrained through silence. The word “traitor” in this passage signals a belief that speech is an essentially alien or separate part of her, something that she should be able to trust but which turns against her. Rather than be betrayed by speech that would cast her as just another stereotype of her gender, Lucy chooses to use the protective cloak of silence. In this scene silence also functions more boldly as a mute protest against the authority with which the male characters assume to test her abilities and to control the way she must prove herself as an academic.

The social censure caused by a female speaking too directly and sincerely, or alternately, with too much emotion, turns self-expressive individualism—the kind that Elizabeth Bennet so often used in Pride and Prejudice— into a form of careful self-constraint in Bronte’s novel. We see this plainly in Lucy’s deliberate use of silence. This linguistic turn reflects a broader claim
Nancy Armstrong identifies in *How Novels Think*, wherein eighteenth-century fiction, novels that had imagined a protagonist using his or her wit and energy to transform an old social order, is replaced by Victorian novels whose heroines internalize an excess of desire and energy through self-discipline. Though we see both of Bronte’s protagonists verbally spar with romantic partners, they frequently do so in a more circumspect manner that tiptoes around the kind of forthright individualism Austen gave Elizabeth Bennet. As Armstrong succinctly phrases this cultural shift in literature: “British fiction replaced self-expression with self-government as the key to social success” (52). Where a heroine like Elizabeth Bennet could more openly express herself and by doing so win over, as well as change, the behavior of her future partner in marriage, the happiness of later heroines, like Jane Eyre and Lucy Snowe, comes through the knowledge of having successfully managed their own moral and social behavior, for themselves as well as for the benefit of other characters.

The question of why British literature took this turn in the 19th century is complex. Why create heroines with less verbal pluck? Why increase their interiority on the page and decrease their word count? Armstrong’s primary explanation for individualism’s turnabout in the Victorian heroine involves the differentiation of “what might be called femaleness (aggressive tendencies formerly celebrated as expressive of individualism) and femininity (the domestic virtues anchoring the new ruling-class home). Novelists,” Armstrong asserts, “used this dualism within the woman to avoid exposing the rather obvious contradiction within the ruling-class man between the qualities enabling socioeconomic success and those required for paternal authority” (80). Key valued categories of liberal theory during the mid-Victorian period, when Bronte was writing, included: character, disinterest, critical publicity, deliberative exchange, and self-development (Hadley 65) and these values, in many respects, clashed with the aims of ordered
domesticity for men and, especially, those meant for women. While writers could easily present a female character invested in some of these ideals such as self-development and moral integrity, others, like the expression and exchange of critical ideas with others—a cornerstone of John Stuart Mill’s doctrine on liberal individualism—became much more difficult for a heroine to successfully enact. Reconciling the competitive drive to succeed as an individual with the empathetic care required in domestic endeavors led to a stronger social investment in self-control. As Mary Poovey in *Making a Social Body*, writes, “individuals were alike in being responsible (economic and moral) agents”; “members of what had once seemed a social body now appear as disciplinary individuals capable of governing themselves” (22, 24). The self-control individuals were expected to exert filtered through many different aspects of life—conversation was not the least of them. Evidence of this surfaces in the plethora of restrictions placed on feminine speech as outlined in Victorian conduct books.

While conduct literature from the eighteenth century provided plenty of directives for young women entering a heterosexual market, instructing them in how to provide pleasant and respectful discourse to others, nineteenth-century texts enlarged these tracts to a greater extent by describing many more categories of speech to avoid for the sake of social niceties. The attention to detail in these works attests to the pressing concern that women control their own self-representation through specific forms of speech. Conversation, itself, was given the same imposed categorizing order that other facets of Victorian life were allotted. These works tended to reference Biblical tales and moralistic analogies to stress the importance of conscientious self-governance—an emphasis which could also be viewed as a way to offset any implications of deception or concealment that might be drawn from conduct book directives that tended promote standardized verbal behavior.
The 1838 conduct book, *Female Excellence*, reiterates the self-discipline urged for young women at this time in an appropriately titled chapter--“Government of the Tongue”--wherein a multitude of “sins of the tongue” are catalogued. Conversational transgressions listed in this advice book include: telling lies, exaggerating, disclosing family affairs to strangers, indulging in idle curiosity, giving offense or injury to others, and providing an immoderate quantity of talk (84-89). On the topic of profaning God’s name, the author is quite specific in identifying which common phrases and exclamations to avoid: “‘God bless you,’ ‘It was quite a God-send,’ ‘My goodness!’ ‘My patience!’ ‘Bless me!’ ‘Upon my word!’ ‘As sure as I am alive!’ ‘Dear me!’” (88). The specificity of instruction in this example is, similarly, granted to other points of verbal conduct and signals an increased awareness of how speech can be controlled as well as the narrowing parameters placed around verbal discourse.

In a comparable catalogue of warnings, conduct writer Sarah Stickney Ellis devotes pages to outlining the particular limitations and kinds of talk to be eschewed by women. In *Women of England* (1839) she bemoans all manner of speakers who talk too much of their “pet hobbies,” those who speak of the commonplace, on those subjects that “we could have said ourselves, had we deemed it worth our while” (129), those who mistakenly talk “without regard to time, or place, or general appropriateness” (131), those who are too voluble, those who inflict pain—intentionally or not, those who throw out “random statements”, and those who talk too much of themselves. Stickney Ellis admits, “Indeed, the immense variety of annoyances deducible from ill-managed conversation, are a sufficient proof of its importance to society” (122). Considering the multitude of missteps a female could take in ordinary discourse it is no surprise that silence became a space for social refuge.
The kinds of scripts that conduct books would have young women follow limited freedom in self-expression, yet failing to comply with these standards for feminine comportment could lead to social disapproval and ostracism. To loosen the binds of conventionally polite discourse, to evade the restrictive rules that govern self-representation, a woman could turn to the more elastic medium of silence which was a socially approved linguistic form marking femininity and use it to her advantage, just as Lucy Snowe does in *Villette*. Lucy repeatedly demonstrates her capability for self-governance through the careful way she tamps down personal thoughts and holds them to herself. Speech, in all of its variability and restrictions, is, after all, a risk--especially for a character who naturally stumbles when called upon to speak without warning and who often speaks with unmitigated candor. Silence, therefore, serves Lucy well as a form of social protection that shields her from the consequences of making conversational blunders. But her silence is more than just a social shield, for silence gives Lucy pleasure in eluding those who might incorrectly read her. The novel implicitly bears out the often-cited quote by Robin Lakoff, written in 1975, more than a century following the publication of *Villette*, that, “Language uses us as much as we use language” (39). When Lucy bypasses spoken language altogether, she “uses” the socially accepted mode of silence to circumvent speech forms that categorize her in certain ways that constrain the individualism she would like to claim. Understanding the limits built within the language she is expected to use, a system of signs that reflect the social biases of her time and locale, she works within those socially constructed parameters and repurposes silence to enact her own small measures of agency.
Conduct Literature: Silent Modesty and Reserve

Just as conduct literature extolled silence in Austen’s time for the pleasure it gave speakers and the modesty it conveyed, writers continued to promote silence for these same principle values when Bronte wrote her novels. Works from early in the nineteenth-century, such as Hannah More’s 1808 tract on conversation, emphasized the range of meanings attached to silence—“the modes of speech are scarcely more variable than the modes of silence” (344). Silence in all of its variability, then, was acknowledged as more than a mere marker of submission or ignorance; as a useful tool in conversation it could highlight one’s intelligence, one’s interest and respect for a speaker, and it could keep talk going or cut it short if desired. During the mid-nineteenth-century, silence came to be appreciated as a sign of wisdom and was more explicitly described as means of self-protection in social settings for those who speak with volubility, ignorance, or ineptitude.

In the more conservative conduct books, authors framed silence as a means to show one’s subordination to a speaker. In the 1835, Woman as She Is, And as She Should Be, for example, the anonymous author complains of women’s loquacity—a frequent complaint in Victorian conduct literature--and draws from Biblical verses to support the argument that women please best through subjected silence, particularly in their courtships:

‘Let your women learn in silence,’ says St. Paul, ‘with all subjection. I suffer not the woman to teach but to be in silence.’ Solomon has also made this the especial sign of a foolish woman: ‘A simple woman is clamorous; she is simple, and knoweth nothing.’ Quite endless are the authorities we might cite to show that talking, however much the propensity, is not the province of women. (63)

In this passage, women’s speech is equated to “clamorous” noise that is effectively stifled through silence. Other advice books were less overtly sexist, but by emphasizing silence as a
conduit of pleasure for men, they still recommended that women’s voices be kept conservatively constrained.

Sarah Stickney Ellis, after describing the litany of verbal offenses a woman might make in everyday conversation in *Women of England*, begins a follow-up chapter by describing the merit to be found in silence as an agreeable form of communicating and conveying one’s willingness to listen:

> It may appear somewhat paradoxical to commence a chapter on the uses of conversation, by pointing out the uses of being silent; yet such is the importance to a woman, of knowing exactly when to cease from conversation, and when to withhold it altogether, that the silence of the female sex seems to have become proverbially synonymous with a degree of merit almost too great to be believed in as a fact. There could be no agreeable conversation carried on, if there were no good listeners. (145)

Stickney Ellis takes the familiar stance that silence, particularly as it is used in conversations with men, offers social pleasure that can positively influence addressees. Rather than introduce one’s own topics of discussion and elaborate upon them, Stickney Ellis, more conservatively, urges women to allow others to carry the bulk of conversation, especially in courtship: “it is the particular province of a woman, rather to lead others out into animated and intelligent communication, than to be intent upon making communications from the resources of her own mind” (145). In *Villette* Paulina Home, more frequently than Lucy, engages other characters through attentive silences meant to give pleasure to speakers in the manner Stickney Ellis advocates. Content to support others in discourse, we are told, “Paulina was [Count de Bassompierre and Mrs. Bretton’s] best listener, attending closely to all that was said, promoting the repetition of this or that trait or adventure” (314). But if Paulina appears a more courteous speaker and listener than Lucy, then it is to a fault; for Lucy implies on more than one occasion that she sacrifices the kind of self-expression that pushes beyond “sweetness” and “childlike” docility. Where Paulina frequently uses silence to simply show other speakers her attention and
respect, Lucy employs it in more complicated ways that work to protect her sense of autonomy
and deflect others’ power—strategies of silence not explicitly explained in conduct literature.

Though the majority of conduct writers focused on the supportive and pleasurable aspects
of silence, some granted women slightly more agency through silence by explaining it as a way
to cover one’s naiveté, one’s inappropriate thoughts, and a way to redirect the topic of
conversation. Lydia Howard Sigourney’s 1841 *Letters to Young Ladies* states:

There seems implanted in some minds a singular *dread of silence*. Nothing is in their
opinion, so fearful as a *pause*. It must be broken, even if the result is to speak
foolishness. Yet to the judicious, the pause would be less irksome than the folly that
succeeds it. Neither reserve nor pedantry in mixed society are desirable, but a preference
of such subjects as do not discredit the understanding and taste of an educated young
lady. (96)

Sigourney, here, suggests women demonstrate their taste and good judgment through silence
rather than speech. Her advice is echoed by other conduct writers at this time who, when they
mention the virtues of silence, do so to highlight it as a veil for inexperience and lack of
knowledge. In *Female Excellence* (1838) the author urges young women, who find themselves
“in a moment of sudden irritation or frivolous excitement…[to] show…wisdom in silence” (90).
Conduct writer T. S. Arthur, also, warns young women against indulgences in “trifling chit-chat”
and “idle gossip,” advising them to steer conversations to “topics of more interest and
importance” and when this fails, to “maintain a rigid silence on the subjects introduced” (121). It
is worth noting that Arthur’s advice to women parallels the same guidance he offers young men,
writing that those men who “first enter society should think much, observe accurately and say
little” (99). In these excerpts we find writers wanting to protect the moral as well as intellectual
reputation of the speaker through a mask of silence—the kind of which Lucy Snowe is adept at
wearing.
Lucy’s calm, self-effacing, and stoic character corresponds in many ways to the modest and quiet Englishwoman praised in Victorian conduct literature. The narrative’s insistence on her own marginality underscores her outward appearance of feminine reserve—a trait that would have been deemed admirable by writers like Sarah Stickney Ellis and Hannah More. And through those silences that signal proper feminine control, Lucy reaches several advantageous ends: she bolsters her reputation as a trustworthy employee and friend, she is able to travel about more freely without direct supervision, and she maintains an emotional distance from other characters and observes them without drawing attention to her careful scrutiny, granting her a unique perspective to the human relationships around her. The more conventional aspects of Lucy’s feminine modesty work in powerful and personally beneficial ways for her character, particularly as she employs silence with a range of characters who favorably interpret her reticence.

Lucy Plays the Lady

Charlotte Bronte’s novels often invoke the natural images of fire and ice to represent her characters’ emotional temperatures, and Villette is no exception, as the motif finds itself embodied in the figure of Lucy Snowe. Writing to a literary advisor at Smith & Son in 1852, Bronte explained that “I can hardly express what subtlety of thought made me decide upon giving her a cold name…[but] a cold name she must have…for she has about her an external coldness” (Villette xxiv). Bronte’s description directly speaks to the coldness that characterizes Lucy’s outward appearance and behavior, but implicitly suggests that beneath the cool façade of proper Englishness lies a warm and passionate nature held in check. Ruth Bernard Yeazell insightfully writes that “it is precisely because Bronte imagines [Lucy] as one of those
‘unguarded Englishwomen’ whose inner restraints enable them to ‘walk calmly amidst red-hot ploughshares and escape burning’ that she imagines her as burning so fiercely, even dangerously within” (169). These two poles of feeling reflect a certain paradox found within the ideology of feminine comportment in circulation at this time. While conduct literature emphasized modesty in speech, outlining numerous instructions for maintaining proper verbal behavior with intelligence and restraint, the main sphere in which this was meant to take place was one of social intimacy, one where courtship and domestic living required rapport-building skills. Feminine conduct demanded flexibility in discerning when to project respectful detachment and when to project interest and support for interlocutors—two interactional goals that could, both, be concurrently met through silence. Lucy adeptly maneuvers between these poles of communication with the help of silence in order to navigate the aggregate of characters she encounters and maintain a reputation as a properly schooled Englishwoman.

Bronte, throughout the novel, reiterates Lucy’s character as one who is conventionally modest and self-contained. Lucy’s last name is the first textual sign of her outward aloofness, but as narrator, she reminds the reader of her reserved modesty quite often. Referring to herself as a “shadow” on no less than six occasions and by repeatedly describing herself with adjectives such as “quiet,” “collected,” and “calm,” she reiterates her character as one who is properly self-effacing and taciturn. Like the somber clothes she wears, Lucy’s silence tends to cloak the contours in her personality so that she appears less noticeable, less of a sexual being. She implicitly identifies her own modest conversational style by contrasting her speech with the lesser verbal behavior of those women around her whose verbosity, as critic Patricia Murphy points out, is linked to undisciplined sexuality (38). The garrulous flirt, Rosine, is described as “not a bad sort of person, and had no idea there could be any disgrace in grasping at whatever
she could get, or any effrontery in chattering like a pie to the best gentleman in Christendom” (135). In this sketch, Lucy sets herself apart as a female figure of authority who knows the proper etiquette of shutting up. She also finds Madame Beck wanting in proper feminine speech, as her voice is first characterized as producing “an awful clamour” (74) and her overall demeanor is one found more masculine than feminine: “[S]he did not wear a woman’s aspect, but rather a man’s. Power of a particular kind strongly limned itself in all her traits, and that power was not my kind of power: neither sympathy, nor congeniality, nor submission, were the emotions it awakened” (86). Lucy is careful to implicitly define her “power” against Madame Beck’s as a decidedly feminine and proper form. This short list of “emotions” to be wrought from exercising feminine authority might have been torn from a page of a popular Victorian conduct book, so similar are the values inscribed in Lucy’s statement to those instructions for comportment found in tracts by writers like Sarah Stickney Ellis or Hannah More. With the feminine authority she claims that conforms to conduct book norms, the more unconventional aspects of Lucy’s persona—her candor, her sharp observations of others, her strongly-held independence—are mitigated.

Lucy’s reserve, however, is not only a feminine cover for her more enterprising qualities, but it allows for certain freedoms and commendations that could not have been accorded to a female character with less self-control and restraint. Lucy writes, “I had a staid manner of my own which ere now had been good to me as cloak and hood of hodden gray; since under its favour I had been enabled to achieve with impunity, and even approbation, deeds that if attempted with an excited and unsettled air, would in some minds have stamped me as a dreamer and zealot” (49). Beneath her “hood of hodden gray” Lucy boldly walks about London and sets sail across the Channel without a chaperone, without a travel companion, to offer her protection.
Lucy relies, instead, on her own colorless civility to move about her world with impunity. In London she encounters cold indifference from a waiter and chambermaid working at her chosen inn, but by “maintaining a very quiet demeanor” she “got civility from them ere long” (52). The arrogant maid’s initial “accent” in “its mincing glibness” is checked by Lucy’s own proper silence—a transformative sign of her authority.

In Villette, Lucy’s “staid manner” also earns her the approval of characters who offer to employ her. Madame Beck, who wordlessly watches Lucy, quickly promotes her to the position of school teacher—a decision based on little more than a not-so-secret surveillance of her outwardly quiet and calm demeanor in interactions with Madame Beck’s children. Later in the novel Mr. Home—a man whose name and fatherly demeanor underline his authority in domestic settings—shows his confidence in Lucy’s own feminine knowledge by asking her to privately tutor Paulina so that she will become “steady and womanly” (334). As Lucy describes it, Mr. Home sees her as “a model teacher, the essence of sedate and discreet: somewhat conventional perhaps, too strict, limited and scrupulous, but still the pink and pattern of governess-correctness” (334). Through her plain appearance and frequent silences that outwardly render a modest facade, Lucy secures the respect of enabling figures who want to financially support her. Her silences, then, help her to earn the esteem of strangers and friends alike, esteem that often translates into forms of support that allow Lucy a certain amount of independence in travelling abroad and in living her life outside of marriage or paternalistic oversight.

However, Lucy’s silence, as an extension of her modesty, also functions more conservatively as sign of her desire to please others. Silence, as it is shown in conduct literature, was extolled for women who want to please men in courtship, and it is in her courtships that Lucy most frequently holds back words for the sake of gratifying another character. If her
professional silences allow for a certain amount of detachment that wins her the respect of others, then we can see that her silences in courtship frequently work in reverse—to connect and grow closer with characters.

It is with the handsome Dr. John that Lucy is most withdrawn. Her characteristic bluntness is dulled by silence most often in scenes with Dr. John in order to preserve a close connection with him. For instance, she delivers a cutting blow to Dr. John after growing tired of listening to his praises for Ginevra: “‘Dr. Bretton,’ I broke out, ‘there is no delusion like your own. On all points but one you are a man, frank, healthful, right-thinking, clear-sighted: on this exceptional point you are but a slave. I declare, where Miss Fanshawe is concerned you merit no respect; nor have mine’” (212). Though she compliments Dr. John on his frankness in this outburst—a reminder of her own preference for candid speech—her own frankness leads to unwelcome, unstated censure. Mortified by her boldness, Lucy opts to remain silent for the rest of the afternoon so that the sting in her words might wane before apologizing: “I longed to speak out, and I dared not whisper” (213). Silence here marks Lucy’s conservative bow to patriarchal tradition; it functions, much as conduct literature advocated, to show respect and support for an interlocutor. However, her initial silence, meant to appease Dr. John, develops into a different kind of silencing when she tells us that, after they made up, they continued their friendship in one-sided openness: “I think from that day, so long as we continued friends, he never in discourse stood on topics of ceremony with me. He seemed to know that if he would but talk about himself, and about that in which he was most interested, my expectation would always be answered, my wish always satisfied” (214). Lucy’s desire for connection and easy rapport with this idealized suitor comes with a critical cost—her own drawn-out silence. This scene is but
one in the novel where Lucy concedes her own interest in self-assertion to proper feminine verbal behavior for the sake of pleasing another character.

While Lucy is more guarded in her speech after she and Dr. John quarrel, silence that is meant to please, to show attentive listening, occurs before this particular episode, starting with her residence in the Brett on household. Lucy writes that Dr. John, “never seemed to think it a trouble to talk to me, and I am sure, it was never a task to me to listen” (220). Lucy’s voice, in her interactions with the handsome doctor, sounds considerably muted in comparison to his own which she describes in detail: “It was not his way to treat a subject coldly and vaguely; he rarely generalized, never prosed. He seemed to like nice details almost as much as I liked them myself; he seemed observant of character: and not superficially observant, either. These points gave the quality of interest to his discourse” (220). She plays the role of attentive listener quite well and as a good listener, she shows a highly developed skill in critically judging Dr. John and other characters. But her thoughts, with few exceptions, remain unspoken, locked away where they cannot wound him or reveal personal feelings that might break the thread of easy accord in their friendship.

