Female voices and the willful misinterpretation of their words

Literature, Novel

Female speech in Jane Austen's novels is heavily dictated by the whims of her male characters, and although "[f]emale speech is never entirely repressed in Austen's fiction, [it] is dictated so as to mirror or otherwise reassure masculine desire" (Johnson 37). However, there are times when women stray from the gendered rules of speech and, in expressing their opinions, threaten male control over discourse. In these situations men resort to either willful misinterpretation or forced silence in order to draw women back into their verbal control. Mary Crawford and Elizabeth Bennet are two of Austen's more dynamic threats to male control over discourse, but even the meek and modest Fanny Price can become a threat by departing from the gendered rules of speech. When she refuses Henry's proposal, Sir Thomas is stunned, having "[expected] from Fanny [a] cheerful readiness to be guided? Her resistance implies an assumption of self-responsibility that challenges his authority" (Johnson 104).

Mary and Elizabeth are atypical of Austen's female characters in that their freedom of speech means that they do not need men to educate them or to form their opinions. Other heroines, such as Catherine Morland, are lost without a man to guide them. Without Henry Tilney to point out the natural beauty of Northanger Abbey, Catherine " should not know what was picturesque when she saw it" (NA 141). But Mary and Elizabeth are firm in both forming their own opinions and then expressing them. They are aware of and comfortable with their freedom of speech. Mary, when faced with Edmund's disapproval of her flagrant speeches about morality and the church, counters with, " I am a very matter of fact, plain spoken being, and may blunder on the borders of a repartee for half an hour together without

striking it out” (MP 84). Mrs. Bennet attempts to chastise Elizabeth for expressing her disapproval of Darcy, but Elizabeth refuses to be silenced: “ What is Mr. Darcy to me, pray, that I should be afraid of him, I am sure we owe him no such particular civility as to be obliged to say nothing he may not like to hear” (PP 76).

However, men find ways to force women like Mary and Elizabeth back into the framework of female speech. One way men overcome the threat of verbal rebellion is by willfully misinterpreting what women say. This allows the men to co-opt women’s voices and turn the women into modest and pliable mates. Although critic Claudia Johnson argues that women retain “ the right of refusal” despite other limitations to their words and actions (36), men can invalidate that right by simply refusing to accept it.

The two most salient examples of men undermining the right of female refusal are in the marriage proposals of Mr. Collins and Henry Crawford. Collins insists on receiving Elizabeth’s rejection as a type of marital foreplay, and he dismisses Elizabeth’s rejection by asserting his thorough comprehension of the female sex. He explains Elizabeth’s behavior to her as typical of those “ young ladies [who] reject the addresses of the man whom they secretly mean to accept, when he first applies for their favor” (PP 82). Collins reasons that Elizabeth has no choice but to accept his proposal; she is, after all, at his mercy once her father dies and the Bennet estate becomes his. Collins also argues the point on what he sees as the quintessential female anxiety: that she will never be so lucky as to receive another marriage proposal. (Unfortunately, Charlotte Lucas proves the validity of this

argument by marrying Collins because she sees this marriage as the only alternative to spinsterhood.) With all of this evidence, Collins says, “ I must therefore conclude that you are not serious in your rejection of me, I shall chuse to attribute it to your wish of increasing my love by suspense, according to the usual practice of elegant females” (PP 83). Elizabeth’s protestations mean nothing because Collins cannot conceive of a woman who would act outside of the gendered rules of speech. He interprets her words as a “ mirror” that reflects back at him his desire for marriage, and he projects his feelings onto Elizabeth.

Henry Crawford accepts Fanny’s refusal much in the same vein, although he does not attribute her refusal to flirting but rather to an excess of modesty that prevents her from accepting him until he has applied to Sir Thomas. Crawford then becomes a background figure while Sir Thomas attempts to convince Fanny that she, like Elizabeth, is simply playing the role of the lovestruck and (unlike Elizabeth) modest female by refusing Crawford: “ I know he spoke to you yesterday, and (as far as I understand), received as much encouragement to proceed as a well-judging young woman could permit herself to give” (MP 284). Sir Thomas acts on Crawford’s interpretation of Fanny’s refusal. Rather than accepting the blow to his ego, Crawford projects his feelings onto Fanny the same way that Collins does to Elizabeth. Fanny, he reasons, is hampered in her acceptance of his proposal only because she has allowed her excessive modesty to overcome her true desires. And even once Sir Thomas accepts that Fanny has? or, rather, believes she has? reservations about marrying Crawford, he insists that she

“[does] not quite know [her] own feelings” (MP 286). From both instances one gets the distinct sense that what these men are doing is attempting to show that men make better women than women? much as Henry Tilney does by flaunting his knowledge of novels and fabrics? for only men can truly understand what women want.

