

from “The Talent of Ready Utterance” [from *Gossip*]

[Patricia Meyer Spacks’s *Gossip* celebrates “idle talk” and analyzes its role in novels, plays, and letters, as well as its aesthetic and moral ramifications within those art forms. In “The Talent of Ready Utterance,” Spacks discusses eighteenth-century moralists’ opinions about gossip, particularly feminine gossip; she then considers the role of gossip in novels from the period. The excerpts below focus on her discussion of Austen’s *Emma*; Spacks argues that gossip helps to create a subversive feminine subtext in a novel that otherwise generally upholds the conservative values advanced by male moralists.]

Women have always chattered, leaving to men the realm of serious discourse, so the myth goes. In seventeenth- and early eighteenth-century England, while men allegedly pondered philosophy and history, women read romances: fanciful accounts of beautiful heroines fulfilling exciting fates. Then, in the eighteenth century, came the novel. Women both read and wrote novels about life in the social world and in the home, about disastrous and beatific consequences of passion. Men worried, about the reading as well as the writing. This new fiction, claiming to imitate life, developing for itself conventions less safely restrictive than those of romance, might threaten the moral and psychological stability of its readers, presenting, as it did, characters of mixed motives, attractive villains, flawed heroes. Women and the young risked contamination by reading it. (Men, presumably, were made of sterner stuff.)

This primer version of literary history ignores the fact that men too wrote and read the new fiction; but eighteenth-century commentary indeed concentrated on dangers novels presented to their most “vulnerable” audience—dangers in some respects resembling those attributed to gossip. The novel from its beginning drew on published letters, biography and autobiography, and stage drama: genres discussed in my preceding chapters [not reproduced on this site]. Like those genres, perhaps even more obviously than they, it drew also on gossip.

I have already cited eighteenth-century denunciations of gossip; now I want to focus more sharply on commentary addressed specifically to women, trying to locate the moralists’ concerns and to speculate about their occasional uneasy hints of gossip’s conceivable value. This chronologically limited test case will particularize

Chapter Two's hypotheses about reasons for the traditional association of women with gossip.

As the commentary cited in connection with eighteenth-century stage comedy indicated, detailed and restrictive prescriptions for social behavior, including conversation, abounded in this period. Less careful rules governed written narrative. The early novel encouraged precisely the exploration of human possibility that the century's principles of verbal decorum forbade. To think about what women could *not* do respectably in talk calls attention to the surprising latitude they allowed themselves in writing fiction.

To consider novels in relation to moral commentary also permits investigation of how the import of doctrine changes when it is incorporated into a fictional context. Social scientists and historians on occasion assume that they can extract ideas and social detail from novels without considering the force imaginative settings exert; even literary critics have made similar assumptions. But in fact fiction often exercises subversive pressure on the very standards it apparently upholds. On the surface, eighteenth-century novels usually support accepted properties. Fiction by women explicitly preaches doctrines long enforced in female lives. By plot and technique, on the other hand, it often suggests quite another message: a problematizing of moralistic doctrine. Two important novels by women, Fanny Burney's *Evelina* (1778) and Jane Austen's *Emma*, published in the nineteenth century but echoing eighteenth-century tradition, will illustrate what I mean. I shall concentrate on the relation between these novels' direct statement and the implications of their fictional procedure in order to investigate why gossip was vigorously suppressed by moralists, yet exploited as a novelistic resource.

First, the moralists, whose statements provide a context for the novels. Upright middle-class citizens in the eighteenth century, even upright aristocrats feared the contamination carried by what they called "the world"—meaning roughly what is implied in the phrase "the world, the flesh, and the devil"—but they glorified "society." Society consists, one commentator explains, in "a polite intercourse, which unites us to each other—in friendly visits, which cannot be dispensed with;—and letters of civility, which we are to write;—and in that necessary familiarity which we mutually stand in need of for the purpose of relaxation."¹ The increasing stress on necessity and

1 *Advice from a Lady of Quality, to Her Children; in the Last Stage of a Linger-
ing Illness*, tr. from the French by S. Glasse, 4th ed. (Gloucester: B. Raikes,
1796), 78. [Footnotes have been modified to include full references for the
material reproduced here.]

obligation typifies much commentary on social life. The view of society just quoted, concerned with manners and with communication, belongs to a work entitled *Advice from a Lady of Quality, to Her Children; in the Last Stage of a Lingered Illness*. On her deathbed, as it were, the lady insists both on the dangers of “the world” and on the obligations of “society.” “The love of society,” she concludes, “constitutes a part of our duty; the love of the world makes us forgetful of every duty” (78).