Never is Lucy’s physical appearance more outwardly feminine than when she wears a pale pink gown to the concert, accompanied by Dr. John and Mrs. Bretton; and, in this same scene, her communication style, like her dress, reflects an investment in the traditionally feminine act of pleasing a man. Though Lucy speaks with some frankness to Dr. John while discussing Ginevra in the latter half of the concert, she mitigates her open disagreement with silences that work to maintain interactional rapport. When Dr. John questions, “And how do you like it all, Lucy? You are very quiet” Lucy assures him that she is only quiet “because I am so very, very much interested: not merely with the music, but with everything about me” (242).
The three consecutive boosters “very, very much” reveal the extent to which Lucy wants her silence to be read as a positive sign of her interest in the scene spread before her. And when Dr. John, then, continues to vaguely discuss the “little spectacle” that Ginevra Fanshawe instigates at beginning the concert, Lucy writes that, “I did not ask what [the spectacle was]: I waited voluntary information; which was presently given” (242). Lucy’s patient silence in this interaction signals positive encouragement that results in a personal disclosure from Dr. John, one that underlines his friendship and trust in Lucy. Silence, then, in its most conventionally feminine form as a mechanism for pleasure allows Lucy to maintain the warm regard and confidence of those characters with whom she desires closeness.

Lucy’s desire to please Dr. John clearly surfaces in her deliberate silences during their conversations, but pleasure, itself, is also signaled through silence in her courtship with the brusque M. Paul. Because the value of “good” conversation is often measured by how much is actually uttered, silence can be seen as an awkward obstacle to avoid when conversing. But in the case of Lucy and Paul, silence frequently signals their shared sense of intimacy and connection, particularly in the closing chapters of the novel. In one of their many conversations, Lucy describes a drawn-out silence held by M. Paul as “smiling yet thoughtful” (406) and several scenes later writes that, “There were times when he would sit for many minutes and not speak at all; and when dusk or duty brought separation, he would leave with words like these: ‘Rest is gentle. Calm happiness is precious’” (488). As tempestuous and noisy as their exchanges frequently are, both find pleasure and contentment in moments of quietude. Even when verbally jousting, these two characters occasionally break their disputes to hold several moments of silence which suggests that each remains comfortable enough in the others’ presence to sit through their silent thoughts together, despite the enmity between them. The pleasure
taken from shared silence stems from the fact that Lucy and M. Paul capably listen to each other when they do talk and eventually come to treat one another, as Sarah Stickney Ellis would have all Englishwomen and men do, as “the best fire-side companions” (118). Silence in the concluding chapters of the novel, then, functions as a positive sign of accord and respect between a male and female character entwined in courtship, reflecting one of the key aims of domesticity as it was described in Victorian conduct books.

Since the novel’s earliest reviews, critics have tended to look upon Lucy Snow as a highly unconventional heroine. Matthew Arnold famously dismissed Villette as “disagreeable” because its creator’s mind, he wrote, “contains nothing but hunger, rebellion and rage” (Villette xxvii). In 1853, Anne Mozley, from the Christian Remembrancer, found Lucy to possess “a restless heart and vagrant imagination,” and one who, “can have no sympathy or true insight into the really feminine nature” (443). While these reviews reflect the fact that Lucy skirts social stereotypes of femininity in her culture, they fail to take into account the numerous and meaningful ways in which she adheres to convention—her silence is a textually prominent example of this. Bronte takes full advantage of silence as a socially favored medium of communication and uses its malleability to establish Lucy’s credibility as a respectful friend, an employee, and young woman in courtship. But, at the same time, she also uses silence as a linguistic strategy Lucy can employ to stretch standard precepts for feminine behavior in order to develop more individualistic goals. In its ambiguity, silence lessens the tensions between those expectations for proper feminine forms of speech and ideals of individualism that also took root in social discourse during Bronte’s time.
Lucy’s Silence as a Sign of Her Individualism

Although the 19th-century critic, writer, and thinker Matthew Arnold voiced strong objections to Charlotte Bronte’s last novel, some of his own ideals for liberal individualism surface through the silent actions of Lucy in Villette. The Victorian writers most noted for their investment in the idea of a liberal individual held to different intellectual strains of belief surrounding the topic, but according to Elaine Hadley, most men, like Matthew Arnold, Herbert Spencer, John Stewart Mill and Anthony Trollope, all agreed that this figure was one who “offered prudent resistance against the manifold systemic powers of midcentury England—in particular, aristocratic hegemony, popular opinion and class society” (65). In the novel, we find Lucy similarly reject these same values, claiming that, “pedigree, social position, and recondite intellectual acquisition, occupied about the same space and place in my interests and thoughts; they were my third class lodgers” (343). Lucy’s sense of authority stems not from social rank, family connections, or esoteric knowledge that fixes her within the social strata, but instead it derives from her ability to evade discursive construction that pigeon-holes her as a particular kind of individual. It also grows out of professional pursuits that allow Lucy to separate herself from other characters and cultivate emotional control. Deliberate self-suppression, rather than self-expression, becomes Lucy’s means to personal gratification and power.

Throughout the novel Lucy’s identity remains multi-faceted and not easily pegged down by other characters. Perplexed by Lucy’s mysterious past and surprised by her social connection to the Brettons, Ginevra Fanshawe demands that Lucy explain the riddle of her identity: “Who are you, Miss Snowe?” (341) she asks. Lucy responds to her with laughter and takes pleasure in goading her further by mysteriously stating, “Who am I indeed? Perhaps a personage in disguise. Pity I don’t look the character” (341). Ginevra assumes that Lucy keeps hidden a secret identity
that, once revealed, will explain and reconcile the contradictions and peculiarities found in her character. She probes Lucy further, asking, “Do—do tell me who you are? I’ll not repeat it” (342). What Ginevra fails to understand, however, is that Lucy’s identity is not an isolated or unified whole to be easily classified or summarily expressed. As Penny Boumelha, in her critical text *Charlotte Bronte* notes, “Although Lucy has a ‘self,’ this cannot be characterized except by her name; on occasion, even her sex does not seem to be immutable. Our narrator-heroine functions mores as a series, a dispersal, than as a fixed-center” (115). Fragmented, paradoxical, and elusive, Lucy’s character resists any straightforward reading in the same way that the structure of the novel, with its curious gaps of information, its multiple trajectories of desire and its ambiguous center, circumvents conventional patterns of story-telling.

In *Villette*, Lucy’s disjointed speech and the narrative, itself, suggest a certain futility in articulating a single and cohesive selfhood. The novel intimates that personal authority transpires, not from bold assertions of one’s identity, but from controlling a flow of information that others may use to interpret other people and their actions. In Lucy’s case, personal satisfaction is taken from others’ disparate accounts of her character that tend to obfuscate any singular meaning. When relating the impressions others have made of her, Lucy emphasizes the idiosyncrasy of the opinions:

> What contradictory attributes of character we sometimes find ascribed to us, according to the eye with which we are viewed! Madame Beck esteemed me learned and blue; Miss Fanshawe, caustic, ironic, and cynical; Mr. Home, a model teacher, the essence of the sedate and discreet…whilst another person, Professor Paul Emanuel, to wit, never lost an opportunity of intimating his opinion that mine was rather a fiery and rash nature—adventurous, indocile, and audacious. (334)

She concludes the passage by telling the reader, “I smiled at them all” (334), taking pleasure from the fact that she is not uniformly recognized. Though she inexplicably claims that “If anyone knew me it was little Paulina Mary” (334), several chapters follow this in which Paulina
contradicts her assertion, by stating to her: “Lucy, I wonder if anybody will ever comprehend you altogether.” (471). The period punctuating Paulina’s inquiry suggests a certain futility in endeavoring to understand the whole of Lucy’s character. Like a valve, Lucy works to control the kind and quantity of information doled out to other characters who form contradictory opinions of her, but because speech, for Lucy, is less easily controlled, it is silence that ultimately allows her to achieve this refracted image.

One of the novel’s most striking passages to reveal the extent to which Lucy withholds her personality through silence occurs in her first few months in Villette when she refuses to identify herself to her old acquaintance, Dr. John. While in the same room together with him, Lucy admits, “It was very seldom that I uttered more than monosyllables in Dr. John’s presence; he was the kind of person with whom I was ever to remain the neutral, passive thing he thought me” (114). While this behavior could be read as a passive act of self-suppression on Lucy’s part, her silence in Dr. John’s presence is deliberately evasive and, through it, she transforms a seeming act of self-effacement into an exercise of power. Rather than be misrecognized or carelessly dismissed by her former friend, Lucy chooses to withhold her knowledge of their shared past:

To say anything on the subject, to hint at my discovery, had not suited my habits of thought, or assimilated with my system of feeling. On the contrary, I had preferred to keep the matter to myself…Well I knew that to him it could make little difference were I to come forward and announce, “This is Lucy Snowe!” So I kept back in my teacher’s place; and as he never asked my name, so I never gave it. (175)

In the perfect pose of feminine meekness—her head bent down while silently sewing—Lucy’s withheld words signify a pleasurable act of defiance. If Dr. John cannot rightfully “know her,” she will refuse to acknowledge that she “knows” him. It is the careful management of information that allows Lucy to purposefully affect her own self-representation, or lack thereof.
in this case. Authority is not achieved through conversational exchange but by hoarding words and keeping them to oneself.

Lucy’s retreat to her “teacher’s place,” mentioned in the passage above, suggests that her profession has built into it a space of refuge where silence works in her favor. From the very start of her tenure as an employee of Madame Beck’s school, Lucy’s mind remains “bent on success” (91) and part of that success is built upon her reticence. Of all the identities Lucy purports to own among friends and acquaintances, the one most clearly valued by her and aligned with the ideals of liberal individualism is that of a professional. Lucy’s position at Rue Fossette opens an opportunity for her to develop professional authority which is engendered by individualistic values such as sincerity, reticence, and self-control. Elaine Hadley reiterates the social weight accorded to these particular values in *Living Liberalism*, describing that the mid-Victorians held fast to liberal “frames of mind such as disinterestedness, objectivity, reticence, conviction, impersonality, and sincerity, all of which carried with them a moral valence” (9).

Lucy’s strong investment in work and professional advancement emerges in moments where authority and respect are gained, not through assertions of personal identity or vocal dynamism, but through reticence—a key category of individualism.

One of the novel’s most dramatic examples of Lucy achieving professional merit without her voice occurs at the beginning of her first day in the classroom, in a pivotal moment when she must prove to Madame Beck that she deserves to be promoted from the position of governess to that of instructor. Madame Beck warns Lucy before she begins the lesson that her pupils are not “quiet, decorous English girls” but girls of Labassecour who are “brazen, frank, abrupt, and somewhat rebellious” (86). To take control over the “campaign of…titterings and whisperings” (88) without a proper command of French language, Lucy silently snatches an exercise-book.
from the hands of a young student, reads the “very stupid” composition, and then tears it in two. Her bold and wordless action, we are told, “availed to draw attention and check the noise” (88). Without uttering one word of rebuke, without uttering any words at all, Lucy’s quick and stern judgment of the student’s writing effectively establishes her authority as the new instructor of English. And when one unpopular student continues to test Lucy’s position by reviving “the riot with undiminished energy” (88), Lucy reasserts authority by locking the mutinous student into a closet. Silence charged with the force of Lucy’s annoyance brings about an ordered and subdued classroom so that when, at last, she “courteously requests silence” (88) the students quietly and smilingly comply. In this scene Lucy successfully demonstrates that she has the capacity to advance professionally from the role of governess to schoolteacher and she does it through the powerful medium of silence.

In the novel Lucy continually renounces vocal performance and the presumed warmth of a speech community to, instead, turn to her work. The same critical and reticent authority she achieves in her first classroom visit recurs in her interactions with M. Paul who reverses the kind of success Lucy finds in the classroom by noisily bursting into school lessons filled with quietude in order to brusquely recite or lecture the students. “It was his occasional custom—and a very laudable, acceptable custom, too—to arrive of an evening, always a l’improviste, unannounced, burst in on the silent hour of study, establish a sudden despotism over us and our occupations [and] cause books to be put away” (364). M. Paul replaces quiet reading—Lucy’s favored method for learning and working with her pupils—with “grand reading” and dramatic “outpouring” (364). M. Paul creates, through his public utterances, a speech community or, more specifically, a “community of practice.” Cognitive anthropologists Jean Lave and Etienne Wenger coined this term in the early 1990’s to describe a group of people who, through their
common enterprise (learning, working, etc.), develop activities and ways of engaging, they
develop common knowledge and beliefs, and, importantly, they develop ways of talking that
point to orders of social organization. M. Paul’s verbal mastery over the studying girls and his
elevated status within this “community” is signaled through the collective response to his voluble
arrival: “We heard the sharp bell-peal which we all knew; then the rapid step familiar to each
ear: the words ‘Voila Monsieur!’ had scarcely broken simultaneously from every lip, when the
two-leaved door split…and he stood in the midst of us” (364-5). M. Paul situates himself at the
front and center of this small group with aural signs such as the bell peal and the sound of his
footsteps and, then, through his own voice, he unifies the speech of those who listen, as “every
lip” utters the same welcome to him. But it is Lucy, alone, who chooses not to participate in this
speech practice and, instead, focuses on her “work.”

Lucy flouts the expected norms of reciprocation in this small community of pupils and
teachers that M. Paul attempts to coalesce, demonstrating, through actions rather than words, that
one voice, alone, cannot be depended upon to speak for all others. As critic Ivan Kreilkamp
notes, it is Lucy’s “non-participation” in this scene that “gives the lie to the illusion of a voice
that speaks to and from everyone” (349). As the one detractor, Lucy differentiates herself from
the “herd” of other young women and silently undercuts the authority of Paul. When M. Paul,
shortly after his reading, places himself beside Lucy at a study-table, Lucy tells us she attempted
to “recede” from him and moves her “working materials, to clear space for his book…to make
room for his person” (366). Recognizing Lucy’s action as a sign of defection, M. Paul, in a fit of
anger, forces all of the girls to file away from Lucy to another table, effectually setting a
boundary between her and his followers. But Lucy takes the isolation and brusque rebuke in
stride: “As for me, I took it with entire coolness. There I sat, isolated and cut off from human
intercourse; I sat and minded my work, and was quiet, and not at all unhappy” (366). Lucy, in her pleasure of detachment, rejects the kind of speech community Elizabeth Bennet builds and inhabits through her language in *Pride and Prejudice*, but in a similar manner, she finds gratification and solace from challenging a male authority figure and his expectations of speech. Rather than verbally spar, however, Lucy frustrates M. Paul by refusing to voice any of the words he presumes she should or will utter. She refuses to voice words altogether and, in her silence, she individuates her character and gains authority through her focus on solitary work—work over which she has control.

As much as M. Paul complains that Lucy is a being “who must be kept down” (171) she takes pleasure in suppressing her own voice so that emotional control, rather than self-expression, comes to signify personal authority. Proponents of liberal individualism in the mid-nineteenth century condemned forced vocal suppression—the deliberate silencing of a voice at the hands of another individual or group. However, writers like John Stuart Mill acknowledged that within suppressed speech lies “truth.” In *On Liberty* Mill argued: “First, if any opinion is compelled to silence, that opinion may, for aught we can certainly know, to be true…secondly, though the silenced opinion be an error, it may, and very commonly does, contain a portion of the truth” (32). Whether speech is suppressed by an outside force or deliberately for oneself, it often, Mill suggests, contains the conviction of a person’s opinion. Lucy’s preference for sincerity, then, is able to reliably manifest through her silence. For example, while at school, when listening to others spout incorrect information, Lucy holds back her thoughts and takes pleasure in holding the truth to herself. When M. Paul reads aloud an “inefficient” French translation of Shakespeare filled with multiple errors Lucy suppresses her contempt and remains quietly seated, silently assuming the kind of critical authority she projected in her first classroom
experience as an instructor. Lucy writes, “nor did I make any particular effort to conceal the contempt which some of [his] forlorn lapses were calculated to excite. Not that it behoved or beseemed me to say anything” (366). She does not choose to hold back the correct translation to spare M. Paul’s feelings, as some Victorian conduct literature suggests would be a proper motive for silence in courtship, but instead she takes pleasure in withholding words to gain a competitive, if unvoiced, advantage over her suitor and work colleague. She eschews a community of practice and, once again, finds gratification from solitary work and suppressed knowledge.

The perversity of Lucy’s character is often attributed to her manifold efforts at self-repression. Critics, since the time of Villette’s first publication, have frequently chalked up their discomfort in reading the novel to Lucy’s strange pleasure in refusing to adhere to social norms for individual progress and fusion. For example, a critic from The Spectator (1853) places Lucy in the role of “savage” because of her preference for privation, writing that Bronte’s heroine “took a savage delight in refusing to be comforted, in a position indeed of isolation and hardship” (Villette xxvii). But I want to suggest that a certain logic lies behind Lucy’s isolation and repressed voice which serves her own best interests. In Villette, Lucy’s withheld words gain significance as she increasingly works to restrain her voice in conversations so that withdrawal, itself, becomes a sign of pleasure, comfort, authenticity, self-governance, and personal subjectivity. John Kucich notes that, “Bronte cultivates withdrawal, not simply as a sanctuary, but as the preferred field for a turbulent kind of emotional experience” (51). The emotional depth found in Lucy’s gaps in discourse is heightened by the language attached to suppression itself. Bronte’s description of Lucy’s withheld voice becomes, by the ending chapters, an elevated act that sounds heroic: “I drew my breath very deep; I held in the cry, I devoured
ejaculation, I forbade the start, I spoke and I stirred no more than a stone” (513). Through the eloquence of Lucy’s vocal suppression the emotional rewards of social resistance emerge.

As a means to evade constrained discursive constructions from others and as a way to develop professional authority, Lucy turns to silence. By suppressing her voice Lucy not only individuates her character but she withdraws from those speech communities built around her and contrasts their coherence to her own deliberate isolation so that the makeup of her interiority intensifies. In Villette, where secret surveillance is countered by voluble teachers, noisy students, and religious devotees drawn to the confessional, Lucy’s silence sets her apart and produces a unique form of prestige. In her introversion, she develops what John Stewart Mill called “an inward domain of consciousness” (On Liberty 22) where listening to others’ words and opinions, keeping them to herself and critically analyzing them, generates a deeper appreciation and understanding of herself, other characters, and the social ties that influence, shape, and control both. But where Mill advocates for the eventual voicing of one’s thoughts and even, at times, speaking to others as a devil’s advocate, Bronte’s text turns away from the lure and risks of vocal expression. Refusing to speak the words she has carefully hoarded and the thoughtful conclusions drawn from countless overheard conversations and silent observations, Lucy chooses to write them down and narrate her story through pen and paper. In this way she embodies, albeit through a surplus of conversational silence, a cornerstone of liberal thought at this time in England.

Conclusion

Throughout Villette Lucy’s compulsion to work never wavers so that by the novel’s end we find her forging a successful career in solitary contentment. Lucy establishes her school
within in a house procured for her by M. Paul and writes that, within its freshly-painted walls, “silence reigned” (534). The silence that fills this house underlines an increased independence Lucy will experience living away from Rue Fossette where social surveillance binds her to stricter forms of behavior and speech. The silence in this house also portends the ultimate isolation she finds after M. Paul sets sail for the West Indies and, more broadly, her own significant narrative evasion—the withheld conclusion to M. Paul’s story. Though she is alone in her work, Lucy writes that in the three year absence of M. Paul she experiences the “three happiest year of [her] life” (543). She explains the “paradox” of her happiness by describing her school’s success and the pleasure she takes in working for the legacy M. Paul leaves her:

I commenced my school; I worked—I worked hard. I deemed myself the steward of his property, and determined, God willing, to render a good account…The secret of my success did not lie so much in myself, in any endowment, any power of mine, as in a new state of circumstances, a wonderfully changed life, a relieved heart. (543-4)

Lucy insists that her success transpires, not because of her own individual powers, but because of her relationship with Paul. But the novel provides sufficient textual evidence to demonstrate that Lucy finds as much, if not more, comfort in living alone with the knowledge that another person, from a distance, cares about her, rather than in the day-to-day reality of shared time with a partner whose discourse eventually outs the imbalances and biases built into a relationship.

Both Jane Eyre and Villette conclude with Bronte’s heroines ensconced in homes imbued with organic elements from nature that provide a form of personal privacy to the inhabitants. Jane Eyre discovers Ferndean “deep buried in a wood” and surrounded by “close-ranked trees” (366). And during her first visit to the “quiet” Faubourg Clotilde in Villette, Lucy finds her house, furnished by M. Paul, filled with “flower-pots” inside and a “screen of vines” climbing the outside facade (537-8). These similar descriptions suggest that both protagonists have successfully located and settled into their most natural environment by the close of their
narrative, and that, within them, they are protected--if only symbolically--from outside social or materialistic influence. But where Jane’s home becomes a domain for domestic labors and family life, Lucy’s house accommodates personal ambitions driving her career. The novel’s ending renders Lucy a career-minded professional, but the fact that her work takes place within a traditionally domestic space—indeed, a home procured for her by a suitor—figuratively suggests that she will continue to adhere to some of the more conservative aspects of femininity that have helped her up to this point. Employing silence, a socially sanctioned sign of femininity, then, is one means for her to continue to convey proper modesty that grants her certain privileges in her society such as friendship, the trust of others, and personal respect.