But oftentimes men are not satisfied with just willfully misinterpreting what women say; there is a “ dependence of certain kinds of masculine discourse on feminine silence” (Johnson 112). Edmund is horrified at Mary Crawford’s “ blunted delicacy” (MP 416) and her almost masculine lack of restraint when it comes to the subject of sex and relationships. She has “ no reluctance, no horror, no feminine shall, I say, no modest loathings!” (MP 415). Mary’s willingness to speak her mind is very similar to Elizabeth’s, yet Mary is punished with banishment from Mansfield Park, whereas Elizabeth is rewarded with Darcy’s love. But Mansfield Park is the epitome of female imprisonment, where female speech is curtailed from childhood on. Indeed, the Bertram sisters’ education consists of learning “[to repress] all the flow of their spirits before [Sir Thomas]” (MP 16).

Elizabeth, although free to say what she wishes in front of her father and Jane, is still feels the pressure of forced silence in regard to her family. Her family’s senseless speech strays so far from acceptable discourse that she cringes when Darcy converses with them. She knows how ridiculous her mother and sisters are and wishes, if not for their silence, at least for sensible conversation that will show her family worthy of Darcy’s approval. Elizabeth wants their speech to conform to Darcy’s aristocratic wishes, like

other speech that “ mirror[s] or otherwise reassure[s] masculine desire” (Johnson 37), and she feels “ consoled” when Darcy meets the Gardiners and realizes that “ she had some relations for whom there was no need to blush” (PP 193).

But in an interesting twist, Elizabeth, in one of the freer moments with Darcy at the end of the novel, takes it upon herself to explain to Darcy why he fell in love with her. This situation is unique in that it is a moment at which the woman co-opts the man’s opportunity to speak and uses it to show her desires. Elizabeth’s behavior in this situation is analogous to General Tilney’s behavior with both Eleanor and Catherine. General Tilney commands Eleanor to “ speak [her] opinion, for ladies can best tell the taste of ladies” (NA 139), and then he proceeds himself to explain the “ taste of ladies.” Elizabeth asks Darcy to explain his attraction to her and, without waiting for a detailed response, explains it herself, ending with, “ There, I have saved you the trouble of accounting for it; and really, all things considered, I begin to think it perfectly reasonable” (PP 291). Like Collins and Crawford, Elizabeth interprets Darcy’s behavior to suit her needs. Darcy does, however, manage to exert some sort of power in the conversation by correcting Elizabeth’s claim that he liked her “ impertinence” (PP 291). Darcy terms it “ the liveliness of [her] mind” (PP 291), and while this is only a minor difference, it is still noteworthy as a moment of willful misunderstanding on Darcy’s part. Darcy’s correction makes Elizabeth sound more feminine. He alters her self-definition so that it coincides with the definition of acceptable female

behavior, thus putting a positive spin on behavior that some people, such as the Bingley sisters, might object to.

Darcy is one of only a few of Austen's heroes who does not use discourse to influence and change the woman he loves. (Another exception is Edward Ferrars, but he lacks Darcy's charisma, Marianne notes that " there is a something wanting" [SS 14], and his character is so unequal to Elinor's that his power to change her, if any at all, would be minimal.) Darcy disapproves of Elizabeth's family, but he does not disapprove of her personality, even if it includes her un-feminine loquaciousness. Edmund becomes disillusioned with Mary because he has been unable to change her, and his attraction to Fanny is a " regard founded on the most endearing claims of innocence and helplessness, her mind in so great a degree formed by his care, and her comfort depending on his kindness" (MP 429). Fanny's silence throughout the novel allows Edmund to form her speech into something to his liking; he teaches her, in effect, what she as a " modest" woman can and cannot say. This master-pupil relationship is at the heart of the majority of Austen's relationships.

Austen's novels show ambivalence toward the respective roles of men and women. While Elizabeth is the charismatic heroine of her story, Mary, who shares many of her traits, is an anti-heroine. Mary cannot compete with Fanny's model of female modesty, and she must suffer because of it. Despite Mary's fate, Johnson argues that women still have the opportunity to speak their minds, even though they risk being reduced to a " mirror" to reaffirm both their subordination and the masculinity of the men to whom they are

speaking (37). According to Johnson, even when their ability to speak is curtailed, women still have the right of refusal (36). However, Mr. Collins and Henry Crawford make (unsuccessful) attempts to deny Elizabeth and Fanny even that right. Circumstance saves both Elizabeth and Fanny from the two men, Elizabeth’s in the form of Charlotte’s marriage to Collins and Fanny’s in the form of Crawford’s elopement with Maria Bertram, but there is a moment when both are in danger of becoming victims of the gendered rules of speech. Their adamant refusals are invalidated because Collins and Crawford choose to ignore their words. The women’s speech becomes meaningless because it no longer serves as a medium of communication. Although there is no explicit “ repression” of their speech, the willful misinterpretation is as effective as any physical repression could be. The consequences of this psychological repression can even be deadly: General Tilney, while he never physically harmed his wife, still killed her “ by quelling her voice and vitality” (Johnson 40). Even in death the wife cannot escape General Tilney’s control, for he has the power to shape her public memory. This is the ultimate submission of a woman to the male control of discourse, a chilling portrait of women’s fate if men are successful in maintaining that control.

Johnson, Claudia L. Jane Austen: Women, Politics, and the Novel. Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1990.