The felt distinction between “society” and “the world” depends partly on differentiation between internalized and externalized pressures. Everyone belongs to “society,” that network of human connection declaring our necessary interdependence. Eighteenth-century fiction by and about men occasionally permits a fantasy of retreat to a confined society: the miniature civilization of the country estate. *Tom Jones* and *Humphrey Clinker*, for example, resolve in their heroes’ return to such relatively limited environments. Novels by and about women, on the other hand, assume the necessity of living in the context of a larger human community: living, therefore, by that community’s rules. Those rules, increasingly complex and well defined, in the eighteenth century involved even the most minute aspects of behavior—the forms as well as the fact of conventional visiting and letter-writing, and of conventional conversation. Abundant conduct books promulgated the rules, but the truly well-bred woman—to confine myself to the sex toward whom the heaviest barrage of advice about conduct directed itself—carried those rules in her head and heart. The ideal of feeling socially an “insider” glimmers through the large literature about social ascension. *Pamela* (1740) sets the model for many successors in its account of how a humble country girl wins acceptance by her social betters. Her right to *belong* depends not only on her marriage but on her knowledge of such matters as how to carve at table, how to sing for company. To feel “inside” society, one must contain society’s standards inside oneself.

“The world,” on the other hand, remains always outside, as in Restoration and eighteenth-century stage comedy. It both judges and corrupts; unlike “society,” it implies no structural order or harmony. “The world” provides a locus for fear and anxiety. The dying lady’s distinction between love of society as duty and love of “the world” as violation sums up the moral weight attached to each concept. “The world” consists always of other people—other people holding out lures for prospective victims and condemnation for those who have violated social standards. Both temptation and threat, the idea of “the world” expresses the tensions implicit in living among other people; the notion of “society” evokes the reassurance of such life.

Love of society implies love of talk; love of the world encourages the wrong kind of talk, as well as of action: among other things, sexual action. As conversationalists and as sexual beings, women require more warning than men: so eighteenth-century thinkers still believed. Sexual warnings focus on female vulnerability; they assume that women readily become victims. In conversation, on the other hand, women function as agents. They “have this talent of a ready utterance in ... much greater perfection than men,” Addison points out; he speaks, as usual, for many of his contemporaries.¹ Women like to talk. Their volubility demands control. What they might say, lacking external discipline, threatens the order of things.

As for what they might say, it will come as no surprise that many commentators worried about the alleged female propensity to gossip. The *Spectator* essay from which I just quoted examines four modes of what its author calls “female oratory.” Its description of practitioners of the second and third modes epitomizes the century’s sentiments; I shall quote it, therefore, at length.

The second kind of female orators are those who deal in invectives and who are commonly known by the name of the censorious. The imagination and elocution of this set of rhetoricians is wonderful. With what a fluency of invention and copiousness of expression will they enlarge upon every little slip in the behavior of another! With how many different circumstances, and with what variety of phrases, will they tell over the same story! ... The censure and approbation of this kind of women are therefore only to be considered as helps to discourse.

A third kind of female orator may be comprehended under the word gossips. Mrs. Fiddle Faddle is perfectly accomplished in this sort of eloquence; she launches out into descriptions of christenings, runs divisions upon an head-dress, knows every dish of meat that is served up in her neighborhood, and entertains her company a whole afternoon together with the wit of her little boy, before he is able to speak [*Spectator*, 3-376].

After thus suggesting the folly, malice, and triviality of female speech, Addison offers further contemptuous generalization about women’s discourse, concluding with patronizing remarks about the female tongue: “I must confess, I am so wonderfully charmed with the music of this little instrument, that I would by no means discourage it. All that I aim at by this dissertation is to cure it of several

1 *The Spectator*, #247, 13 December 1711, *The Spectator*, ed. George A. Aitken, 8 vols. (London: John C. Nimmo, 1898), 3.377.

disagreeable notes, and in particular of those little jarrings and dissonances which arise from anger, censoriousness, gossiping, and coquetry" (379).

If Addison's tone, with its simple ironies, conveys a clear moral message, his vocabulary invites speculation. From some points of view, imagination and eloquence of the gossip really *are*, as he ironically says, "wonderful," quite literally "helps to discourse." The fluency, copiousness, variety which characterized the gossip's speech embody values which the writer, in other contexts, would readily acknowledge. How can women talk so much about so little? The question haunts the commentator, who reiterates the word *little*, yet cannot conceal his wonder at the sheer abundance of female talk. Addison's description of the varieties of female oratory conveys emotional power as well as moral weakness. Women display remarkable fertility of utterance, but their words lack substantial content, the writer claims. The essayist utilizes all his rhetorical skill in a program of reduction, attempting to convert female speech into mere sound—or "music"—and thus to limit its conceivable power.