In her silence, as in her letters, Lucy finds satisfaction in communication that circumvents delimiting parameters of speech. Through silence she capably negotiates proper feminine comportment with individualistic goals that provide her the chance to professionally advance, to evade narrow social categorization, and yet, also, hold onto her preference for sincerity, even if that sincerity is indirectly conveyed. Silence, in its ambiguity and indirectness, characterizes the uncharted and split desires of Lucy Snowe. At one level she shows an investment in wanting to traditionally signify—after all, she does ask M. Paul in the penultimate chapter of the novel to validate the worthiness of her feminine appearance: “Do I displease your eyes much?” she asks, acknowledging that the “point had its vital import for me” (533). But, in a somewhat contrary fashion, she also desires to be overlooked, to obscure her intelligibility, and escape the position of woman as object and instead constitute a subjectivity of complex consciousness through writing and silence. Aware of these contradictory impulses, Lucy, herself, acknowledges the divided power she holds in both traditionally feminine behavior and in her individualism, writing, that “Whatever my powers—feminine or the contrary—God had
given them… I felt resolute to be ashamed of no faculty of His bestowal” (390). Within both frames of behavior, Lucy utilizes silence to advance her own interests.
Chapter Six: “A Noble Drapery Over a Mass of Particulars”: The Proper and Powerful Indirections of Dorothea Brooke and Rosamond Vincy

_Middlemarch_, often considered George Eliot’s finest novel, was published in eight parts beginning in November of 1871. Subtitled “A Study of Provincial Life,” the novel is set in the fictitious Midlands town of Middlemarch on the eve of the first Reform Bill and contains interlocking narratives that set domestic life against female aspiration. The two central courtship and marriage plots that Eliot delineates follow Dorothea Brooke and Rosamond Vincy—two figures whose outward appearance, manners, and personal convictions starkly contrast. Dorothea, a young woman of moral fervor holding aspirations for the development of her spiritual education, holds little, on the surface, to resemble Rosamond Vincy, a text-book version of feminine beauty and propriety with high social aspirations for the man she intends to marry. But both, Eliot shows, must learn to navigate a complex social order and learn their relational part within it through the marriages that they make.

The concluding chapters of Bronte’s _Jane Eyre_ and _Villette_, locate Jane and Lucy in isolated spheres of living that satisfy their inward-looking search for self-knowledge. Jane chooses to reside in Rochester’s Ferndean, a “quite desolate spot” with thick woods surrounding the house and only two servants for company. Rebecca Mitchell writes, “The world conceived in _Jane Eyre_ is a world without society, where self-fulfillment is achieved by moving away from, rather than into a sphere shared with other people” (311). Lucy Snowe, similarly, finds fulfillment in a small, quiet house where intercourse with broader society is limited to letters and professional encounters. The end of these novels reward the protagonists with insular corners of dwelling that thwart societal influence and control. But in George Eliot’s _Middlemarch_ we find
Dorothea Brook and Rosamond Vincy propelled into a society they must come to understand and successfully function within, a society that becomes increasingly complex to navigate following their marriage vows, as their sense of personal agency diminishes. As these two characters move more fully into society, they work to balance the demands of traditional propriety expected from those characters that surround them and that make up the web that is Middlemarch, with their own self-interests that stem from a lack of effectual power located inside and outside of their own homes. This tension between feminine constraint and individualism emerges within the speech patterns of both characters, as they choose various modes of indirection in conversations to influence, befriend, control, educate, understand, and aid others that they know and meet.

Historically, directness in speech has been held as a virtue and indirectness as an impediment to effective communication. Even more so today is the prevalent belief that one should be honest, direct, and get to the point. But no fully competent communicator lives by this precept alone. Men and women both employ any number of indirect speech acts in their everyday conversations to perform a multitude of functions and social stances in interaction; for example, one’s indirectness can be considerate or defensive, polite or critical, controlling or disengaging. Though both genders frequently use indirection in their discourse, women have been stereotypically criticized for their ambiguity and circuitousness in speech: “When will she get to the point?” or “Why does she beat around the bush?” are frequent complaints heard in this regard. For many years women have been urged to communicate with tentativeness and polite persuasion—a fact made clear in nineteenth-century conduct literature that promoted their indirect influence in social and domestic matters. But under the cover of respectability and proper femininity, many Victorian women were able to linguistically control social situations
without appearing to control them, to hide strength while covertly exercising it. This is certainly the case for Eliot’s female characters who socially maneuver through strategies of indirection.

Indirect communications serve Rosamond and Dorothea in several important ways as they negotiate their position in society in relation to other characters. Despite the fact that Dorothea Brooke is frequently described by the narrator as speaking “ardently” and “directly,” she, more than any female character in *Middlemarch*, qualifies her speech with hedges and negated questions which render her speech politely deferring. This linguistic contradiction underscores Dorothea’s struggle to define herself against convention, her uneasy relationships with Casaubon and Ladislaw, and her participation in social exchanges that uphold traditional notions of Victorian sympathy. On the other hand, Rosamond Vincy only occasionally qualifies her speech, achieving more agency through linguistic omissions and ambiguity than the propriety she purports to hold through language. Though both characters are able to achieve interactional goals through their indirect speech acts, which indicates a certain amount of linguistic control, Eliot more frequently shows that their communications in courtship and marriage are vexed because of the cultural limits which curtail direct self-expression.

Both characters consistently employ indirection in their communications as they work to balance their personal desires with those expectations attached to social duty. Though indirection in speech encompasses many kinds of linguistic forms that, on the surface may seem to be routine or formulaic modes of expression, its frequent usage points to the different ways that, as a strategy, it builds rapport between speaker and hearer or, alternately, marks distinction between speaker and hearer. These two social stances are reflected in the aims both Dorothea and Rosamond hold-- to comply with those expectations of feminine conduct prevalent during their time and to individuate themselves from others by acting on their own self-interests.
Conduct Literature: The Imperative to “Hint”

One of the most popular conduct book writers in the Victorian era was Sarah Stickney Ellis, a woman who argued it was a religious duty, as daughters, wives, and mothers, to morally shape and influence the lives of others in order to make one’s society better. During the eighteenth-century and up until the mid-nineteenth-century, many middle-class women read conduct books by Ellis and others who wrote about women’s proper roles within the home. But by the 1850’s, conduct literature was surpassed by etiquette guides. While conduct literature had been motivated by the idea that one’s manners could outwardly express one’s religious morals, etiquette guides aimed to help readers avoid the appearance of vulgarity, showing much less interest in one’s internal virtues. As the middle-classes in England expanded throughout the nineteenth-century, more and more people sought out ways to convey their status, frequently drawing upon dated aristocratic models of leisure and pleasure that were outlined in etiquette guides. This ideological divide between conduct and etiquette books similarly reflects the different motivations driving Dorothea Brooke and Rosamond Vincy in Middlemarch. Dorothea’s ambitions to socially improve her society correspond to the sympathetic and moral imperatives enumerated in conduct literature while Rosamond’s education in social affectation and display responds to more class-driven concerns.

George Eliot and Sarah Stickney Ellis are two Victorian figures rarely paired together by critics, but according to Daryl Ogden, in the 1840’s, at the “height of Ellis’s notoriety, the then Mary Ann Evans read female advice book literature” (588). Though Eliot’s novels implicitly critique the more superficial aspects of female education that Ellis laid out for women readers,
her explicit directives for conversation emerge in the language of Middlemarch’s Dorothea Brooke and Rosamond Vincy—particularly as the characters work to indirectly sway the actions and thoughts of their husbands. Both characters hold decided—if untested—opinions about their life purpose and how their days should be spent, and they devote a fair amount of time attempting to convince Casaubon and Lydgate to adapt to their own ideas and interests. Through conversations, they work at different levels to please as well as influence the male characters in their lives and in doing so, they employ linguistic strategies sanctioned by conduct writers such as Sarah Stickney Ellis.

First published in 1839, Women of England, written by Stickney Ellis, contains two substantial chapters devoted to the art of conversation and the advice found within these pages centers on the necessity of pleasing discourse. Above all, Stickney Ellis recommends that women work to engage others and adhere to the “duty of being agreeable” (141). For instance, she asserts that the topic of conversation between a married pair should always reflect the interests held by one’s husband:

Not conversation upon books, if her husband happens to be a fox-hunter; nor upon fox-hunting, if he is a book-worm; but exactly that kind of conversation which is best adapted to his tastes and habits, yet at the same time capable of leading him a little out of both into a wider field of observation, and subjects he may never have derived amusement from before, simply from the fact of their never having been presented to his notice. (120)

The implication that married women can, and indeed, should, take up conversational control—that they are capable of “leading him”—suggests they possess a certain amount of agency and influence in marriage. But this authority has its limits, considering that the influence a woman may hold over her spouse remains, foremost, a way to offer up “amusement.” A woman’s
knowledge of subjects that stand outside the realm of typical discourse, those intellectual interests unique to her, are meant to be shared primarily for his pleasure. Stickney Ellis writes:

A woman does not converse more agreeably, because she is able to define botanically the difference between a rose and a buttercup, though it may be desirable to be able to do so when asked; but because she has a quick insight into character, has tact to select the subjects of conversation best suited to her auditors, and to pursue them just so long as they excite interest, and engage attention. (130)

In this case, a woman’s intuition serves her much better than her intellect because it is likely to produce pleasing conversation with interlocutors.

Bold self-assertion was considered bad form in the minds of most Victorian conduct writers. In the 1837 etiquette book, *Etiquette for the Ladies*, the author warns readers that, “Scarcely anything is so repulsive in a lady—so utterly plebeian, as speaking in a loud harsh voice. As in Shakespeare’s time, a ‘small’ voice is still considered ‘an excellent thing in woman.’” (19). This particular writer plays upon class anxieties by invoking a “repulsive” and “plebeian” populace to promote a softer voice in women. The author then goes on to assert that: “Even when positive as to the correctness of your view of a subject in which you may differ in opinion from any of the company, though you may assert it firmly and gently, avoid every thing like pedantry or dogmatism. Such a display in a lady is always repulsive, and you may be wrong” (46). Any form of assertion, then, is best when delivered in a gentle and equivocating manner. Author Florence Hartley, mirrors this attitude in *The Ladies’ Book of Etiquette, And Manuel of Politeness*, when she instructs: “Never, when advancing an opinion, assert positively that a thing “is so,” but give your opinion as an opinion. Say, “I think this is so,” or “these are my views,” but remember that your companion may be better informed upon the subject under discussion, or, where it is a mere matter of taste or feeling, do not expect that all the world will feel exactly as you do” (17-8). Her explicit advice to hedge one’s statements speaks to the
imperative many women felt to indirectly convey their thoughts and feelings in a pleasant, 
unobtrusive manner.

And yet books, such as these, also stressed the importance of morally guiding one’s 
husband and family. To please and, at the same time, to lead, required careful attention to 
language. Sarah Stickney Ellis places an inordinate amount of emphasis on pleasing one’s 
husband through refreshing talk and attentive listening so that his pleasure comes before his 
wife’s own thoughts and desires. But in contrary fashion, she additionally implies that a wife’s 
intellect and opinions must filter through shared conversations if a marriage is to be successful: 
“If she has no intellectual hold upon her husband’s heart, she must inevitably become that most 
helpless and pitiable of earthly objects—a slighted wife” (120). Stickney Ellis’s book makes it 
clear that earning the respect of one’s husband is accomplished—not through one’s appearance 
or vivacity or pleasing manners--but through one’s “intellectual hold.” To reconcile the paradox 
between speech that is meant to please and speech that is meant to inform, Stickney Ellis and 
other conduct writers endorsed indirection in conversation. In Stickney Ellis’s own body of 
work, the frequent occurrence of the word “hint” attests to the weight given to indirectly stated 
advice and opinions.

Other conduct writers in the nineteenth-century echoed the advice of Sarah Stickney Ellis 
by promoting pleasant conversation capable of positively influencing others through indirect 
means. In the 1833 Letters to Young Ladies, Mrs. L.H. Sigourney emphasizes the great power 
women can wield through speech that is both pleasing and considerate. Sigourney writes:

So great a part of our time is devoted to conversation, and so much has the power to 
influence the social feelings and relative duties, that it is important to consider how it 
may be rendered both agreeable and useful. In all countries where intelligence is prized, 
a talent for conversation ranks high among accomplishments. (173)
Sigourney acknowledges that when a woman injects intelligence into her discourse, she will likely win over an audience, but later concedes that women possess a much more limited range of knowledge from which to draw upon than when compared to men, whose experience renders more substantial and elevated talk. In the eyes of Sigourney, feminine influence extends only as far as one’s husband allows, as far as they deem it appropriate to benefit from those women who desire to bolster the family’s reputation and position in society.

Victorian conduct literature prescribes and advises women by following the assumption that a woman’s role in life will depend strictly upon the men who financially support her, in effect, limiting her access to fully individualized social practices. The possibility of a woman attempting to “make a figure” of herself in the world is quickly discredited by Sarah Stickney Ellis who explains that the “truly English, domestic, and fireside companion…knows little of what is called the world, and would be too diffident to attempt to make a figure in it if she did” (170). On this particular point, George Eliot, who pays tribute to any number of ambitious women in her work, women like the allegorical figure of Saint Theresa—whose “nature demanded an epic life” (Middlemarch 1), would certainly disagree. Yet the two authors share a basic philosophical belief in the situation of human relatedness, a belief that underlines much of their writing. Sarah Stickney Ellis, in Women of England, writes:

Women, considered in their distinct and abstract nature, as isolated beings, must lose more than half their worth. They are, in fact, from their own constitution, and from the station they occupy in the world, strictly speaking, relative creatures. If, therefore, they are endowed only with such faculties as render them striking and distinguished in themselves, without the faculty of instrumentality, they are only as dead letters in the volume of human life, filling what would otherwise be a blank space, but doing nothing more. (123)

In this view, the value of a woman lies in her relation to other people and her “instrumentality” in their lives—her ability to support and be of service to them. George Eliot’s work endorses
this brand of domestic utility. Amanda Anderson, drawing attention to Eliot’s more conservative thinking regarding gender, explains that for Eliot, the role “played by hearth and home is a healthful one, enabling “recovery.” The woman’s stabilizing powers counter the effects of dislocation…[and] serve to steady a more self-conscious embrace of modern opportunities by the heroic masculine subject” (14). The finale of Middlemarch stresses this same belief, in its reiteration of Dorothea’s indirect influence over Will Ladislaw which occurs in the home where “unhistoric acts” transpire, those acts for which the “growing good of the world is partly dependent” (799).

**Eliot’s Liberalism and The Importance of Opinion**

Women, Eliot shows, play their part, if indirectly, in effecting positive changes in their communities while embodying traditionally feminine values. But this underlying belief in sympathetic influence, is countered and complicated by those same female characters who Eliot shows are equally capable of using others as instruments for their own benefit and personal advancement. In describing the more calculating minds of those residing in Middlemarch, Eliot writes: “Not only young virgins of that town, but grey-bearded men also, were often in haste to conjecture how a new acquaintance might be wrought into their purposes, contented with very vague knowledge as to the way in which life had been shaping him for that instrumentality” (145). In this case, the influence a female character may exert feeds personal ambition in a way that runs counter to Stickney Ellis’s original prescription for indirection. But it remains that one’s destiny is irretrievably connected to other people—and, more broadly, those expectations held by the community where one lives.
Though their ambitions differ to a great extent, both Dorothea and Rosamond imagine that through marriage they will fulfill personal goals: for Dorothea this means performing a great social good for the betterment of others and for Rosamond this means sustaining an image of perfect propriety and a life of ease. These points of view, from the outset, reflect a fair amount of naivety, yet both characters come to recognize, early on, that their ambitions cannot be realized without the aid and influence of other people, namely their husbands. Their individualism must be understood as being socially situated.

Critics such as Lauren Goodlad and Elaine Hadley have pointed to women’s exclusion from the political realm in Victorian England, asserting that their ban from public governance effectively obstructed full participation in the process of becoming a liberalized individual. Elaine Hadley links this outlook to George Eliot’s own point of view on the subject, writing:

Eliot’s occasional interest in politics also shows her to be fairly conventional in relation to gender. Although one could reasonably provide a reading of her heroines in relation to the procedures of liberalization at work in this period—as Dorothea seeks a way to put her idea into social practice, for instance, or as Dinah preaches virtue in the public sphere—their femaleness inhibits their access to fully liberalized political status and thus bars them from achieving an abstracted embodiment. (34)

The transition from private idea to publicly held opinion does not work so well for women taught to speak up for the pleasure of others. Femininity sits uneasily within the bounds of liberalism. But it is also evident, especially in the character of Dorothea, that Eliot believed women could indirectly assert their ideas by influencing those characters who might listen, those whose who hold the power to establish social and political practices that work for the betterment of others.

Daniel Malachuk, writing on Eliot’s formulation of liberalism, explains that:

Rather than continuing to restrict our focus to the polis [political realm], Eliot believed liberals should reconsider realms and practices outside the polis: indeed, though she does not use the term, it is useful to see Eliot as promoting the neglected oikos [household]…Eliot’s body of work suggests that for liberals the oikos could prove to be
the key domain of those ‘unhistoric acts’ upon which ‘the growing good of the world is partly dependent.’ (371)

The most obvious person a woman can turn to for this kind of influence is her husband—a fact that John Stuart Mill acknowledges in his discussions on marriage and individualism in relation to women.

In his 1869 essay, “The Subjection of Women,” Mill presents two different views of marriage to argue that a woman should be considered a legal person. On the one hand, he argues that marriage reminds us all of the significant gender inequalities that have beset women for centuries. On the other hand, Mill also imagines a different sort of marriage, one in a more ideal form that provides a space where two inquiring, respectful minds can come together and develop a sense of sympathy as well as their own individuality. At its best, a family, Mill insists, “should be a school of sympathy in equality, of living together in love, without power on one side or obedience on the other” (180). Mill, ever the proponent of testing opinions through sincere and open dialogue, sees in marriage the potential for two companions to perform this exercise in free speech. Hilary Schor underlines this aspect of Mill’s views on marriage, writing, “Testing as much as sympathizing creates the perfect union. We need to dwell with what we do not like in order to think more clearly and independently—and is there a better definition of marriage than consistently, over time and of necessity, dwelling with what we do not like?” (29). Marriage, then, has the potential to provide women an education, one that forces them to examine their ideas and test them against another’s so that they may develop a stronger sense of their own individuality.

In Middlemarch, Eliot writes that “Marriage, which has been the bourne of so many narratives, is still a great beginning” (793) and so we see in that novel, as well as in Daniel Deronda, the different ways marriage prompts her heroines into processes of learning, social
experimentation, and self-discovery. In the novel, Eliot writes that “Character is a process and an unfolding” (141) and much of this process is relational. The novel’s primary narrative focuses on the ways in which Dorothea develops progressive views concerning gender equity, the companionate marriage, and the purpose of an intellectual life that are distinct from her husband’s. And though Rosamond hardly ever thinks outside the narrow corners of her own ambitious social horizons or exercises “self-reflexive deliberation,” the novel demonstrates that she, like Dorothea, holds onto strong opinions of marriage and economy that run contrary to her husband’s beliefs. The opinions of these female characters emerge through ongoing interaction in which their perspectives are expressed and tested. In developing their individualism and attempting to realize their ambitions, Dorothea and Rosamond must engage with those characters who hold the power to help them. But voicing outright one’s values and beliefs is not an easy task for young women, as conduct literature from this period of time indicates. This is one critical reason both characters employ indirection in their speech so often.

Though Dorothea, the self-effacing helpmeet who uses her instrumentality for the betterment of others, may be viewed as a foil to Rosamond, the self-absorbed social climber who uses others for her climb up the Middlemarch branches of society--the dichotomy is problematic, for both characters are locked into relationships where they must negotiate their own self-interests as well as the interests of those characters around them—their husbands, their families, and those characters that make up their community. In Middlemarch, Eliot dramatizes the tension Dorothea and Rosamond experience as they attempt to balance their personal desires and opinions with the wider world and its pressing limits through speech. Eliot’s formulation of liberalism, according to Daniel Malachuk, recognizes this common struggle between the “vague visions in the human soul and the world in which we must live together” (371). This same
ideological struggle was stressed by Eliot in an 1856 essay written on Sophocles’ Antigone—a heroine Eliot likens to Dorothea in Middlemarch. In the essay, Eliot distinguishes between “our inward needs (or “moral sense”) and “the outer life of man” (or “the rules which society has sanctioned”) and argues that they must “gradually and painfully” be brought into “harmony” (Malachuk 371). Rather than choose between the two claims, Eliot’s Middlemarch illustrates that one may cultivate personal desire without forsaking a community made up of other people attempting to do the same thing. Eliot represents this subtle negotiation in Middlemarch through the ongoing interactions of Dorothea and Rosamond, and more specifically, through their indirect discourse. By looking at the ways linguists have classified and characterized forms of indirection in conversation, we gain a better sense of how and why Eliot’s characters communicate as they do: how Dorothea and Rosamond position themselves in relation to others, how they manage to persuade and influence those characters they rely upon for financial and emotional support, and how they uphold social expectations for feminine comportment as they were recorded in Victorian conduct literature.