Many statements about women's gossip more or less explicitly emphasize that disturbing power, which derives, certain moralists recognize, from female minds as well as female tongues, and which potentially threatens the order of society by investigating what should remain veiled. One may call the special women's gift "curiosity" or "penetration": James Fordyce, a well-known sermon-writer, does both. "Curiosity" he, like his contemporaries, finds reprehensible. "To what shall we chiefly impute that female curiosity, which has been so long, and in most instances so justly, a topic of satire? Is it possible, that women could show such amazing eagerness to be acquainted with every minute particular in the life, character, dress, fortune, and circumstance of others, did they possess a fund of domestic entertainment and liberal conversation?"¹ Like other moralists, Fordyce thus finds a possible excuse for female limitation in the lack of fruitful occupation readily available to upper-class women. But he also in effect re-interprets the vice of curiosity, although he does not appear to notice the connection between what he considers female vice and what he finds an intellectual virtue. "Of this I am certain," he writes, "that amongst women of sense I have discovered an uncommon penetration in what relates to characters, an uncommon dexterity in hitting them off through their several specific distinctions, and even nicer discriminations, together with a race of fancy and a fund of what may be strictly termed Sentiment, or a pathetic

1 James Fordyce, *Sermons to Young Women* (Philadelphia: Thomas Dobson, 1787), 194. First published 1765.

manner of thinking, which I have not so frequently met with in men. It should seem that Nature, by her liberality to the female mind, in these respects, has seen fit to compensate what has been judged a defect in point of depth and force" (167). Women make up for lack of intelligence by being nosy.

In this speculation about the special strengths of female minds, Fordyce by no means typifies his period. The frequent eighteenth-century indictments of women's curiosity duplicate one another in language as well as thought, but the complainers do not typically think about the relation between this traditional female vice and other aspects of women's minds. Yet awareness like Fordyce's, of special female gifts, may explain the insistent efforts to keep women from saying what they think about other people. If females in fact possess "uncommon penetration" about character and "uncommon dexterity" in characterizing, if their emotional sensitivity (what Fordyce calls "Sentiment, or a pathetic manner of thinking") combines with a capacity for "nicer discriminations" than men can make—if these things are true, then women potentially possess dangerous powers of accurate commentary. The prevailing emphasis on the "littleness" and triviality of gossip may reveal anxiety about the possibility that gossiping women see and tell important truth.

So moralists warn women against associating exclusively with one another. "In mixed companies alone," John Bennet pronounces, "... conversation has its proper interest, flavour, of improvement."¹ Women do not improve each other; in all-female company, they are far too likely to gossip. Only men protect women, in Bennet's apparent view: from one another and from the vacancy of their own minds. And men protect mainly by enforcing a doctrine of repression. Women want to find out about other people and to articulate their knowledge; men attempt to control in them these dangerous aspects of desire. The fantasy that women, left to their own devices, would say destructive things recalls the fear that only constant vigilance by protective males prevents women from indulging their insatiable sexuality. But the persistent association of "curiosity" with gossip hints a more specific fear: that females, attentive to the minute, might uncover everything—Samson's secret, Cupid's—and betray it to other females. The possible assembly of only women—or only women with the company of one or two "half men," as Congreve has it in *The Way of the World*—troubles the male imagination.

1 John Bennet, *Letters to a Young Lady, on a Variety of Useful and Interesting Subjects, Calculated to Improve the Heart, to Form the Manners and Enlighten the Understanding*, 6th American ed. (Hudson: William Norman, 1811), 124. First published 1789.

Female curiosity bears fruit in stories about other people—stories which might under different circumstances take literary form. In a *Spectator* essay about “the inquisitive,” Steele condemns their “temper of inquiry,” which stems, he surmises, “from a vacancy in their own imaginations.” Although he does not refer specifically to women, his indictment sounds familiar from other statements about the female. But as he continues to muse about “the insatiable desire of knowing what passes,” he remarks that the mind gratified by such knowledge is formed, “*like myself*, to be a mere spectator” (my italics). Curiosity, he acknowledges, serves social ends. “This curiosity, without malice or self-interest, lays up in the imagination a magazine of circumstances which cannot but entertain when they are produced in conversation. If one were to know, from the man of the first quality to the meanest servant, the different intrigues, sentiments, pleasures, and interests of mankind, would it not be the most pleasing entertainment imaginable to enjoy so constant a farce, as the observing mankind much more different from themselves in their secret thoughts and public actions, than in their nightcaps and long periwigs?”¹ The subversive implications of such observation readily attach themselves to gossip, but Steele here implicitly connects talk with authorship. The enterprise of a periodical called *The Spectator* doesn’t greatly differ from that of the dedicated observer of and talker about other people; and what about a periodical called *The Tattler*? Abstracted from the link with malice, gossip’s trivia can generate literary power.

Why do commentators value written forms of observational narrative but at best only joke about gossip which shares such narrative’s values? Dr. Johnson, in his familiar exposition of biography’s importance, insists on the significance of trivial detail and on the imaginative power of specific knowledge about other people. In a less well-known *Rambler*, on the other hand, he deplores narrative about others as an element of conversation. People enjoy it, he admits; but they shouldn’t.

He who has stored his memory with slight anecdotes, private incidents, and personal particularities, seldom fails to find his audience favorable. Almost every man listens with eagerness to contemporary history; for almost every man has some real or imaginary connection with a celebrated character, some desire to advance, or oppose a rising name. Vanity often cooperates with curiosity. He that is a hearer in one place qualifies himself to become a speaker in another; for though he cannot comprehend a series of argument, or transport the volatile spirit of wit without

1 *The Spectator*, #228, 21 November 1711, *The Spectator*, 3.28.

evaporation, he yet thinks himself able to treasure up the various incidents of a story, and pleases his hopes with the information which he shall give to some inferior society.

Narratives are for the most part heard without envy, because they are not supposed to imply any intellectual qualities above the common rate. To be acquainted with facts not yet echoed by plebeian mouths, may happen to one man as well as to another, and to relate them when they are known, has in appearance so little difficulty, that every one concludes himself equal to the task.¹

Narrative in speech requires no intellectual gifts; moreover, Johnson goes on to imply, it tends to reduce its subjects to the same level as its hearers, encouraging the pernicious myth of equality.

The *Rambler* essay on biography argues that small facts provide the biographer's best material, since they compose the texture of human life. Johnson emphasizes how much we all share as human beings; biography, he believes, should stress this truth. In the biographical text, he finds such concern not reductive but instructive. Nothing is too little for so little a creature as man, he told Boswell. Yet the talker who reports man's littleness aloud wins only his reproach.

The biography essay insists that a "judicious and faithful narrative" of *any* human life would be useful.² A few months earlier, however, Johnson had argued that writers of novels—a genre based, in his view, on imitation rather than invention—must take care choosing specific lives to delineate because of their writing's imaginative potency. "If the power of example is so great as to take possession of the memory by a kind of violence, and produce effects almost without the intervention of the will, care ought to be taken that when the choice is unrestrained, the best examples only should be exhibited; and that which is likely to operate should not be mischievous or uncertain in its effects."³ Why should novels prove so much more dangerous than biographies? Perhaps because they involve the imagination more intensely; their readers, Johnson tells us, include "the young, the ignorant, and the idle," all susceptible to the lures of fancy. He does not tell us who reads biography.

Let me recapitulate this series of observations. Stories about other people reported in speech attract ready audiences because everyone

1 *The Rambler*, #188, 4 January 1752, The Yale Edition of the Works of Samuel Johnson, 5, ed. W.J. Bate and Albrecht B. Strauss (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1969), 222.

2 *The Rambler*, #60, 13 October 1750, The Yale Edition, 3.320.

3 *The Rambler*, #4, 31 March 1750, The Yale Edition, 3.22.

feels some connection to well-known people, because the hearers can anticipate their own subsequent roles as narrators of the same stories, and because those hearers feel no envy of the narrator's gifts: he needs no gifts, they believe, and Johnson appears to share their conviction. Such tales falsify experience by simplifying it and by suggesting that those talked about have the same flaws as those talking. Stories about other people presented in the guise of printed fiction attract the gullible; the novelist therefore must take responsibility for making characters and actions in fiction instructive, for presenting positive models of conduct. Stories about other people in biography cannot be too trivial; they illustrate the ways in which small actions define character and comprise experience.

The implicit differentiations here involves both author and audience, different kinds of authority, different kinds of perceptivity. Johnson appears to imagine oral narrative as communicated in coffee houses: a limited public setting. Novels reach a larger, more indiscriminate public; biography appeals to a group which Johnson fails to define but which he apparently trusts. The transmitters of narrative take their places in a posited hierarchy of authority, a hierarchy which illuminates the subjects of women and of gossip.