Why Dodge? The Linguistic Take

Like many other aspects associated with woman’s speech, the topic of “indirection” came to the forefront of critical discussion when Robin Lakoff addressed the subject in her 1975 work, Language and Women’s Place. The forms of indirection Lakoff originally identified included the use of hedges, tag questions, and euphemism—all of which, she argued, women used to soften and attenuate their expression of opinion. In her view, women all-too-often side-stepped strong assertions under the umbrella of conventional “politeness” in order to please and defer to their interlocutors. Lakoff’s original claims still resonant today, but many of her own assertions
have since been qualified after closer examination in contextual situations, in studies that demonstrate just how multifunctional indirect speech forms can be. For example, a hedge may, as Lakoff claims, weaken one’s assertion to convey polite deference: One might say “I suppose that’s a difficult situation,” rather than “You are in deep shit.” But hedges can also be used in risky face-threatening acts, as for example, when used to couch personal criticism: “I suppose you couldn’t keep up with the rest of us.” The key to discerning how a speaker wants to position him or herself is to take into account the context of an utterance: the likely intent of an utterance, the setting, the speaker and hearer’s status and their relationship to each other, and those linguistic conventions that are ritualized in the cultural context (Tannen 34).

A speaker may qualify an opinion by framing it as a question, using hedges, or understating it, but indirectness also can involve, what linguists Penelope Brown and Stephen Levinson call “going off record.” In their words, “to construct an off-record utterance one says something that is either more general (contains less information in the sense that it rules out fewer possible states of affairs) or actually different from what one means (intends to be understood). In either case, the hearer must make some inference to recover what was in fact intended” (211). When a communicator goes off-record, he or she typically gives ambiguous, vague, incomplete, suggestive, or overly-generalized statements to a hearer who may interpret the speaker’s words in more than one way, understanding that the speaker desires to establish solidarity with, or, distinctiveness from the addressee. Rosamond Vincy, in particular, proves adept in using this tactic to avoid discussions that center on herself and her duplicitous actions that occur in her marriage to Lydgate.

Indirectness, in all of its forms, is an important strategy for serving the needs of both rapport-building and defensiveness, or as Brown and Levinson describe it, upholding both
positive and negative face. To build rapport and solidarity with an interlocutor, a speaker may use indirectness to have the pleasant experience of getting one’s way or being understood, not because one demanded it (power) but because the other person wanted or understood the same thing (solidarity) (Tannen 32). As a form of defensiveness, indirectness can allow a speaker to disclaim, rescind, or further modify an opinion if it does not meet with a positive response, for one of the primary purposes in using indirectness is to preserve one’s “face” or, in other words, to keep one’s public self-image intact (Brown and Levinson 212). In *Middlemarch*, Eliot shows that Dorothea and Rosamond employ indirectness in their communication styles to both develop rapport with their addressees and to articulate their opinions without risking social rejection or embarrassment.

Linguists since J. L. Austin have held an interest in studying indirectness in communication because of its correlation to the power dynamics between a speaker and hearer. Though indirectness has stereotypically been read as a sign of deference and powerlessness, as Robin Lakoff claimed in her early study of language and gender, she later revised this position, by pointing out that indirectness can work helpfully for those who are powerful as well as for those who are powerless. She claimed that indirection functions particularly well when both participants are on approximately equal footing, but not one of true intimacy, so that both need protection and feel a need to protect each other (*Talking Power* 32). Though Dorothea and Casaubon and Rosamond and Lydgate cannot be described as entering their relationships on entirely equal footing, their courtships do involve a great deal of indirectness because intimacy, the kind where one may speak directly without fear of being misunderstood or reproved, is not initially established. Lakoff continues to explain that once close relationships develop, many people may continue to use indirectness in defensive ways because:
The partners have different ideas about how close the relationship is, and therefore about whether the usual rules are in effect or not; second, because they have different personal calibrations of how severe the imposition is; and third, because the scale of directness-to-imposition is different for each partner. These differences can arise out of nonshared cultural backgrounds, differences in gender, or simply different personality styles. (32)

The reasons that Lakoff lists above are not exhaustive, but in the case of *Middlemarch*, all three of the differences she identifies contribute to Dorothea and Rosamond’s indirect speech in marriage. The prevalent expectation that women should speak with more circumspect indirection than men is made plainly clear in Victorian conduct literature and is one basic reason Dorothea and Rosamond employ it so frequently in their marriages. The discrepancy between their personalities and their husbands’ is another underlying reason for indirectness, as each character fails to imagine or understand the whole of the person they marry before exchanging wedding vows and, thus, comes to realize a certain futility in having their opinions completely understood and their directives granted. Lastly, the issue of not sharing cultural backgrounds is, in this case, also tied to gender difference, for the dissimilar forms of education Rosamond and Dorothea undergo, compared to professionally-minded Lydgate and the cerebral academic, Casaubon, fail to provide a common ground where opinions might be shared with confidence.

Both female characters hold less overt power than their partners which prompts their use of indirection as a defensive linguistic strategy. But they also use indirect speech in powerful ways to persuade others, to evade confrontation, and to align more equally with addressees in their interactions. The qualifications, evasions, and softened statements found in their conversations may seem like formulaic modes of politeness routinely embedded in nineteenth-century discourse, but the frequent usage of these indirect forms underlines a consistent negotiation of the personal need to assert their individualism and to, alternately, build solidarity with others and uphold traditionally feminine manners.
Rosamond’s Wily Indirections

Rosamond Vincy’s indirection in speech comes quite naturally to her, as two of her family members also are noted for their use of indirection in conversation. Rosamond’s father, we are told, “was an open-minded man, but given to indirect modes of expressing himself” (326). Her Aunt Bulstrode, too, takes up indirection as a strategy of persuasion; after attempting to dissuade Lydgate from pursuing Rosamond, Eliot writes, “she felt that she had spoken as impressively as it was necessary to do, and that in using the superior word “militate” she had thrown a noble drapery over a mass of particulars which were still evident enough” (285). The pointed ambiguity of Mrs. Bulstrode’s comment works as she intends, for Lydgate—at least briefly—purposefully avoids visiting the Vincy household. By throwing “a noble drapery over a mass of particulars,” Rosamond, too, successfully maneuvers in conversations with Lydgate to accomplish her personal aims.

Proper form in speech carries a great deal of weight with Rosamond. When Eliot first introduces her, she writes that, “Mrs. Lemon had always held up Miss Vincy as an example: no pupil, she said, exceeded that young lady for mental acquisition and propriety of speech, while her musical execution was quite exceptional” (91). Her “melodic charm” and “agreeable” voice mark Rosamond as an accomplished young lady—in the minds of those in Middlemarch and in her own high estimation. One of the first statements Rosamond utters in the novel is a personal boast to her mother, “You never hear me speak in an unladylike way” (93). It is a point of personal pride that Rosamond looks and speaks with the “proper feminine angle” (90).

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Indeed, Rosamond’s own sense of importance derives from her distinction in being one of Middlemarch’s most proper and attractive young ladies. She individuates herself from others by holdingonto lessons in etiquette that privilege class difference and social protocol, rather than sympathy and sincerity, using language to reinforce this personal distinction. Linda Mugglestone has noted this as well, writing: “Rosamond adopts methods of social, and indeed moral, discrimination on the basis of linguistic sensitivity” (16). During her first scene in the novel, we see Rosamond’s snobbery quickly surface while correcting her more “plebian” mother’s speech:

‘Excuse me, mamma—I wish you would not say, ‘the pick of them.’
‘Why, what else are they?’
‘I mean, mamma, it is rather a vulgar expression.’
‘Very likely, my dear; I never was a good speaker. What should I say?’
‘The best of them.’ (93)

Rosamond’s hedges-- “excuse me,” “I wish,” “I mean,” and “rather”--mitigate the bald request she makes to her mother. The polite forms in her language, here, as in all of her conversations, cannot be described as improper, and yet the content of the speech, itself, carries the negative and hardly proper, or pleasing, message that her mother’s speech sounds inferior. Fussy pretentions in the name of propriety trump pleasant and well-meaning manners for Rosamond Vincy. Her lack of sympathy would not have stood well with Victorian conduct writers like Sarah Stickney Ellis who, in Women of England, writes four distinct and lengthy chapters all titled “Consideration and Kindness.” Rosamond’s flippant disregard for the feelings of others, renders her frequent manipulation of language not, altogether, surprising.

Rosamond manages to secure the attentions of the desirable Dr. Lydgate and she does this by conforming to his appreciation for a certain style of femininity. Indeed, Lydgate’s way of thinking about the opposite sex matches many of Rosamond’s own precepts. Early in their acquaintance, Eliot writes that in Lydgate’s eyes, “The tinge of unpretentious, inoffensive
vulgarity in Mrs. Vincy gave more effect to Rosamond’s refinement” (149). A large part of Rosamond’s appeal stems from how favorably she is contrasted against other, less-refined women in Middlemarch, yet her individuation, is, ironically, based upon a common stereotype of feminine conduct—a stereotype Lydgate superficially idealizes. Lydgate, who fails to delve below the surface appearance of Rosamond apprehends her, not as a person, but as one of a “type” embodying “that distinctive womanhood which must be classed with flowers and music, that sort of beauty which by its very nature was virtuous, being moulded only for pure and delicate joys” (154-5). As Rebecca Mitchell points out, “it is not Rosamond’s particularity that he finds attractive, but precisely her lack of particularity” (319). One critical reason Lydgate has little reason to find fault in Rosamond’s performance of feminine propriety is because she offers so few direct or personal thoughts in their conversations together to counter the stereotype.

Though Rosamond is not always a considerate speaker to those closest to her, she works especially hard to please Lydgate by sticking to vague and polite topics that reinforce his idealized opinion of her femininity. For instance, in their first conversation together, when Lydgate asks Rosamond what she saw while visiting London, she replies “Very little”, which is followed by the all-knowing narrator’s parenthetical interjection: “(A more naïve girl would have said, ‘Oh, everything!’ But Rosamond knew better.)” (150). Rosamond’s projection of subtle modesty works, for Eliot tells us that Lydgate asks his next question with “an involuntary emphasis of admiration, which made Rosamond blush with pleasure” (151).

Another example of indirection enters this same conversation a bit later and produces a similarly satisfying result for both participants. Rosamond introduces the subject of dancing—“Do you care about dancing at all? I am not quite sure whether clever men ever dance” (153)—offering up a compliment to close her implied request to dance with him at some future date.
Lydgate directly answers her unspoken appeal—“I would dance with you, if you would let me”—(153)—so that Rosamond then backtracks and qualifies her earlier question, saying, “Oh!...I was only going to say that we sometimes have dancing, and I wanted to know whether you would feel insulted if you were asked to come” (153). Rosamond, in projecting an air of friendly modesty clearly wants to please Lydgate and build rapport with him and so is justly pleased, herself, by Lydgate’s reciprocal show of interest in her.

To a certain extent, Rosamond recognizes that the less she reveals of herself to Lydgate, the more likely she is to draw him into a lasting commitment—her overarching aim—which accounts for the fact that she often manages to place herself in the position of not having to converse with Lydgate at all while being in his company. She does this by changing the subject of conversations and introducing less personal topics for discussion, as when Lydgate metaphorically speaks of her ability to teach him “a thousand things—as an exquisite bird could teach a bear” (151). Though Lydgate, himself, speaks vaguely of his budding bond with Rosamond using the silly metaphor of “birds and bears,” the substance of his comment, and its intimate tone, prompts her to redirect the conversation back to Fred and his grating music, for she replies, “Ah, there is Fred beginning to strum! I must go and hinder him from jarring all your nerves” (151). Rosamond manages to convey her concern for Lydgate’s ear, while avoiding giving a response to his personal attentions. She instead redirects Lydgate’s attention to Fred and then, “fortuitously”, to her own musical abilities. From a distance, Rosamond capably impresses Lydgate with her piano-playing without exposing more of herself than necessary, for her musical performance, which has the potential to wordlessly convey something of her feelings, is, itself, little more than an imitation. We are told Rosamond mimics her instructor’s “manner of playing,” a giving forth of “his large rendering of noble music with the precision of
an echo” (151). Rosamond, at this point, holds firmly to her identity as an abstract model of feminine correctness that allows for little in the way of self-revealing discourse.

From the beginning of the novel, Rosamond, like Dorothea, imagines courtship and marriage in vague and idealistic terms. But where Dorothea conjures a great spiritual and intellectual “communion” with Casaubon, Rosamond follows the scripts of “love-stories” she has read to pattern her pictured life with Lydgate. Her courtship proceeds, in her own mind, in the same structure as a romantic novel: she “had registered every look and word, and estimated them as opening incidents of a preconceived romance” (156). Yet those looks and words exchanged between Lydgate and Rosamond are scarce and rarely revealing. As Cara Weber suggests, Rosamond’s “idea of love precedes the actual relationship with a human partner, leaving little room for particularity or exchange…By making openness or exchange with Lydgate virtually impossible for her, Rosamond’s perfect typicality reveals the problems attendant upon considering the self in terms of identity” (504). Rather than consider the self as something consistently constructed and reimagined through ongoing discursive exchanges, Rosamond’s own self-image remains static because of her refusal to speak with open candor to others and more broadly, because she does not readily recognize an alternative mode of being. Rosamond, is after all, the prize pupil of Mrs. Lemon’s school and Lydgate plucks her out of the Vincy household because of that very reason. Surrounded by characters and a community who approves of her narrowly conceived role as a flower of society, can Rosamond be expected to act otherwise? Her strong resistance to stepping outside of this socially-sanctioned role emerges through her conversational strategies of indirection that continue even after she has married Tertius Lydgate.
Through her pleasing indirections, Rosamond wins over the husband of her choice and gains the respect (if only superficially) of others—two important accomplishments corresponding to the directives of Victorian conduct literature. However, it would be a mistake to assume Rosamond’s indirections work only to prop up a thinly constructed self-image. Her indirect speech also helps in less conventional ways: to extract information from characters that might aid her own interests, to avoid assuming culpability for back-handed actions in her marriage, and to challenge her husband on his decisions regarding their house and relationship. Rosamond’s indirect forms of personal agency appear in discourse through topic control and ambiguity that countermands the frequent requests made by her husband. Just as Dorothea works to influence those men necessary for reaching her ambitions, Rosamond, too, attempts to indirectly influence Lydgate. The main differences between the two female characters are their end goals. While Dorothea’s projects play out liberal ideals that work for the betterment of the community-at-large, Rosamond’s individualism is bound to the insular desire for social distinction.

An important way Rosamond controls conversation is by paying exclusive attention to the interlocutors she engages. One of the most statistically distinct words in Rosamond’s vocabulary is “you” which she utters 267 (4.67%) times in *Middlemarch*. To offer a sense of contrast, Dorothea’s usage of “you” occurs 381 (2.84%) times, almost half of the percentage found in Rosamond’s total amount of speech. The word “you” has a high frequency in most any characters’ dialogue and its usage always varies, but its repetition in Rosamond’s speech points to an underlying effort to keep the topic of discussion focused on other characters. It’s much easier, and considered more polite, to keep an interlocutor talking than to directly expose one’s opinions in conversation and in this way, the focus on “you” works for Rosamond’s benefit. For
example, rather than ask Mary Garth, “What do you think of our new doctor Lydgate?” and reveal her intense interest in him, Rosamond flatters Mary and, in a round-about way, eventually arrives at the topic:

“You may have an offer” [Rosamond tells Mary]
“Has any one told you he means to make me one?”
“Of course not. I mean, there is a gentleman who may fall in love with you, seeing you almost every day.”…
“Does that always make people fall in love?” she answered carelessly; “it seems to me quite as often a reason for detesting each other.”
“Not when they are interesting and agreeable. I hear that Mr. Lydgate is both.”
“Oh! Mr. Lydgate!” said Mary, with an unmistakable lapse into indifference. “You want to know something about him,” she added, not choosing to indulge Rosamond’s indirectness. (107-8)

Though Rosamond’s indirections make it more difficult to elicit information from Mary, Mary does eventually reveal more of the unknown Lydgate, satisfying Rosamond’s curiosity. By consistently redirecting the conversation back to her addressees and using subtle suggestions and questions, Rosamond indirectly collects information that she finds of interest. But this strategy also allows her to engage other characters to work as proxies in her schemes. To prompt other characters into performing some action, Rosamond uses this tactic. For instance, when Rosamond wishes for Fred to escort her to Stone Court she does not ask, “Fred, will you take me to Stone Court with you tomorrow?” but instead suggests:

“I suppose you are not going out riding to-day?”
“No; why?”
“Papa says I may have the chestnut to ride now.”
“You can go with me to-morrow, if you like. Only I am going to Stone Court, remember?”
“I want the ride so much, it is indifferent to me where we go.” Rosamond really wished to go to Stone Court, of all other places. (97)

Rosamond’s indirect request works, for Eliot tells us “The ride to Stone Court, which Fred and Rosamond took the next morning, lay through a pretty bit of midland landscape…” (98). Without
wanting to appear too eager or wanting to cause her family to question her motives for the visit, she manages to convey polite nonchalance. One further example demonstrating this strategy of indirection occurs when Rosamond, upon seeing Lydgate outside their lane, persuades her mother to ask him inside for a visit:

“Mamma!” said Rosamond, who was seated near the window (the dining room windows looked on that highly respectable street called Lowick Gate), “there is Mr. Lydgate, stopping to speak to some one. If I were you I would call him in. He has cured Ellen Bulstrode. They say he cures every one.” (247)

Mrs. Vincy, we are told, “sprang to the window” to call for Lydgate’s services in treating Fred’s illness. Rosamond’s indirect request succeeds, for she “lures” Lydgate into the house without having given the slightest appearance of doing anything so forward. Though Rosamond repeatedly manages to effect attitudes of polite disinterest, her stances lack sincerity, and once Rosamond marries Lydgate, this polite facade becomes more difficult to maintain.

Before Rosamond marries Lydgate, few of her personal opinions enter into their conversations. She comments broadly on the tuneless characters of Middlemarch, she hints at her enjoyment for dancing, and her discussion of other polite topics progresses in a light-hearted manner. But in the lived experience of relationship that follows their wedding vows, those personal thoughts and desires that had once been carefully tamped down quietly come to light and are shown to have a tenacious hold in her psyche. Eliot writes, “We know that she had much quiet perseverance in her opinion” (434). Eliot’s adjective, “quiet,” signals the deliberate suppression speech, which, as a powerful strategy of indirection, manages to convey precisely what Rosamond thinks and feels.

Rosamond, who believes her own authority to be best, gradually reveals to Lydgate her determined sense of independence. Lydgate, who had once regarded her cleverness as that “kind which became a woman” comes to see that it mingled in a “network aloof and independent”
Lydgate draws this conclusion after the most polite and effortless of his requests to Rosamond are met with silence or the introduction of a new topic—stances that convey her obstinate lack of compliance. For instance, when Lydgate asks that Rosamond not go riding, out of concern for their unborn child, Rosamond refuses to comply in a round-about way. While Lydgate awaits “some assurance” from her, she makes her own personal, and deliberately unrelated, request: “I wish you would fasten up my plaits, dear” (555). The turn in topic allows for their conversation to continue without her having to make a promise she has no intention of keeping. Eliot writes that Rosamond “had been determined not to promise…. [for] she had that victorious obstinacy which never wastes its energy in impetuous resistance” (556). Rather than fight with outright defiance, Rosamond challenges Lydgate using polite indirection and as a result, wins the skirmish.

As Rosamond receives more directives from Lydgate, particularly those meant to help them settle his severe debt, she continues to mutely protest in order to sustain the house and self-image she has abstracted for herself. For example, when Lydgate requests that they sell her jewelry to meet pressing financial obligations, Rosamond “with perfect propriety” hands over a box filled with amethysts and other trinkets and tells him: “This is all the jewellery you ever gave me. You can return what you like of it…You will not, of course, expect me to stay at home to-morrow. I shall go to papa’s” (568). Rosamond protests this material sacrifice by embedding into her response the implicit threat that she will leave him indefinitely. When Lydgate asks that she not go to her family Rosamond reluctantly agrees—conceding to her husband’s authority. So great is his relief from extracting her agreement, that he retracts his original request for the jewels and says, “I shall not touch these jewels, Rosy. Take them away again” (568).
Rosamond’s grudging acceptance of the directive to stay at their home cancels out Lydgate’s first order that she give up her jewels, so that, in the end, she gets her own way.

In many instances, Rosamond’s circuitous will allows her to triumph in domestic spats. But her agency has its limits. Outside the confines of her marriage and family, the control she holds through speech is tested—particularly by Will Ladislaw who eventually shatters the illusion that she, alone, represents the perfect embodiment of womanhood. Listening to his impassioned veneration for Dorothea Brooke powerfully provokes Rosamond so that she, if only for a brief time, takes up a broader and more realistic mindset, one that prompts thoughtful self-reflection. After she “wakes into some terrible new existence” in which she has “lost the sense of her identity” (742), Rosamond heroically steps outside of her routine linguistic behavior to use indirection as conduct literature originally intended—as a sign of sympathy and understanding.

In many respects Dorothea and Rosamond differ—in appearance, in background, in the values that they hold—but their marriages and the obstacles derived from the “awful nearness it brings” (759) provides them a common bond. In the final scene in which Dorothea and Rosamond meet, both characters connect by opening up and discussing, with sincerity, their mutual trials in marriage. Dorothea employs tag questions, negated questions, hedges—all of them meant to mitigate her authority in order to connect to Rosamond, to convince her of Lydgate’s devotion and love:

“It will cheer you—will it not?—to know a great deal about [Lydgate]?” (756)
“That will cheer you, will it not? That will give you courage!” (757)
“Trouble is so hard to bear, is it not?” (757)

Dorothea’s expressive consideration moves Rosamond to tears. But she, too, uses indirection in this passage to communicate her sympathy by putting “her lips to Dorothea’s forehead” and then clasping her “as if they had been in a shipwreck” (759). By this point both characters have
learned the personal limits of their authority within the bounds of matrimony and their mutual feelings of regret and sadness stem from this knowledge. Yet both also understand that there are ways to make the most of the influence they do hold. They do this for one another in this scene for the most altruistic of reasons: to comfort and confide in one another. While it is hardly surprising that Dorothea employs indirection to mitigate her authority and build rapport with Rosamond in this scene of friendship, it is also true that she uses similar tactics of indirection to influence, persuade, and to express herself to other characters. Just as Rosamond manipulates language to forward her agenda for social ascension, Dorothea, too, linguistically maneuvers using indirection. But because her personal ambitions align more closely to traditional notions of Victorian sympathy, the linguistic strategies she employs lack the tinge of self-serving calculation that so frequently colors Rosamond’s communications.

**Dorothea’s Feminine Indirections**

The opening pages of *Middlemarch* first describe Dorothea Brooke and her handsome looks—the plain clothes she prefers to wear and the dignity of her profile and stature. This is followed by her family circumstances which, though not aristocratic, were considered “unquestionably ‘good’” (3). After Eliot establishes those personal conditions that females are initially judged upon when considered as a potential partner in courtship, she informs her reader that Dorothea was “open” and “ardent” (6)—the first adjectives used to explicitly describe her voice. Dorothea, she explains, held a love of extremes and felt eager to know the truths of life:

> Her mind was theoretic, and yearned by its nature after some lofty conception of the world which might frankly include the parish of Tipton and her own rule of conduct there; she was enamoured of intensity and greatness, and rash in embracing whatever
seemed to her to have those aspects; likely to seek martyrdom, to make retractions, and then to incur martyrdom after all in a quarter where he had not sought it. (4)

In this passage, Eliot’s phrasing suggests that Dorothea, at this early juncture, already possesses split impulses between embodying noble, yet vague, individualistic desires and traditionally feminine knowledge that is framed by “rules of conduct.” Those “retractions” that the narrator anticipates for Dorothea, as she wobbles to fulfill the nebulous role of martyr, also hint at the indirectness to follow in her future path. So even though Dorothea begins the novel being described as a strong, opinionated, and “ardent” individual, Eliot also alludes to her traditional education in feminine comportment and conduct which contributes to having those grand aspirations seem less distinct and less tenable.

Of course, good reason stands as to why Dorothea is described as speaking “directly” or “energetically.” Her brusque rejections of Sir James, her fervent discussions of religion and spirituality, her strong defense of Casaubon’s intellectual work, her push to build the poor new cottages—all of these examples point to Dorothea’s directness in speech. Eliot frequently characterizes her outbursts through metaphors such as an “outpouring” and “impulse” and “discharging”—all of which suggest a lack of conscious control that would have been viewed as tactless by a conduct writer like Sarah Stickney Ellis. George Eliot well understood the risk females ventured from “outpourings” of emotion and “impulsive” ideas, for early in the novel when discussing Dorothea, she wryly comments: “Women were expected to have weak opinions; but the great safeguard of society and domestic life was, that opinions were not acted on. Sane people did what their neighbors did, so that if any lunatics were at large, one might know and avoid them” (5). Underlying the humor in this statement is a sense of the pressures placed on Dorothea to conform to those precepts for feminine comportment that temper direct self-expression.
Even before her engagement to Casaubon, Eliot shows Dorothea squashing her opinions in order to uphold polite conversation. During a small dinner party, for example, she offers no rebuttal or comment when her uncle insults her secretarial skills. It is likely that the presence of Casaubon and Sir James, as well as her uncle’s authority within their small gathering, prompts Dorothea to tamp down her sharp reaction—a reaction which Eliot provides through free-indirect discourse. In a similar manner, Dorothea represses her strong opinion and feelings when broaching the subject of building cottages with Casaubon and discovering his indifference her cause. Though she questions “urging these arguments on Mr. Casaubon” a second time, she ultimately decides “she was presumptuous in demanding his attention to such a subject” (29).

Dorothea deliberately forgoes her designs for community activism in order to please her suitor. The courtship of Dorothea and Casaubon, itself, is made up of ambiguity. Rarely do their shared conversations appear as dialogue, a stylistic choice contributing to the sense that neither character delivers direct or sincerely felt opinions that stretch beyond their discussions of academic and religious interests. It also suggests how little the two characters talk to one another at all. Dorothea’s strange attraction to the much older and sallow Casaubon, we are told, hinged on his “vague labyrinthine” mind and the assumption that she will learn “a whole world” (20-1) from him; these broad and unclear descriptions point to how little Dorothea actually knows of her suitor. Through the “loops and zigzags” (21) in which signs are read and conclusions are drawn, both characters conjure idealistic images of the other to suit their own purposes. Even the small amount of dialogue attributed to their shared conversations before marriage contains indirections that reveal little of the inner-workings of their minds. For example, Casaubon first compliments Dorothea in a back-handed manner by addressing her uncle, rather than her, saying, “You have an excellent secretary at hand, you perceive” (16) so that the praise includes Mr.
Brooke’s discernment as well. During this same meeting, he also draws upon metaphorical language--after listening to Sir James press Dorothea to go riding--to answer for her, stating: “‘We must not inquire too curiously into motives,’ he interposed, in his measured way. ‘Miss Brooke knows that they are apt to become feeble in the utterance: the aroma is mixed with the grosser air. We must keep the germinating grain away from the light’” (18). The use of metaphor, an off-record strategy noted by Brown and Levinson (222) forces the hearer to choose his/her own interpretation of an utterance. Though no one in the room listening to Casaubon directly replies to this abstract and lofty statement, Dorothea loosely infers from it that they might share “some spiritual communion” (18). Their language, in its indirectness, then, parallels the vague vision of marriage they both share.

Had Dorothea and Casaubon taken the time to converse in more depth or with more frequency, they might never have been wed. Cara Weber, in discussing marriage and sympathy in Middlemarch, comments: “Eliot opposes the moments of contact in courtship—‘the brief entrances and exits’—to the ‘continuity of married companionship,’ emphasizing that it is this very continuity, the ongoingness of interaction in marriage, that brings fuller light to one’s knowledge of the other” (501). Sustained closeness after their marriage does bring both characters more thorough knowledge and understanding of the other, but this change in perspective does not stop Dorothea from speaking with indirection meant to please her husband.

Casaubon’s “frigid rhetoric” and drawn-out silences after they are married provoke many of Dorothea’s qualifications in speech. While Casaubon’s most statistically distinct word in speech—“my”—frequently points to a possessive mindset (“my direction,” “my mind,” “my opinion,” “my selection,” “my purpose”), Dorothea’s indirections reveal, in part, an attitude of conciliation. But when Dorothea attempts to build rapport with her new husband, she is often
met with cold resistance. While in Rome on their “honeymoon,” Dorothea’s caresses—an indirect, if unspoken, sign of care—are met with Casaubon’s pronouncement, describing her “to be of a most affectionate and truly feminine nature” while indicating at the same time, “by politely reaching a chair for her, that he regarded these manifestations as rather crude and startling” (189). Casaubon’s own indirection—saying the polite platitude while physically intimating its opposite meaning—triggers hesitancy in Dorothea’s voice. Shortly after this we hear Dorothea tentatively ask Casaubon: “I hope you are thoroughly satisfied with our stay—I mean, with the result so far as your studies are concerned,’ said Dorothea, trying to keep her mind fixed on what most affected her husband” (190). The hedge, “I mean,” reoccurs with great frequency in Dorothea’s speech and in this particular conversation, it works to redirect her question so that the focus lies on Casaubon’s studies rather than the more personal question of how he views their time spent together while in Rome. Dorothea’s qualification works to save face for herself and for Casaubon, as the topic of their relationship would likely, and eventually does, result in an unpleasant confrontation.

Dorothea finds a poor conversationalist in Casaubon—a learned man she hung great hopes upon for giving her a more purposeful life, for teaching her “to see the truth by the same light as great men have seen it” (25). Though she tries to connect with Casaubon in conversation and involve herself in his studious work, he brushes off Dorothea’s attempts with regularity. Eliot writes, “She was always trying to be what her husband wished, and never able to repose on his delight in what she was” (452). With little to do to occupy her time, living in “the stifling oppression of that gentlewoman’s world, where everything was done for her and none asked for her aid” (261), Dorothea struggles to connect with other characters. Like Bronte’s Jane Eyre, Dorothea’s sense of isolation prompts her to find understanding in others for “what she cared
most to say” (345). While Jane asks questions to Rochester, working to engage and build rapport with him, Dorothea, more tentatively, works to engage the young and handsome Will Ladislaw while her husband pours over his mythological tomes away from her in Rome.

Just as Dorothea politely uses indirection with her husband to help convey a desire for friendly rapport, she employs it with Will Ladislaw as well for the same reason. Her qualifications that pepper questions and statements directed to Ladislaw also underline the novel experience of having an attentive listener speak cooperatively and on topics of interest to her, a character who likens her voice to that “which had once lived in an Aeolian harp” (75). During their initial meetings in Rome, Dorothea opens up polite subjects for conversation: “‘You mean perhaps to be a painter?’ said Dorothea, with a new direction of interest. ‘You mean to make painting your profession?’” (196). The hedge “perhaps” signals a polite deference to Ladislaw so that he will discuss more of himself with her. In the novel Dorothea mitigates her statements with the word “perhaps” fifteen times—more than any other female in Middlemarch. Most often the hedge “perhaps” softens questions and assertions so that an utterance is more likely to be well-received by the addressee. Dorothea uses this hedge, again, during one of her talks with Will in Rome, for this same reason, when asking him to help her choose a cameo as a gift for her sister, Celia:

‘I am so glad you are come. Perhaps you understand all about cameos, and can tell me if these are really good. I wished to have you with us in choosing them, but Mr. Casaubon objected; he thought there was not time. He will finish his work tomorrow, and we shall go away in three days. I have been uneasy about these cameos. Pray sit down and look at them.’ (208)

Dorothea begins warmly, “I am so glad you are come,” then prefaces her request with the word “perhaps” and the implied compliment that she places trust in Ladislaw’s knowledge and taste in art. She indirectly contrasts Ladislaw with Casaubon, by complaining of her husband’s work and
absence, mentioning them as a reason given for his not soliciting Will’s opinion. Dorothea then quickly redirects the topic back to the cameos with a polite request.

Critics like Jean Arnold have pointed to this scene as an illustration of how Eliot’s ideas of art and sympathetic action intersect through the views expressed by Dorothea and Will, but the basic linguistic strategies used in it also reveal how they desire to position themselves in relation to one another. The polite deference Dorothea shows Will works to open up their conversation to more personal and stimulating subjects that gratify them both in discussion, for in talking to Ladislaw: “a lunette opened in the wall of her prison, giving her a glimpse of the sunny air” (345). But Dorothea’s speech is not so familiar that she oversteps her wifely duties, for as soon as the hint of her dissatisfaction with Casaubon is voiced, Dorothea redirects the topic to safer and less personal ground. She balances the claims of her marriage and her personal desire to confide and to converse with Ladislaw through indirection in speech.

**Dorothea’s Indirect Individualism**

As much as Dorothea would like to connect with others like Ladislaw and to please those with whom she converses, she also holds strong opinions that individuate her from other characters. Dorothea confides to Will Ladislaw during one of his visits to Lowick: “Mr. Casaubon often says I am too subtle. I don’t feel as if I were subtle” (374). Yet, Eliot shows that, in many respects, Dorothea must be subtle in order to express herself, to control conversational discourse, and to persuade others to her way of thinking. In order for Dorothea to put her ideas into social practice—a liberalizing aim—she must maneuver through those
constraints that bar women from enacting their private ideas in social and political realms. Chief among those limitations is the expectation that women mitigate their opinions in discourse.

The most marked enthusiasm in Dorothea’s speech occurs while she discusses “plans” for building cottages. The emotional contour in her voice when speaking on this topic is conveyed through her overuse of exclamations—an “intensifier,” stereotypically associated with females, that shows a speaker linguistically working to be heard and understood by others (Holmes 73). Dorothea, in speaking of her cottages, exclaims: “Worth doing! yes, indeed” (27); “Oh what a happiness it would be to set the pattern about here!” (27); “Tipton may look quite another place. Oh, how happy!” (371). But the eagerness Dorothea expresses while discussing her charitable project is also tempered with qualifications that convey her lack of knowledge and resources for implementing the construction of the cottages she envisions.

Dorothea, cognizant of her own dependence upon a land-holding male to aid her cause, qualifies her language to indirectly persuade Sir James to take up her project. In Dorothea’s mind, “certainly these men who had so few spontaneous ideas might be very useful members of society under good feminine direction if they were fortunate in choosing their sisters-in-law!” (30). A good portion of that “good feminine direction” occurs indirectly through her communications to Sir James; in part, her qualifications are meant to politely defer to her addressee’s judgment, but they also speak to the vagueness of her ideas that have yet to be tested or seriously talked over with another character invested in her project. When Sir James asks Dorothea to show him her plan, she agrees with some hedging: “Yes, certainly. I daresay it is very faulty. But I have been examining all the plans for cottages in Loudon’s book, and picked out what seem the best things. Oh what a happiness it would be to set the pattern about here! I think, instead of Lazarus at the gate, we should put the pig-sty cottages outside the park-gate”
(27). The qualifications in this paragraph, “I daresay” and “I think,” as well as her reliance upon the Scottish writer, John Claudius Loudon who wrote *Observations on Laying Out Farms* in 1812, points to Dorothea’s inexperience planning for cottages. But it is also worth noting that she subtly ropes Sir James into her scheme by stating “we should…” And though the plans in this passage sound vague, for she picks out the best “things” in Loudon’s book and uses a metaphor that does more to entertain Sir James than precisely explain her project, her strategy ultimately succeeds. Shortly after this conversation is related we learn that Sir James takes one of her written plans with him to “consult upon with Lovegood” (28).

But Dorothea’s energetic appeals do not always work—especially when they lack the qualifying statements that defer to those men who might enact her cause. Later in the novel, after Dorothea has married Casaubon, she once again urges her uncle to improve the cottages at Tipton, but her persuasions, spoken to Mr. Brooke and in front of Will Ladislaw in “clear and unhesitating” tones, like “that of a young chorister chanting a *credo*” (371) fail her. Dorothea’s direct call to action and fortifying speech falls on deaf ears. Eliot writes that “Will’s admiration was accompanied with a chilling sense of remoteness” while Mr. Brooke, looking at the footman while speaking to Dorothea, replies, “There is something in what you say, my dear, something in what you say—but not everything—eh, Ladislaw?” (372). The subject of building cottages is then summarily dismissed.

Though the issue of building cottages is a pet project of Dorothea’s that surfaces throughout the novel, there are other matters of opinion that Dorothea takes up in indirect ways. One critical way she works to indirectly persuade other characters is to present them with negated questions. According to John Heritage, negated questions are “quite commonly treated as expressing a position or point of view” (1428). They work to indirectly solicit a specific kind
of response and in this way may control the direction of conversation. Rather than give an outright request or opinion, the negated question functions as a strategy of negative politeness by deferring to the addressee who has the right to agree or disagree with the speaker’s opinion and either accept the speaker’s request or refuse it. However, it can also “indicate that a speaker knows a hearer’s wants, tastes, habits, etc.,” (Brown and Levinson 122) and in this way mark a sense of solidarity with them. For Dorothea, the negated question often works to persuade others to accept her opinions, and more specifically, to follow a course of action that she deems morally and intellectually worthwhile. In urging others to cultivate their character alongside their careers, Dorothea embodies a doctrine of liberalism that John Stuart Mill subscribed to: “the cultivation of an ideal nobleness of will and conduct,” he asserts, should prevail over any other standard of happiness with which it comes into conflict (130). As Dorothea searches for developing this “noble” standard of conduct in her own life, she indirectly presses Casaubon and Ladislaw to follow this same pursuit.

Early in their relationship, Dorothea requests that she assist Casaubon in his work, the “Key to all Mythologies” and she does this through negated questions:

‘Could I not be preparing myself now to be more useful? said Dorothea to him, one morning, early in the time of courtship; “could I not learn to read Latin and Greek aloud to you, as Milton’s daughters did to their father, without understanding what they read?’ (58)

By framing her role as that of a helpmeet and appealing to Casaubon with two negated questions phrased as, “could I not?” Dorothea gains his “precious permission” (59). Had she simply stated her desire: “I want to learn to read Latin and Greek and I want you to teach me” she would have likely met more resistance. Though Casaubon initially expresses concern over the propriety of a young woman performing this typically masculine work, he eventually consents to Dorothea’s request.
By the time we find Dorothea in Rome, married to a preoccupied Casaubon, she has developed some idea of the futility of her husband’s intellectual work and pushes him to organize his notes and publish them. In a fit of deep frustration, she says to him: “And all your notes…all those rows of volumes—will you not now do what you used to speak of?—Will you not make up your mind what part of them you will use, and begin to write the book which will make your vast knowledge useful to the world?” (190). Dorothea envisions herself as an indirect vessel for her husband’s own grand purpose in life. But Casaubon only hears the implied insult and censure in her words. The negated questions, meant to persuade, fail Dorothea in this scene.

Dorothea gradually accepts that her husband’s great book will never materialize but this does not stop her from defending him to Will Ladislaw or pushing others to concede to the value of his intellectual labor: “Why should Mr. Casaubon’s [studies] not be valuable, like [other scholars who wrote on antiquities]?” (211) she asks Ladislaw. Dorothea’s negative question is meant to push Will into agreement with her point of view; however, she does not get the answer she wants—that her husband’s work is, indeed, important to the broader world. Her defense of Casaubon endears her to Will and he gradually, if grudgingly, concedes for her benefit that, “Mr. Casaubon’s generosity has perhaps been dangerous to me” (212), even though his negative opinion of Casaubon cannot be shaken.

Eliot shows that the same impulse within Dorothea to propel Casaubon towards intellectual and principled achievement stretches to Will Ladislaw as well. Even as the two first come to know one another in Rome, Dorothea asks him, “But if you have a genius for painting, would it not be right to take that as a guide? Perhaps you might do better things than these—or different, so that there might not be so many pictures almost all alike in the same place” (197). The qualifications in this speech, “perhaps,” “might,” and “almost,” as well as the negated
question—“would it not be right?”—work as forms of gentle persuasion. Will hears the “simplicity” in her statement and it prompts him to speak to her with characteristic “frankness”—a trait that Dorothea increasingly appreciates. Though he first rejects Dorothea’s suggestion that he “might do better” than paint, the conclusion of the novel suggests that Dorothea does, indeed, eventually persuade Will to “struggle against the wrongs that existed” in their small world (797). In the end, Dorothea succeeds in urging others like Will toward beneficent activity, but Eliot leaves her mode of persuasion unexplained.

At the conclusion of the novel, Dorothea reminds her sister Celia that none of her benevolent plans have come to fruition, saying, “I never could do anything that I liked. I have never carried out any plan yet” (782). By ending her statement with the word, “yet,” she underlines an ongoing desire for planning and pushing others to good causes. That “yet,” which she utters just before her marriage to Ladislaw, suggests that she has not given up hope for bettering a community in significant and meaningful ways. Through her companionate marriage to Will Ladislaw, this expectation is met, if only indirectly. As a public figure of London and a journalist working to right the social wrongs around him, Will’s character comes to embody the liberal individual writers like John Stuart Mill had imagined, a figure whose livelihood centers around the expression of opinion and public good. Eliot writes that Will became “an ardent public man, working well in those times when reforms were begun with a young hopefulness of immediate good” (797). However, Dorothea’s own involvement in this sphere, we are told, is important but peripheral, as the narrator insists that “many who knew her, thought it a pity that so substantive and rare a creature should have been absorbed into the life of another, and be only known in a certain circle as a wife and mother” (797). Despite her more equal relationship with Will, Dorothea’s power remains dependent upon another’s willingness to enact her own desires.
Dorothea’s language, just as her influence, we may assume, continues to be indirect—a powerful, but curbed, expression of her individuality that effects those around her in “incalculably diffusive” ways (799). In her “Finale” to *Middlemarch*, Eliot records the words of characters like Fred Vincy, Tertius Lydgate, and Sir James Chettam, but provides no dialogue to represent Dorothea’s new role as wife to Lydgate and mother to their children. Her absent speech and the narrator’s own disappointing tone when addressing Dorothea’s fate as wife to Ladislaw, combined, suggest that her voice never quite breaks away from the social binds that curtail open self-expression.

**Conclusion**

Before Dorothea marries Casaubon, Eliot writes that he perceives within her an “ardent submissive affection which promised to fulfil his most agreeable provisions of marriage” (58). The phrase “ardent submissive affection” surprises initially. It contains an internal tension, for how can one person be both “ardent” and “submissive”? But through indirection in speech, Dorothea ably conveys both of these stances in courtship and marriage. She employs qualification, hedges, and negated questions that help her to connect with other characters as well as to push them to fulfill her own “ardent” ambitions. And though the ambitions of Rosamond Vincy carry little resemblance to Dorothea’s “noble” social intentions, she, too, works to persuade and influence other characters while, at the same time, embodying the conduct books general mandate for maintaining a pleasant and proper demeanor. Rosamond, “ardent” in her willfulness to achieve social distinction and “submissive” in the appearance she effects, adopts indirect strategies—using ambiguity and linguistic omissions—to enact personal agency in her courtship and marriage to Tertius Lydgate.
In her discussion of the negotiations and contradictions that make up the lives of those living in Middlemarch, Elizabeth Ermarth asserts, “George Eliot knew that language determines possible perception; that to inhabit a language is to inhabit a world” and that within the world of her novel “various such systems of value and expression—‘language’ in the large sense—overlap…constituting a complexity that both supports and (on the other hand) hampers individuals” (119). The broad ideologies that make up those systems of value and expression are located in the strategies of speech Eliot assigns her characters. The language Dorothea and Rosamond use—its elasticity and limits—reflects their society’s many values. Two of those prominent, but disparate, beliefs derive from conduct literature promoting sympathetic and supportive language as well as liberal thought promoting sincere discourse that develops individualistic opinion.

Through their indirections in speech—qualifications, negated questions, leading questions, hedges, ambiguity, omissions—Dorothea and Rosamond capture the attention of their future husbands and, once married, use these strategies to influence and persuade their partners in order to enact their subjective goals. Sometimes they are successful, and other times not—which is a reflection of the social constraints placed upon them. The linguistic strategies employed by Dorothea, in particular, reflect Eliot’s attention given to the strong influence of private character and how it may shape broader social projects—a liberalizing ambition. But Dorothea and Rosamond, both, must show their adherence to forms of feminine propriety as others’ expect them to do. It is this, after all, that attracts Casaubon and Lydgate to them initially. And so they balance both of these societal claims through indirection in discourse.
Chapter Seven: Gwendolen Harleth’s Doubleness and Dissatisfaction in Speech

*Daniel Deronda*, Eliot’s final novel, unlike her previous works, takes place in the time during which she wrote it, the 1870’s. Even more than *Middlemarch*, this novel is explicitly concerned with the limits of modernity in England at that time which hinder people from meaningful social interaction and individual growth. In the novel’s central female figure, Gwendolen Harleth, we find a doubleness in character that corresponds to the doubled plot she shares with the eponymous hero, Daniel Deronda. From the beginning of the novel to its end, Eliot stresses her character as one not easily categorized, leaving characters and readers alike wondering if she is villain or victim? self-seeking or self-sacrificing? flirtatious or frigid? materialistic or moral? The first words of the novel--the unspoken questions swirling through Deronda’s head as he first watches Gwendolen at a gambling table--reflect this doubleness of character: “Was she beautiful or not beautiful? And what was the secret form or expression which gave the dynamic quality to her glance? Was the good or the evil genius dominant in those beams?” (1). Aside from the unusual fact that this opening portrait reveals little of the novel’s heroine, it also introduces the problem of communicating and reading that vexes Gwendolen throughout the novel.

One reason Gwendolen’s character can be so difficult to read is because her patterns of communication primarily work to satisfy her paradoxical proclivities for social performance as well as autonomy. Early in *Daniel Deronda*, Gwendolen assertively tells her mother: “I have made up my mind not to let other people interfere with me as they have done” (22). The selfhood she seeks flouts typical expectations of her gender, but her insistent desire for independence is contrasted to and quashed by her constant need to be admired and looked at by others. The narrator writes that Gwendolen Harleth, “meant to do what was pleasant to herself in
a striking manner; or rather, whatever she could do so as to strike others with admiration” (31).

Her negotiation of these seemingly contradictory stances linguistically surfaces through
dissonant speech patterns that obscure her interiority and amplify her affectation in social
settings. Gwendolen’s frequent use of boosters—exclamations and italics that signal her desire to
be heard—and her attempts at ironic and witty discourse underline the effort she takes to draw
others’ attention to her speech. Both strategies can be read as an attempt to socially align with
other characters in the novel, but also signal her investment in speech as a type of performance—
a form of speaking Eliot’s narrator implicitly critiques.

For all of Gwendolen’s seeming bravado, her speech only occasionally registers
authority. The social world that Eliot draws in Daniel Deronda does not properly prepare her
heroine to look past her ambition to be superficially admired or speak in ways that might
complicate her singular goal to be “daring in speech” (53). In settings where women’s words are
often rendered superfluous by the sheer force of this particular society’s imperative to look and
take stock of one another, rather than listen to one another, Gwendolen must work to have others
take note of her speech. Yet her speech is not always easy for others to decipher or appreciate.
For every considerate and polite utterance, a critical or brash comment follows, producing the
effect of animated, but oscillating affectation that repels her audiences more often than not. This
doubleness in communication is similarly reflected in her attempts at irony and wit. Aware of
how a statement may be framed in order to draw attention to herself, Gwendolen “cajoles” and
“laughs” and speaks “saucily” or “wickedly” to provoke reactions from her audiences. But as
daring and teasing as her tone may sound, the majority of her comments lack insightful content
to show a fully developed subjectivity, for Gwendolen’s concept of identity and self-
development is premised on being seen and heard to advantage, an idea of performance that
focuses on visible effect to the exclusion of inner cultivation. This personal deficit hinders her ability to interpret, analyze, and question other characters in social interactions, thwarting open and sincere exchange.

More than any of the other novels examined in this dissertation, *Daniel Deronda* shows the constraining limits placed on both politely feminine and individualistic speech. Gwendolen, who ineffectually enacts both of these stances, remains fixed in competitive social system that undermines sympathetic and sincere discourse. Her theatrical worldview affords the short-lived sensation of holding personal agency every time she draws attention her way. Daniel admits to this uncanny power of attraction when he describes Gwendolen’s potent effect on others “as coercion” (1). But when the social eye closes for brief moments of abstraction in the novel’s tableau scene, when Gwendolen receives Lydia’s diamonds, and following Grandcourt’s death, Gwendolen’s self-awareness emerges and shatters the illusion of personal power exerted through social performance. In each of these scenes, terror triggers muteness and fragmented speech, linguistic signs of the severe limitations placed upon what women can actually utter in polite society—a society that Eliot depicts as tightening the field of possibilities for self-expression.

As Gwendolen’s sense of control and independence dramatically lessens in the narrative, her speech dwindles on the page, suggesting an increasing unwillingness to speak up to others and a growing distrust in speech as a useful form of communication. Like the characters Alcharisi and Mirah, Gwendolen eventually offers a confessional account of her own history—a moment when her voice breaks the pattern of stylistically conscious language meant for show---yet she fails to move her interlocutor, Deronda, in any way to help change her diminished circumstances. Language, as an intrinsic part of the limiting society she finds herself within, does little to help her find personal fulfillment or narrative closure—even when she momentarily
escapes the public eye and her acute consciousness of being watched. Gwendolen’s speech patterns point to an increasing anxiety directed toward women who embody excessive individualism. But the novel’s broader critique rests upon a social world that promotes feminine performance and standardized verbal behavior at the expense of meaningful social interaction and a sense of relatedness through one’s community.

**Conduct Literature: Learning One’s Role**

From the time George Eliot began writing her first published novel, *Adam Bede*, in the 1850’s, to the time she finished *Daniel Deronda* in 1876, conduct books had become overtaken by etiquette manuals that codified conventional rules of behavior. In *Manners, Morals, and Class in England, 1774-1858*, Marjorie Morgan asserts that “the eclipse of the conduct book by the etiquette book in the nineteenth century suggests that the latter’s fashionable behavioral code was, in some fundamental way, more compatible with England’s highly competitive, commercial society than was the sincere behavioral code” (87). Both books promoted the idea that female readers could control their lives to a certain extent, but in differing respects: one could gain a sense of agency based on the manifestation of personal attributes such as honesty and compassion or, alternately, one could gain a sense of purpose and power by displaying signs of material wealth and refinement. In the novel, we see Gwendolen, to her own detriment, take up the more status-driven directives found in etiquette books that promote social performance.

To counter the growing social trend that promoted refined behavior for the sake of social display, Sarah Stickney Ellis and other conduct writers addressed, head on, the dangers of affectation and caprice—outgrowths of standardized manners promoted in etiquette books. In
Women of England Stickney Ellis devotes an entire chapter to “Social Intercourse—Caprice—Affectation—Love of Admiration” and in Daughters of England, similarly, includes a chapter titled, “Selfishness, Vanity, Artifice, and Integrity.” In her books, she explicitly lumps “caprice” and “affectation” together, explaining that they both stem from the dangerous need to incite others’ interest and garner personal attention:

[Caprice] arises from the same cause as affectation; and both owe their existence to a desire to attract attention, or a belief that attention is attracted by what is said or done. Caprice refers more to a weak and vain desire to be important; affectation, to a desire to make ourselves admired. Both are contemptible in the extreme. (292)

Caprice and affectation, by these definitions, are pushed to extremes in the character of Gwendolen Harleth and her speech reflects this personal investment in an attentive audience. Her frequent exclamatory statements and the emotional contour of her voice, signaled through italics, highlight her efforts to be heard to advantage. In addition, she works to impress other characters by offering up pointed quips, quotations of literature, and vague truisms to appear distinctively “clever.” Sarah Stickney Ellis’s tract on “caprice” could not correspond to a more exemplary model than Eliot’s heroine:

How often do we see, for instance, a beautiful and fascinating girl expressing the most absurd antipathies, or sympathies, and acting in the most self-willed and irrational manner; in short, performing a part, which, in a plain woman, would be regarded not only as repulsive, but unamiable in the utmost degree; yet because she is beautiful, her admirers appear to think all these little freaks of fancy highly becoming, and captivating in the extreme. (Women of England 287)

This description captures the sense of spectacle and performance derided in attractive characters like Gwendolen Harleth who thrive on self-display. Eliot’s own implicit critique of this behavior emerges in comments from characters such as Gwendolen’s Aunt Gascoigne, who warns: “[N]ow there is no room for caprice; indeed, I trust you have no inclination to any” (276).

Admonitions like this, however, do not sway Gwendolen, for the idea of social performance is
never far removed from her mind. But neither is it far removed from the other female characters in the novel who investigate musical performance as a profession and its costs—a fact that emphasizes the broadly held idea, at that time, that most women have some part to play, whether privately or publicly.

In a contradictory way, conduct literature draws upon images and aspects of the theater to suggest the kinds of parts women were to take up within the household—a rhetorical pattern that signifies the broader social pressures that Victorian women felt to “play a role.” Even those writers who abhorred affectation sprinkled their advice with allusions to performance. For example, writer Florence Hartley, was not above recommending young women to act out those “virtues which you would affect” until “they will appear naturally” (20). Sarah Stickney Ellis, too, asserts in Daughters of England that all should be prepared for the duties that “urge us forward on the theatre of life” (64). In Women of England Ellis recommends that young women’s “leisure hours in school be filled with the practice” of conversation and urges them to hone their techniques on one another so that they may perform without fault when in the company of men (151). So even though many of these writers promoted modest and sincere discourse, they also understood the agency women could assume by taking up certain roles within the “domestic theater.” Literary critic, Anna Despotopoulou, points out that, “female conduct book writers like Sarah Stickney Ellis use the metaphor of the theatre to describe not only the flaunting of womanliness in public, but also women’s domestic profile, since even in the home, women would assume poses to run the household, manipulate their husbands, or simply survive in an unstable and vulnerable domestic environment” (94). Taught to be “natural” while at the same time expected to “play a role,” many Victorian women had to strike a careful balance between the two stances in order to maintain their own subjectivity. Femininity, never a
straightforward category, becomes more precarious under this system, as the line between representation and reality blurs. For Gwendolen, this line is consistently confused, yet she, alone, is not entirely at fault, for Eliot, echoing the words of Ellis, reminds us that her heroine’s outlook had been molded by the social conventions drawn within the “narrow theater which life offers to a girl of twenty, who cannot conceive herself as anything else than a lady” (53). The feminine scripts Gwendolen learns lock her into a mode of performing that precludes self-analysis and exploration of subjects that fall outside the bounds of her narrow “education.”

Gwendolen’s linguistic performance of femininity obscures elements of her selfhood, successfully masking an interiority she, herself, does not even recognize, and as a result she alienates herself from far more characters than she successfully engages. Rather than win over interlocutors with sympathetic sentiment, as most Victorian conduct writers suggested, Gwendolen draws upon empty quips meant to impress: “it was never her aspiration to express herself virtuously so much as cleverly” (239). When given the chance to reveal something of herself in conversation, Gwendolen frequently falls back to vague or overly simplistic statements, words that disclose little of her own subjectivity. For example, when asked if she likes her new neighborhood, she tells young Clintock: “There seems to be a little of everything and not much of anything” (41). At this same social gathering, Gwendolen tells Mrs. Arrowpoint, “Imagination is often truer than fact,” which the narrator then notes, is string of “glib words” Gwendolen could “no more have explained…than if they had been Coptic or Etruscan” (38). Only a few scenes later, Gwendolen naively tells her cousin Rex, “But if the world were pleasanter, one would only feel what was pleasant” (59). Gwendolen’s nebulous assertions leave her addressees little to interpret in her character and little to respond to in
conversation. Her adherence to role-playing prevents her from building connections to other characters in discourse in ways that Eliot would have certainly endorsed.

For Eliot, those characters fulfilling a proper feminine role most often act as an anchor for their communities—consolidating relationships and building sympathetic bonds to create solidarity between people. Amanda Anderson emphasizes this aspect of Eliot’s work, writing, “[F]or Eliot, femininity in its ideal form enacts and transmits bonds of the community, from the level of the family to that of the nation” (139). Those characters such as Mirah Lapidoth and Dorothea Brook, who represent Eliot’s feminine ideal, are rewarded with marriages that allow them a sense of purpose by working, if indirectly, to build cohesion and sympathetic alliances among the people they know and meet. But connections of this kind elude Gwendolen Harleth. Her version of feminine speech, which privileges style above substance, repels characters and reinforces her own sense of social distinction, even as it isolates her. Eliot writes:

In the ladies’ dining-room it was evident that Gwendolen was not a general favorite with her own sex; there were no beginnings of intimacy between her and other girls, and in conversation they rather noticed what she said than spoke to her in free exchange. Perhaps it was that she was not much interested in them, and when left alone in their company had a sense of empty benches. (100)

Though Gwendolen, like Rosamond Vincy of Middlemarch, superficially enacts modes of conversing that etiquette books promoted, Gwendolen’s overt strategies to draw attention to herself coupled with her insistence on living independently leave her in a more solitary and punishing position than the one Rosamond finds herself in living with Lydgate and remaining enmeshed in the small community of Middlemarch. Eliot shows, through her portrayal of Gwendolen, the possibilities of linguistic choice lessening as feminine forms of speech more obviously become used as tools for concealment and pretense in interactions. A polite quip, an exclamatory response, a complimentary remark, a show of attention—all of these forms of
interaction touted in Victorian conduct and etiquette books do little for Gwendolen in social circles where her desire for homage and independence overrides her desire for belonging and a sense of solidarity with other characters.

Eliot’s Individualism and the Process of Instruction

If *Middlemarch* shows the extent to which women are socially situated beings, then *Daniel Deronda* goes even further, suggesting that women are socially and linguistically “stuck.” Eliot demonstrates how her female characters remain caught in a system of commodification that undergirds the marriage market and that curtails freedom of expression. Gwendolen Harleth, unlike Dorothea Brooke, does not view courtship and marriage as an advancement towards enlightenment. She possesses an early understanding of the kinds of fetters that marriage can form around women: “Girls’ lives are so stupid: they never do what they like…I never saw a married woman who had her own way” (59). Yet she cannot find anything else to do that will allow her to maintain the “domestic empire” she assumes to control at Offendene early in the novel. She comes to understand, more and more, the limited amount of choices women can actually make in a society that contracts them to men through marriage, as well as how those limits translate into communicative practices that hinder expressive individualism for women. Her narrative powerfully illustrates the problem of shared sociality in a culture where choice for women is so often subjugated by men.

In the opening chapters of *Daniel Deronda* Gwendolen repeatedly expresses her desire for autonomy—“I desire to be independent…I thought I could have made myself independent,” (233) she tells the musician Klesmer. Even though she does not fully understand the futility of
her persistent desire or what a life of independence might look like, she attempts to enact the liberalizing goal of attaining it. Never more so than when she asks Herr Klesmer for advice in pursuing a career on the stage. But her spirit of independence functions within the bounds of feminine activity. In one of her more insightful comments, she explains to Grandcourt her view concerning the social limitations imposed upon women:

We women can’t go in search of adventures—to find out the North-West Passage or the source of the Nile, or to hunt tigers in the East. We must stay where we grow, or where the gardeners like to transplant us. We are brought up like the flowers to look pretty as we can, and be dull without complaining. (118)

Gwendolen’s remark suggests that while adventure tends to shape men’s subjectivities and that their life experience is unpredictable, feminine development remains structured, knowable, and stagnant. Her desire to make a career on the stage, to earn her independence in that way, corresponds to a concept of freedom that defies predictability, yet it remains firmly situated in the feminine realm of social performance. Unable to see through the theatricality built into her own life, Gwendolen conceptualizes a career beyond the walls of Offendene in terms of performance. She derives a sense of control and self-possession by working to manage her public image, yet slowly comes to understand she cannot control the effect she has on Grandcourt and other male characters who consistently objectify her. Her looks and her words do little to alter the circumstances of her circumscribed life.

Rarely in the cosmopolitan world Eliot paints in Daniel Deronda does Gwendolen have an opportunity to engage in discussions or debates that allow her to develop a deeper sense of her individuality. The idealized form of companionate marriage John Stuart Mill imagines in The Subjection of Women, wherein two partners test their ideas against one another with respect and love, looks far different from the marriage Gwendolen and Grandcourt embark upon. Eliot sets Gwendolen’s formative education in “display” against the education she embarks upon in her
marriage to Grandcourt, yet neither one of these schools is positively framed. Never does she experience an open field of communication, of testing and interrogation, for which Mill advocates. From the beginning of their courtship to their last days together in Genoa, ominous silence held by Grandcourt prevents an open exchange of ideas. Indeed, their marriage reflects Mill’s alternate articulation of marriage in *The Subjection of Women* when he invokes the imagery of slave and master to assert that in the most depraved of marriages, “the vilest malefactor has some wretched woman tied to him, against whom he can commit any atrocity except killing her, and if tolerably cautious, can do that without much danger of the legal penalty” (170). Though Grandcourt never resorts to physical violence, Eliot shows that the exacting power deferential between Gwendolen and Grandcourt remains fixed in great part because of Grandcourt’s terse utterances and refusals to openly communicate with his wife.

Gwendolen hardly ever engages in discursive practices associated with liberal individualism—inside or outside of her marriage. Even in her conversations with Deronda which gesture towards the kind of discourse Mill promotes, Gwendolen merely echoes the advice given to her, never fully engaging or questioning Deronda’s own frame of thinking. She goes from one establishment that reinforces her penchant for performance—her school and family-- to another that necessitates it—her marriage, so that through Grandcourt’s domination she may save face and hold onto some small measure of personal control. Seemingly chastened for her earlier shows of egotism, Gwendolen unhappily endures a process of learning that repeatedly communicates the limits of her agency and her speech patterns reflect this course of correction.

Just as Bronte’s Jane Eyre and Lucy Snowe transform individualistic energy into forms of self-management and containment, so too, does Gwendolen Harleth begin to yield to a
constraining social order and learn to more carefully regulate her speech. Nancy Armstrong, in *How Novels Think*, comments on this pattern in Victorian novels, writing:

> The Victorian novel not only portrayed all women who expressed extreme forms of individualism as extremely unattractive but also punished them so harshly as to persuade a readership that the very excesses that once led to self-fulfillment and the illusion of a more flexible social order now yielded exactly the opposite results. (79)

Gwendolen, punished for her aggressive tendencies, follows this same course of action, demonstrating the difficulty for women who unhesitatingly express their desires, particularly if those desires run counter to traditionally feminine expectations. Increasingly, Gwendolen suppresses her thoughts and feelings in the company of her husband and other characters, preferring to project an attitude of poise and self-possession rather than reveal her private feeling of subjection through words. Like other heroines in this study, Gwendolen negotiates conventionally feminine strategies of speech with bolder, more assertive speech, but the resources she draws upon reveal a tightening field of possibilities for social maneuvering in conversation and far fewer rewards for making the effort.

**Looking v. Listening**

Throughout *Daniel Deronda*, Gwendolen holds the instinctive conviction that her most ordinary actions and words serve as performance for an audience. Her sensitivity to social surveillance allows her to feel confident in the “power of playing” (40). But this consciousness of the social frame that shapes her everyday actions is not unique to her. In the novel it is difficult to find any single character who avoids being watched and who, in their own turn, fails to participate in the sport of observing others. Social surveillance pervades Eliot’s novel, a fact underscored by the frequency with which words appear in the novel attached to observation,
rather than speech. For example, the lexemes for “look”—“look,” “looking,” “looked,” and “looks”—appear 819 times. To offer a sense of contrast, the word “listen” and all of its variations—“listen,” “listening,” “listens,”—occurs 56 times. This stark disparity highlights the import placed upon appearance rather than conversation. The world into which Eliot immerses her heroine is watchful, competitive, and rarely offers opportunities for meaningful exchange.

### Table 7.1 “Looking” words v. “Listening” words in *Daniel Deronda*

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Word</th>
<th>Frequency in DD (# of times it appears)</th>
<th>Word</th>
<th>Frequency in DD</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Look*</td>
<td>819</td>
<td>Speak*</td>
<td>259</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Eyes</td>
<td>307</td>
<td>Voice*</td>
<td>165</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>See</td>
<td>396</td>
<td>Hear</td>
<td>91</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Watch*</td>
<td>107</td>
<td>Listen*</td>
<td>56</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

*Note: The * represents the inclusion of all that particular word’s lexemes, (i.e. looks, looking, looked)*

The novel opens with Gwendolen sitting at a roulette table, winning great sums until Daniel Deronda walks in, casts his “evil” eye upon her, and causes a dramatic reversal of fortune. He is not the only character watching her, however, as “distant varieties of European type” (2) amble about the gaming tables, acting as spectators while they also put down “five-franc” pieces in order to win at someone else’s expense. Eliot describes this motley group, writing, “while every single player differed markedly from every other, there was a certain uniform negativeness of expression which had the effect of a mask—as if they had all eaten of some root that for the time compelled the brains of each to the same narrow monotony of action” (3). Despite the sense of drama and performance that imbues this scene, a leveling sameness is born from looking, studying, and posing, but not really engaging others beyond commenting.
upon what they see. Carolyn Lesjak comments on this mind-numbing crowd, writing, “What they all ‘share’ is a competitive self-interest that paradoxically renders the concept of shared sociality meaningless” (115). Eliot’s social critique extends further than the gaming halls of Leubronn, as she represents, in this same dim light, other characters in the novel--those in the educated, dominant classes of England whose thoughts center on little but their own concerns and who effectively impede the possibility for relatedness.

Gwendolen’s first conversation in the novel—a fragmented and repetitious exchange—introduces the difficulty of extracting information or gaining any sense of connection with another character, even when employing conventional tactics for pleasing. Gwendolen, who wants to learn more about Deronda seeks out Mr. Vandernoodt, a man respected for his social clout and money, and begins their conversation with a compliment: “‘Mr. Vandernoodt, you know everybody…Who is that near the door?’ (7). What she receives in reply are questions and vague comments that skirt around her original request:

“There are half-a-dozen near the door. Do you mean that old Adonis in the George the Fourth wig?”
“No, no; the dark-haired young man on the right with the dreadful expression.”
“Dreadful, do you call it? I think he is an uncommonly fine fellow.”
“But who is he?”
“He is lately come to our hotel with Sir Hugo Mallinger.”
“Sir Hugo Mallinger?”
“Yes. Do you know him?”
“No.” (Gwendolen coloured slightly.) “He has a place near us, but he never comes to it. What did you say was the name of that gentleman near the door?”
“Deronda—Mr. Deronda.”

Gwendolen’s questions, which defer to Vandernoodt, are side-stepped and her own brief comment is contradicted, until, at last, he offers up the name ‘Deronda.’ Though Gwendolen tries to lightly steer the topic, Vandernoodt controls the conversation, illustrating what little weight her words hold. This early exchange is one of a pattern in which a female character’s
words are minimized and overshadowed by a more privileged point-of-view. Indeed, her looks garner more admiration and notice than the utterances she makes in this opening scene. Only moments before this exchange, Eliot describes the sundry characters who surround her, carefully observing and quietly discussing her “Nereid” looks. Mr. Vandernoodt, who takes little effort to linguistically engage Gwendolen, offers one of the most detailed and picturesque accounts of her appearance:

“I think her complexion one of her chief charms. It is a warm paleness: it looks thoroughly healthy. And that delicate nose with its gradual little upward curve is distracting. And then her mouth—there never was a prettier mouth, the lips curl backward so finely, eh, Mackworth?” (6)

Eliot shows that among the observant characters circling the gaming tables, much more individual attention goes towards Gwendolen’s looks than her speech.

The general dissatisfaction Gwendolen finds in speech can be illustrated through her repetition of the word “don’t”—one of the most statistically distinct words in her repertoire. Much more than any female character in Daniel Deronda or even in Middlemarch, Gwendolen employs the word “don’t” a total of 96 times:

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th></th>
<th>Gwendolen</th>
<th>Alcharisi</th>
<th>Mirah</th>
<th>Rosamond</th>
<th>Dorothea</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>“Don’t”</td>
<td>96 (.548%)</td>
<td>10 (.17%)</td>
<td>11 (.093%)</td>
<td>4 (.07%)</td>
<td>27 (.201%)</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

The word, itself, is a negation of “to do” and it signifies Gwendolen’s lack of choice, action, and authority in her own disjointed narrative. The word appears in her conversations with Mrs.
Davilow, Rex, Grandcourt, and Deronda and its usage signals three distinct speech patterns that reflect her mindset as it evolves in the novel.

Gwendolen’s use of “don’t” begins with complaints and orders at Offendene that expose her biting narcissism: “I don’t see why I should [give lessons to Alice]” and “I don’t want to be her equal.” (22). Her use of “don’t” then appears in conversations with Grandcourt that underline her early sense of unease with him: “I don’t know whether to feel flattered or not” (104) and “I am quite uncertain about myself; I don’t know how uncertain others may be” (119). Finally, it appears in statements made to Deronda that are meant to convince him—and herself—of her moral reformation: “Don’t be afraid of telling me what you think is right, because it seems hard” (696) and “Don’t be unhappy about me” (700). In each of these cases, Gwendolen’s use of “don’t” indicates her frustration with the life she has been dealt and the limitations within it that thwart any real chance to “do what she likes.” Her interlocutors most often respond when she uses the word “don’t” in ways that do little to positively effect change for her. When issued as an order or a bald complaint “don’t” registers assertive authority that grates on most women’s nerves—her mother excepted. The men also respond to it in adverse ways: Grandcourt hears the boldness in her voice and uses it to carefully and quietly strip away any authority she may feel she owns. Deronda, though he is physically drawn to Gwendolen, inwardly shirks from the force of her words and her direct appeals to him. Eliot tells us that Deronda “wondered at the force that dwelt in this creature, so alive to dread” (624). Without a viable option to channel her dynamic energy in a productive way, Gwendolen’s speech becomes a sign of her ineffectual actions.
**Gwendolen’s Positive Politeness**

One tangible way Gwendolen works to counter unreceptive interlocutors is to add emotional contour to her voice in order to be heard and attended to. Eliot signals this effort through the high frequency of italics and exclamations found in Gwendolen’s dialogue; more than any female character in *Daniel Deronda* or *Middlemarch*, Eliot marks her speech with these forms.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th></th>
<th>Exclamations</th>
<th>Italicized Words</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Gwendolen</td>
<td>70 (.399%)</td>
<td>43 (.245%)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Alcharisi</td>
<td>10 (.171%)</td>
<td>9 (.153%)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Mirah</td>
<td>22 (.186%)</td>
<td>10 (.084%)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Dorothea</td>
<td>47 (.350%)</td>
<td>5 (.037%)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Rosamond</td>
<td>20 (.350%)</td>
<td>7 (.122%)</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Both italics and exclamations convey any number of stances in conversation—fear, anger, surprise, or pleasure, for example—but in relation to women’s language, they have most often been thought to convey a desire to be heard and understood by addressees. Robin Lakoff, in 1975, claimed that when women speak in italics, they actually say something like: “Here are directions telling you how to react, since my saying something by itself is not likely to convince you: I’d better use double force, to make sure you see what I mean” (81). In Gwendolen’s speech we find exclamations and italics used for this same purpose—to underline her intentions and draw forth certain responses from interlocutors. With her mother, for instance, Gwendolen fishes for compliments, “Jocosa, let down my hair. See, mama!” (19) or attempts to cheer her, “Come now! You must be glad because I am here” (205). These examples illustrate
Gwendolen’s attempt to extract a certain response and, with an indulgent mother, these subtle tactics work. But with other interlocutors, Gwendolen is less successful.

Linguist Carol Waseleski’s recent study on exclamations has demonstrated that “exclamation points function most often to indicate friendliness and to emphasize intended statements of fact” (127). Though many of Gwendolen’s exclamations and italics are off-putting—“Pray don’t make love to me! I hate it!” (70); “But he is a stick” (46); “It’s all false!” (617)—these forms also function in a sociable way, showing that amidst the monotony of her social surroundings, Gwendolen wants to align with characters such as Mr. Vandernoodt, Mrs. Arrowpoint, and Grandcourt—those who, in her mind, hold social authority. For example, after Mr. Vandernoodt finally reveals Deronda’s identity, Gwendolen happily exclaims, “What a delightful name!” (7) and proceeds to question him in order to learn more about the mysterious character: “I can’t guess at what this Mr. Deronda would say. “What does he say?” (8). She charms Vandernoodt into offering up only the bare-bones of information regarding Deronda, straining to extract answers through a persistent show of friendliness and flattery, and her effort to engage him reflects traditionally feminine strategies as conduct literature endorsed.

In the early chapters of the novel we find Gwendolen using strategies for positive face most frequently—tactics that work to engage and build solidarity with interlocutors (Brown and Levinson 61). Before she has even met Grandcourt, Gwendolen recognizes the importance of befriending the “good” families in her neighborhood, those like the Arrowpoints, who might add pleasure and a sense of importance to her days. When Gwendolen first meets Mrs. Arrowpoint, Eliot writes that she meant to win her and give her “an interest and attention beyond what others were probably inclined to show” (35). Gwendolen appeals to her hostess’s intellectual pursuits by exclaiming, “I wish I could write books to amuse myself, as you can! How delightful it must
be to write books after one’s own taste instead of reading other people’s!... I would give anything to write a book!” (37), then listens to the woman’s short sermon on Tasso and, afterward, exclaims, “How very interesting!” (37). Gwendolen does not lack for enthusiasm or determination in befriending Mrs. Arrowpoint, but at a certain point, her egotism surfaces, prompting Mrs. Arrowpoint to conclude: “this girl is double and satirical” (42). Gwendolen’s unique “form of stupidity” in conversation, as Eliot calls it, arises because her “self-confidence is apt to address itself to an imaginary dullness in others; as people who are well off speak in a cajoling tone to the poor, and those who are in the prime of life raise their voice and talk artificially to seniors, hastily conceiving them to be deaf and rather imbecile” (36). Gwendolen, who draws upon conventions of politeness in conversation, rarely pushes beyond these forms in order to pursue more sincere modes of expression that might provide an avenue for self-knowledge and moral development. Consumed with her part as “leading lady” in interactions and unwilling to delve beyond social niceties, she often misses the nuances of others’ words and gestures, failing to accurately read them or appropriately respond. As a result, characters, like Mrs. Arrowpoint who vows to “be on… guard against her” (42), never fully form sociable bonds with Gwendolen.

Gwendolen consistently seesaws between comments in discourse that work to build alliances with characters and those that tend to alienate her from others, and, sometimes, both of these stances bookend the same conversation. For instance, upon hearing that Juliet Fenn has won the “gold arrow” in their archery tournament, Gwendolen tells her uncle, “I am very glad to hear it. I should have felt that I was making myself too disagreeable—taking the best of everything” (98). She politely supports Juliet Fenn’s win, but her comment works doubly to reinforce her own feeling of prestige. At this same social gathering she compliments Catherine
Arrowpoint’s appearance, telling Clintock, “She would make a fine picture in that gold-coloured dress” only to further qualify this with the derisive observation that she actually looks, “a little too-symbolical—too much like the figure of Wealth in an allegory” (90). Gwendolen’s contradictory comments underline the fact that her knowledge and use of proper feminine forms of speech—in this case her pleasing compliments—is at odds with her more pressing desire to favorably stand apart from other female characters.

Gwendolen’s doubleness in speech—her efforts to befriend others as well as her efforts to detach—mirror a pattern more broadly reflected in Gwendolen’s narrative arc that consists in moments of shared sociability with concurrent moments of uncontrollable disaffection. Jill Matus has pointed out that, “It is pertinent that whenever in the early parts of the novel Gwendolen feels power, or a sense of mastery and triumph, she also experiences a concomitant backlash or dread. Fear and trembling seem to follow her unconscious sense of the possibility that she may be denied freedom, that she is vulnerable and not powerful” (69). Gwendolen’s moments of great triumph occur when she captures the attention of an admiring audience—her winning streak in Leubronn, her pose as Hermione, her exalted place beside Grandcourt in their wedding and these instances allow Gwendolen to play the “heroine of an admired play without the pains of art” (320). But following these social triumphs she encounters feelings of terror: of being poor and without power, of being haunted by a ghostly painting, and of facing a woman’s curse—moments when speech fails her. These doubled acts, like her doubled speech acts, underline the inescapable bind of needing others for a sense of validation yet the impossibility of escaping their presence or the frame of society that continually constrains her actions and words.
The Doubleness of Gwendolen’s Humor

The most doubled speech that Gwendolen utters is when she attempts witty discourse, using humor to connect with characters. Humor, as we’ve seen with Elizabeth Bennet in *Pride and Prejudice*, has the potential to reinforce the bonds of a community or small group by appealing to a shared sense of knowledge and understanding, and, alternately, it has the potential to distance oneself from other characters. While Elizabeth tends to build more alliances than not through her razor sharp wit, Gwendolen’s quips most often distance herself from others, for she tends to laugh *at*, rather than *with* those characters in her company. Her humor rarely contains critical or insightful remarks that push against social norms in the way Elizabeth Bennet’s do, rather, her teasing tone in social interactions points to a keen desire to “play” and perform for those characters she encounters. More generally, it works to straddle the contradictory impulses she has to seek out others for self-validation without wanting to give too much of herself away.

Linguistic Rebecca Clift has offered an insightful study of conversational irony to argue, drawing from Erving Goffman’s notion of footing and theories of performance, that irony involves a shift in conversation that makes interactional frames visible. What she proposes helps to explain the ways in which Gwendolen’s “playful” speech corresponds to her other framed social performances such as the *tableaux vivants*. Clift begins her study by quoting Goffman’s 1974 writings on “footing”:

In daily life the individual ordinarily speaks for himself, speaks, as it were, in his “own” character. However, when one examines speech, especially the informal variety, this traditional view proves inadequate…When a speaker employs conversational brackets to warn us that what he is saying is meant to be taken in jest, or as mere repeating of words by someone else, then it is clear that he means to stand in a relation of reduced personal responsibility for what he is saying. He splits himself off from the context of the words by expressing that their speaker is not he himself or not he himself in a serious way (512).
When “footing” in a conversation takes place that means an interactional shift has occurred. Some word, tone, or gesture indicates that the nature of the interaction has changed and the speaker’s words are not meant to be taken at face value. Though Clift argues that irony, specifically, is placed in “conversational brackets,” I would extend this to include other forms of speech, as Goffman does when he asserts that “footing” can take place when a speaker is meant to “be taken in jest.” When a speaker makes a playful, sarcastic, or ironic statement, as Gwendolen Harleth does, she is effectually bracketing, or framing, her statement so that she becomes “split from the context of [her] words” (Goffman 512) and distances herself from principal authorship of the statement. To put this another way, the ironist, in the very process of shifting footing, frames what is said, as if placing imaginary quotations around the ironic statement and presenting it for an audience. Clift writes that, “The ironist…effects a shift in footing from committed participant to detached observer” (532) and, as a result, invites the addressee or audience to share the ironist’s perspective. Thus, Gwendolen can separate herself from the content of her speech yet appeal to an audience in order to demonstrate verbal deftness—one of the few forms of social authority available to her. Part of her trouble, however, is that her humor rarely registers real wit.

Gwendolen’s playful words, as an intrinsic part of her social performances, reflect her desire to be admired and attended to. But they also signal her lack of introspection and self-knowledge—deficiencies that stem from the careful distance she maintains from others in social settings. Gwendolen’s teasing and “lively venturesomeness of talk,” writes Eliot, had “the effect of wit” (243). The key word in Eliot’s short description is “effect.” Indeed, if Eliot did not attach descriptions to her “witty” repartee, they would not be read as clever. The speech-tags appropriated to Gwendolen’s dialogue like “saucily,” “cajoling,” “laughing,” “playfully,” and
“wickedly” frequently work harder than the meaning of her actual words to convey her liveliness in speech. For example, the bold question Gwendolen asks Grandcourt after he has proposed, “Have you anything else to say to me?” (271) contains no inherent humor, but when Eliot writes that she asked the question “playfully” it is transformed into something light and theatrical. These narrative tags resemble stage cues or “brackets” of the kind Goffman describes, emphasizing that self-presentation is always connected to another’s subjective evaluation.

As much as Gwendolen befriends other characters and seeks to win their veneration, her stronger impulse is to stand back and focus on her own pleasure and distinction. Her role-playing and “playfulness” is one key way she negotiates these divergent stances, as it effectively conceals certain impenetrable aspects of her character. Gwendolen’s “attitudinized and speechified” (44) interactions suggest an underlying desire to keep her subjectivity unknowable to others, and yet this subjectivity remains hidden from Gwendolen herself, as the emphasis on visibility and self-display has modified her own self-perception. Her efforts at “playing” may be read as a means to exert control over the ways others perceive her, but this agency proves futile in her larger designs to live independently.

Gwendolen’s Individualistic Speech

In the opening chapters of Daniel Deronda Gwendolen seeks out pleasure and adventure, not knowing what a dark adventure courtship and marriage in Victorian England can be. She begins the novel as a “princess in exile” (33), where all revolves around the gratification of her desires. Critics such as Carolyn Lesjak and Deirdre David have pointed out Eliot’s use of colonization imagery to paint her “power for inspiring fear” and her reign over the “domestic
empire” that is Offendene. Eliot tells us that Gwendolen’s “clear unhesitating tones” are, in part, what accounts for her hypnotic hold over family and servants alike, for she shows no fear in calling “things by their right names, and [putting] them in their proper places” (22).

Gwendolen’s speech in these opening chapters reflects her “egoistic sensibility,” when she asserts herself through commands—“How dare you open things which were meant to be shut up, you perverse little creature?” (20); “Now, mamma, don’t begin to be dull here. It spoils my pleasure, and everything may be happy now” (21); “Don’t talk of Mr. Middleton, for heaven’s sake” (60). Gwendolen’s authority, however, only operates with success within the narrow confines of her home and family—her own colony of admirers.

Eliot shows that the self-driven ambitions that incite Gwendolen’s spirit of domination do not go unchecked for long. Gwendolen eventually contracts herself in marriage to Henleigh Grandcourt, a man much more skilled at subjugating individuals than she. Eliot extends the metaphor of empire to Grandcourt’s character, writing that “He knew the force of his own words. If this white-handed man with the perpendicular profile had been sent to govern a difficult colony,” he would have found “it was safer to exterminate than to cajole” (539). And so, indeed, we see him resort to silencing strategies, rather than the “cajoling” ones exercised by Gwendolen, to control her. Marriage contains those threatening energies in Gwendolen that reflect her investment in competition and display, rather than relational and sympathetic bonds. Grandcourt, as a merciless correcting force, gradually stifles Gwendolen’s voice through his own measured silences. Silence, for both, works as a strategy of control and containment, one that diminishes the chances for empathetic and inquisitive relatedness of the kind John Stuart Mill envisioned in marriage.
The first meeting between Grandcourt and Gwendolen at the archery tournament offers a glimpse into the strategic ways silence will function in their jagged relationship. In an unusual narrative choice, Eliot places Gwendolen’s unspoken thoughts, following her polite questions and comments directed to Grandcourt, in parentheses:

“Are you converted [to enjoy archery] to-day?” said Gwendolen.
(Pause, during which she imagined various degrees and modes of opinion about herself that might be entertained by Grandcourt.)
“Yes, since I saw you shooting. In things of this sort one generally sees people missing and simpering.”
“I suppose you are a first-rate shot with a rifle.”
(Pause, during which Gwendolen, having taken a rapid observation of Grandcourt, made a brief graphic description of him to an indefinite hearer.) “I have left off shooting.”
“Oh, then you are a formidable person…I hope you have not left off all follies because I practice a great many.”
(Pause, during which Gwendolen made several interpretations of her own speech.)
“What do you call follies?”
“Well, in general, I think whatever is agreeable is called a folly. But you have not left off hunting, I hear.”
(Pause, wherein Gwendolen recalled what she had heard about Grandcourt’s position, and decided that he was the most aristocratic-looking man she had ever seen.) (96-97)

Eliot’s repeated parentheticals are highly unusual and it is only in this initial meeting between Gwendolen and Grandcourt that the narrator offers the internal thoughts of a character in this way. The parentheses enclosing Gwendolen’s silent reflections operate similarly to the invisible conversational brackets around her teasing and sarcastic comments, only this is a more literal representation of that strategy, one that draws attention to the level of performance enacted in her conversation. It is a stylistic form that highlights Gwendolen’s unwillingness to share her thoughts with another person—even a potential suitor and seemingly attentive listener.

Significantly, the bracketed pauses in this scene only occur after Gwendolen has spoken, never do they follow Grandcourt’s speech, a pattern that shows Henleigh Grandcourt as the one controlling the content and pace of their exchange. His curt responses and gaps of silence
foretell the ways in which he will eventually silence Gwendolen in marriage, while her parentheticals suggest how her own unvoiced ideas and opinions become subordinated to his.

Before Gwendolen agrees to marry Grandcourt, she holds the power of choice—one of her few real opportunities to exert personal agency and she takes advantage of this in her early conversations with him. She exercises skillful control by sustaining his attention yet evading intimacy and contractual promises. When Mrs. Davilow asks Gwendolen if her suitor has clearly stated his intentions, she replies, “As far as I would let him speak” (122). This is a sentiment echoed, again to her uncle, when she discloses, “I think [Grandcourt] meant—he began to make advances—but I did not encourage them. I turned the conversation” (124). Gwendolen “manages” Grandcourt by turning the topic when it grows too personal and skirting his questions with vague responses in ways that resemble Dorothea and Rosamond’s tactics of indirection in Middlemarch. Gwendolen’s strategies, if only briefly, succeed in influencing Grandcourt’s words and actions which leads her to naively believe, as Dorothea more altruistically does, that she has the power to influence and shape their lives together. Gwendolen admits to herself that “after marriage she would most probably be able to manage him thoroughly” (120). This confidence, however, is short-lived.

Silence performs many conversational functions but, for Grandcourt, silence works most powerfully as a tool of coercion and submission. Even before he and Gwendolen marry, she admits that he “caused her unusual constraint…that she was less daring and playful in her talk with him than with any other admirer she had known” (120). Much of her early uneasiness stems from the frequent pauses and silences that he purposefully injects into their interactions: “after a moment’s pause” (104); “after the usual pause” (104); “Grandcourt did not answer” (111); “they walked in silence” (117); “there was the same pause before he took up his cue”
Each time Grandcourt pauses in conversation, he opens up a small window for Gwendolen to internally question her own words, to doubt her “cleverness” and “daring” in speech. His lack of expression gives her little evidence to guess his thoughts and this “blank uncertainty” (385) puts her on edge, effectively constraining her voice. Unable to gauge how her performance is being received, her speech begins to lose its assertiveness.

Little by little, Gwendolen’s voice appears with less regularity on the page as the novel progresses, signaling her diminished sense of authority and individuality under Grandcourt’s rule. Eliot writes, “Her voice was more and more veiled, till it was hardly above a whisper” (554). By the time they marry, the silence permeating their relationship works doubly in its capacity to conceal—superficially covering the obvious power deferential between husband and wife while they are out publicly, as well as the dark secret they share of Lydia Glasher and her children. Gwendolen’s rare moments of personal authority occur in social settings where she works to favorably shape others’ perceptions of herself and she attempts this, increasingly, without words. In their first public appearance after exchanging vows, Eliot writes that Gwendolen, who “had been enthroned not only at Ryelands but at Diplow…was likely to have composed her countenance with suitable manifestation or concealment, not being one who would indulge the curious by a helpless exposure of her feelings” (365). Her profound distrust in words is communicated by the “chill smile” and “proud concealment” she presents to friends and acquaintances.

Gwendolen’s unhappy isolation and subjection in marriage prompts her to seek advice and solace from Deronda who regularly appears at Diplow and wherever the Grandcourts happen to be situated. She opens up to him in honest exchanges that reveal her deeply felt regret for
benefitting from another’s loss—gambling, snatching Grandcourt from Lydia Glasher. Her appeals to Daniel suggest she has begun a path of introspection and self-analysis that might lead outward, to relationships and a more thorough examination of her social world. Eliot writes:

> It had been Gwendolen’s habit to think of the persons around her as stale books, too familiar to be interesting. Deronda had lit up her attention with a sense of novelty: not by words only, but by imagined facts, his influence had entered into the current of that self-suspicion and self-blame which awakens a new consciousness. (389)

But despite the promise of Gwendolen’s moral development, her interactions with Deronda never quite steer her towards forms of interrogation or interpretive practices that might lead her to become the liberalized individual John Stuart Mill imagined. In *On Liberty*, Mill repeats the point that, “There must be discussion, to show how experience is to be interpreted” (36). But rather than challenge the moral expectations Deronda elucidates, Gwendolen merely echoes his words, repeatedly asking him what she should think and do. Her speech in their conversations never reaches beyond the “here and now” or even beyond her own crises to fully examine ideas and characters outside her small sphere of living.

Eliot dramatizes Gwendolen’s greatest moment of crisis—and her most sincerely expressed words in the novel—through the haunting confessional scene that occurs after witnessing Grandcourt’s drowning. In a darkened room, Gwendolen breaks free of her habitual reliance on showy speech and instead exposes raw feelings of guilt born from marriage to the sadistic Grandcourt, her ambiguous part in his death, and Lydia Glasher’s curse. No longer capable of playing a social role or suppressing her pent-up fear, Gwendolen pours forth a fractured narrative and all linguistic signs of the sarcastic, teasing coquette are erased and replaced by “an inward voice of desperate self-repression” (626). She opens the monologue in unusually low tones and her frequent use of negated forms—“no,” “not,” “never”—signal her emotional distress, for she tells Deronda:
“You will not say that I ought to tell the world? You will not say I ought to be disgraced? I could not do it. I could not bear it. I cannot have my mother know. Not if I were dead. I could not have her know. I must tell you; but you will not say that any one else should know.” (626)

Like her frequent use of “don’t,” these repetitious negations stress Gwendolen’s fear and social stasis. Rather than frame her story in affirmative and assertive words, she focuses on what she “cannot” do. Hers is a story mired in ineffectual words and actions, despite the seriousness and sincerity of her speech in this climatic scene.

The lack of coherence in Gwendolen’s confession similarly reflects her larger narrative arc made up of chronologically jumbled scenes that intimate how little personal control she has over the events and social rules shaping her life. She begins the scene in uncharacteristic openness, saying to Deronda, “I will tell you everything now” (626) and promptly admits herself a “murderess.” In fits and starts she explains her theft and disposal of a knife, then repeats again, “I will tell you everything as God knows it. I will tell you no falsehood; I will tell you the exact truth” (629). Such honesty sets this speech apart from her previous linguistic patterns, but so, too, does the disordered and emotionally wrought language she uses. Eliot describes Gwendolen’s speech in this confession as “fitful,” “wandering,” and “fragmentary” (627). She stylistically emphasizes the ineffectiveness of her utterances through an awkward repetition of words, fragmented statements, and dashes that interrupt completed thoughts. For example, in a highly dramatic moment within the scene, Gwendolen brokenly claims: “I have been a cruel woman! What can I do but cry for help? I am sinking. Die—die—you are forsaken—go down, go down into darkness. Forsaken—no pity—I shall be forsaken” (630). Gwendolen proceeds to explain what happened on the boat with Grandcourt, but her inarticulate rendering of the death scene leads to more questions than answers so that her guilt cannot be fully credited. Deronda, unsure of her role in Grandcourt’s death eventually concludes, “the word ‘guilty’ had held a
possibility of interpretations worse than the fact” (633). Gwendolen’s speech crumples under the strain caused by Grandcourt’s wretched death and fails to effectually alter the circumstances of her situation.

Daniel Deronda, the one person privy to Gwendolen’s psychic outburst, does little to help her, other than eventually summon her family to Genoa and urge her to never repeat the story. Indeed, her appearance in this scene affects him more than the words she utters. Even before Gwendolen begins to disclose her narrative, Deronda we are told, “dreaded hearing the confession…he dreaded the weight of this woman’s soul flung upon his own with imploring dependence” (626). The dread he anticipates in listening to Gwendolen’s words intensifies from observing her distraught appearance, for Eliot writes that, “There was a piteous pleading in [Gwendolen’s] low murmur to which Deronda turned his ear only. Her face afflicted him too much” (626). As he looks upon her, we learn, “the sight pierced him with pity, and the effects of all their past relation began to revive within him” (625) and before the scene has ended he feels “obliged to look away” (627). The power in “looking” proves to be much more potent than the act of listening. Deronda’s actions underscore that even in a scene as emotionally pitched and critical as this, the social routine of looking distorts mutually respective communicative practices.

The apparent climax of Gwendolen’s confession leads to no clear resolution. But Gwendolen does learn, first-hand, the repercussions of holding onto egoistic desires and is severely chastised for her early shows of excessive self-interest, just as Nancy Armstrong claims many female characters must do in novels:

It is through a series of what might be called lessons, after all, that novels transform signs of an individual’s natural excess into the cultural wisdom of a citizen-subject. Rather than simply part of a curriculum that educates, we might more accurately identify the
novel as the larger cultural framework within which education proper provides one means of converting bad subjects into citizens. (51)

Gwendolen, as “bad subject,” undergoes punishing lessons in her marriage to Grandcourt and escapes married life a more penitent character. But her newfound wisdom hardly prepares her for the position of “citizen-subject”—one that would ostensibly require her to engage with other people and learn from their opinions and observations as she hones and voices her own. Gwendolen’s unspoken distrust of speech and its unerring power to expose one’s subject position in relation to others hinders further movement forward. As Daniel listens to Gwendolen’s fragmented and incoherent confession to Grandcourt’s drowning, he has the thought: “Words seemed to have no more rescue in them than if he had been beholding a vessel in peril of wreck—the poor ship with its many-lived anguish beaten by the inescapable storm” (554). Words, alone cannot help Eliot’s heroine. The frequent gaps of silence that disrupt her inarticulate confession suggest that some part of her interior remains out of reach, that she has no way to completely convey or analyze her dissonant life narrative through dialogue shared with another person. The last words from Gwendolen that Eliot leaves us with are not spoken at all, but, in fact, appear in a letter written to Deronda, implying the futility of speech and its exacting limits.

Conclusion

The odds against Gwendolen’s happiness emerge quite early in the novel, a fact foretold by her significant losses at the roulette table in the first chapter. Her narrative does not have a conventionally happy ending, or even a conventional conclusion that gives some sense of closure
to her story. Without the prospect of a new beginning, without another chance at love or marriage, or even a chance at a career on the stage, Gwendolen’s final words, “I shall live. I shall be better” (733)—suggest that simply “living” would be a personal achievement. Raised in a society promoting competitive self-interests that filter down to young women in the middle classes as materialistic values, she learns communicative practices that gain her the momentary attention and notice of other characters, but little else. Those polite forms of speech recorded in Victorian conduct literature—taking turns, attentively listening, complimenting, asking questions—which had mainly worked to please others and signal social respect or solidarity, become more obviously simulated for her personal self-interests. Through her presentation of Gwendolen’s stalled development, Eliot brings to light the negative effects of unreflective speech practices, implying that women who court public approval, often do so for the wrong reasons and encumber interactions that bring people together and reinforce the sympathetic bonds that create a community.

The independence Gwendolen dreams of early in the novel proves to be little more than a hopeful abstraction that leads her to an isolated position among those she knows. Her linguistic efforts to defy predictability and stand apart from others precludes her experience of shared sociability and a companionate marriage of the kind Mill envisioned. And though her merciless marriage pushes her toward some new form of subjectivity, it is not the ideal Mill imagined. After Grandcourt’s murky drowning, Gwendolen emerges shell-shocked, with a fragile hold on reality and her future. All of those egoistic desires shaping her self-presentation to others have been excised at the expense of her own sense of selfhood and purpose.

The narrative of Gwendolen Harleth is a shrinking story that reveals the limitations placed on women’s speech. At one point in the novel, Eliot writes: “Our speech even when we
are most single-minded can never take its line absolutely from one impulse” (230). But Gwendolen, unable to read the different impulses that shape one’s speech and unwilling to critically question them, finds herself in a lessened field of linguistic possibilities. Caught between the desire to “strike others with admiration” (31) and yet not wanting “other people to interfere” with her life, Gwendolen’s bind is socially fixed and ultimately, inescapable. These aspirational poles leave Gwendolen little room to enact agency through traditionally feminine or individualistic forms of speech.
Chapter Eight: Conclusion

I began by asking a basic set of questions: “What linguistic norms shaped the speech repertoires of women in the nineteenth-century? How did these standards translate into gender expectations? How did British women writers engage these norms through their works and to what effect?” The interactional norms circulating during the nineteenth-century, I found, included the widely published belief that women, above all else, should please interlocutors through attentive listening and cooperative discourse. At the other end of the communicative spectrum, I found historical tracts that promoted sincerity and detachment in discourse to enact more liberalizing practices. In each of the novels of this project I analyze female characters who consistently negotiate these two stances. They use forms that adhere to stereotypically feminine speech, which often constrains open communication, with expressive language that has typically been thought to convey individualistic authority. These speech categories, however, do not always cut so neatly—at times characters achieve more agency through stereotypically feminine speech forms and less agency when speaking assertively. Through these communicative practices, the heroines influence interlocutors, develop their sense of individuality, protect their reputations, separate themselves from characters, evade discursive judgments, reiterate their place in a community, earn the respect of future husbands and also challenge their authority. And while the linguistic strategies they use are not always successful, they all point to the ongoing and collaborative nature of interaction that connects the individual to the social order.

One of the more surprising elements in this study has been the overall trajectory of the novels, showing an escalating pessimism in the rewards of verbal communication for female characters. Granted, I begin with one of the most “vivacious” and noted wits in the British literary canon—Elizabeth Bennet---and end with the tragic and chastened figure of Gwendolen.
Harleth, but even so, one might think that as the century wore on and women were afforded more opportunities outside their roles in the family and home, that their speech strategies would become more varied and inventive. But this is not the case when comparing the works of Austen, Bronte, and Eliot. In addition, the last published novel each author wrote contains heroines employing more constrained linguistic tactics compared to their preceding novels. Anne Elliot’s silence, though beneficial and effective, intimates a diminished appreciation for the verbal jousting that fills the pages of *Pride and Prejudice*. The narrative interiority that we see begin in *Persuasion* is amplified in Bronte’s novels of repressed desire. Lucy Snowe’s silence, which is in many respects socially advantageous, underlines her implicit distrust in speech, a distrust not as evident in Jane Eyre’s assertive outbursts and consistent questioning in interaction. George Eliot, even more than Bronte, presents the restrictions placed upon women’s speech once a female character decides to marry. Gwendolen’s theatrical language and subsequent silencing is far more punishing than the indirections Dorothea and Rosamond employ in conversations with their husbands. The novels of each author, and the novels altogether, become increasingly pessimistic about the personal agency to be fashioned from various modes of speech—those both assertive and traditionally feminine.

It is difficult to pinpoint the exact reasons why these authors’ novels grow progressively skeptical in spoken language. One guess is that the trajectory corresponds to an increasing social awareness of how speech constructs one’s identity. As more and more advice literature came to be published and disseminated to middle-class readers in the nineteenth-century, the directives for feminine speech became more detailed, more numerous, and more prescriptive. Considering the multitude of missteps a female could take in ordinary discourse according to these works, it seems logical that silence increasingly became a space for social refuge. After all, silence in its
elasticity can project any number of interactional stances that may benefit a character in conversation while putting the onus on an addressee to infer what that silence actually means. The fact that women during this time also assumed more socially visible roles (i.e. becoming teachers and governesses and adopting appearance-driven codes for behavior) would have made them particularly sensitive to how their speech shaped others’ evaluations of them in interaction. Each authors’ increasing use of silence as a communicative resource might also signal a subtle stance against language practices which had become consciously standardized. But whatever the authorial intentions may have been, the overarching trend in these novels suggesting female characters’ diminished confidence in speech, is a salient reminder that history advances unevenly, that social progress never follows one tidy line of development.

Another surprising element to this project has been discovering just how many of the nineteenth-century precepts for women’s speech carry over into our contemporary understandings of language usage. Then, as today, there exists advice literature where we can see the norms for what counts as acceptable or unacceptable communicative practices. Today there are dozens of books, magazine articles, wikis, and YouTube videos all dedicated to instructing women to “speak like a lady”—directives that linguist Deborah Cameron has coined, “verbal hygiene for women”—for they promote practices that work to improve or clean up language usage (1). Much of the advice in them echoes the directives found in late eighteenth and nineteenth-century literature. James Fordyce, for example, writing in 1809 warns female readers of gossip, calling “love of scandal and dispute” the “Acid of Speech, in contradistinction to the Salt recommended by our apostle” (100). In a 2014 YouTube clip titled “Talk, Dress, and Act Like a Lady,” teenager Grace Mattox similarly invokes biblical references to complain of gossiping friends while the score to the 2005 Pride and Prejudice film runs as her background
music. Though not all contemporary advice makes direct links to historical precedents in this way, much of the current advice does center on the same traditionally supportive and pleasing speech practices written about in Victorian conduct books. For instance, Sarah Stickney Ellis in *Women of England* writes in 1839 that a wife’s conversation should cater to her husband’s interests, that one should not offer, “conversation upon books, if her husband happens to be a fox-hunter; nor upon fox-hunting, if he is a book-worm; but exactly that kind of conversation which is best adapted to his tastes and habits” (120). This is one example of what linguist Pamela Fishman in 1983 called “conversational work,” the facilitative role that is expected of women: by initiating topics that appeal to male interlocutors, they were more likely to keep a conversation going and hold their addressee’s attention. A quick survey of women’s magazines and dating sites today will show that we still publish a great deal of advice explaining how to hold someone’s interest through interactional tactics. Though recent advice literature, just like historical advice literature, is not always a reliable or a consistent guide to trends of people’s actual behavior, it does present stereotypes that filter into the lives of men and women, stereotypes that they may choose to follow, subvert, challenge, or ignore in their everyday usage. This project’s sections on nineteenth-century conduct literature serve as a reminder of how fixed and lasting certain stereotypes may be.

Where do we go from here? When initially choosing the novels to research and examine in this project, I imagined ending with Virginia Woolf, a female writer who inaugurates a new era of modernist literature in the twentieth-century. Woolf showed a marked appreciation for the works of Jane Austen, Charlotte Bronte, and George Eliot—discussing them at length in *A Room of One’s Own*. She praised Jane Austen as a woman “about the year 1800 writing without hate, without bitterness, without fear, without protest, without preaching” in contrast to Charlotte
Bronte who “had more genius in her than Jane Austen” but also “more rage” (50). George Eliot, she claimed, had “less genius for writing than Charlotte Bronte, [but] she got infinitely more said” (53). In light of her concerns regarding these authors’ attitudes towards social agency and her own modernist experimentation with stream-of-consciousness, it would be interesting to test her own novels to see what linguistic patterns emerge and what they may reveal about her treatment of gender. Do her characters adopt similar interactional tactics as those found in the novels of Austen, Bronte, and Eliot, or do they practice entirely new forms? Can we view her use of stream-of-consciousness in the novel an extension of these previous female authors’ implied pessimism in women’s speech or does it suggest the possibility of greater creative freedom for expressing one’s ideas? How might the linguistic norms for speech in the nineteenth-century have evolved into the twentieth and how does Woolf respond to those standards? These questions establish a starting point for an investigation into the linguistic forms that help to shape Woolf’s novels.

The potential for further studies in this field of inquiry is promising and expansive. The same linguistic methodology paired with literary analysis I have applied to the works of Austen, Bronte, and Eliot can be used with other works of literature to broaden our understanding of how gender ideologies are made manifest in the representations of spoken language. I would like this project to direct others to consider the manifold ways language and self-presentations are linked in novels and in our everyday lives. I would also like it to help us see the nuanced ways language and power intertwine and are continually negotiated through social interaction. And finally, I would like this work to demonstrate how the concerns of feminist linguistics can inform our understanding of the past while extending a contribution to the histories of women and women’s literature.


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