The biographer's authority exceeds the novelist's because of the weight of didactic tradition accruing to his genre (I use the masculine pronoun because Johnson entirely assumes it) and because he grounds his narrative in fact. Johnson takes for granted both the didactic intent and the didactic effect of a life story in writing. The biographer imposes a pattern on experience to declare the comprehensibility of human existence. Learning of other people, we learn of ourselves. Lacking a long formal tradition to authorize his enterprise, the novelist, with more dubious purposes than the biographer, risks contamination by association with the morally suspect mode of romance: as Johnson reproachfully observes, novels too often make love the spring of action. And novelists rely, of course, on the dangerous power of imagination: put it bluntly, they *lie*.

Both a novelist and a biographer, however, by assuming the responsibility and the power of the written word, exceed in authority the conversational narrator for whom Johnson expresses patronizing contempt. Johnson imagines this narrator too as male; he does not even bother to discuss those jabbering females evoked by his dictionary's striking definition of *gossip*, which I quoted earlier ("One who runs about tattling like women at a lying-in"). Such women, in Johnson's representative view, would lack all semblance of authority. Conversing only with one another, they confine themselves to a more private sphere than that of the male story-teller who circulates

in coffee houses to relate the foibles of public men, existing therefore at least on the fringes of the public life that tests human worth—*male* worth. Women share secrets, hiding from scrutiny. And—Johnson doesn't say this, but many others do—they deal in scandal, thus raising questions of motive and the possibility of fanciful exaggeration. Critics implicitly grant the biographer moral motivation; they allow its possibility for the novelist, despite suspicion that the fiction-writer may stress pleasure more than instruction. The coffee-house story-teller, Johnson suggests, wishes to make himself important and to reduce the stature of those greater than he. But in the eyes of their critics, female gossips, their specific utterances only hypothesized, conceal destructive purposes, existing thus at the bottom of the moral hierarchy as well as of the closely connected hierarchy of authority.

Public writing on the whole enjoyed a higher status than did private talk. Eliza Haywood, writing early in the century specifically about gossip, suggests a possible justification for the oral mode by raising the question, "Will the Knowledge of what other People do make us wiser or happier?"—only to answer it, without further explanation, by insisting that abundant examples, both positive and negative, exist already in writing.¹ Examples in writing of course possess the stability necessarily lacking in oral utterance; their implications can be more sternly controlled. Women's gossip seems dangerous not only because it belongs to women but because it belongs to the unpredictable realm of talk, talk made more unpredictable by taking place in domestic rather than public settings. When Addison speaks of "female oratory," his irony focuses on just this aspect of women's conversation: he considers such talk negligible precisely because it is *not* oratory, not public performance.

Explicitly, the body of moral doctrine I have been citing draws on an acknowledged standard of social decorum to sanction disapproval of gossip. The implications of the doctrine, however, go far beyond propriety. To summarize the eighteenth-century attack on gossip suggests the superiority of the verbal mode epitomized by those who can read Latin and consider public matters; it hints at the inadequacy of female understanding as well as of female talk; it declares the reprehensible nature of concern with human detail if such concern issues in speech; it preaches a doctrine of repression in the service of communal welfare, in the interests of that "society" generally assumed to define value. If the moralizers leave a few loose ends in such comments as Steele's connection of authorship with curiosity and Fordyce's recognition of female insight, they yet display

1 Eliza Haywood, *The Female Spectator*, 4 vols. (London: T. Gardner, 1745), 3.

a striking unanimity in their distaste for gossip and in the grounds of that distaste.

Women can write as well as talk, of course, although Dr. Johnson barely acknowledged the fact; and they wrote novels beginning early in the eighteenth century, sometimes anonymously or under pseudonyms, but sometimes attaching their own names. Curiosity; avid interest in other people, their lives, the small manifestations of their personalities; close observation and a nice discrimination—the qualities alleged to account for the nature of women’s conversation now fueled their writing (as well as that of their male contemporaries) and apparently interested readers male and female, old and young. Even the malice supposed to underlie gossip could provide energy for the novel. In deeper ways than Dr. Johnson may consciously have realized, the novel embodied troubling possibilities. ...

Jane Austen’s *Emma*, dealing with village existence, evokes a society without a “world.” The people who talk about one another in Highbury all have faces; reactions from neighbors and friends respond promptly to social deviation. The knowing narrator of the novel, who understands the kinds of restriction implicit in a tiny, intimate society, helps to locate the missing term in her heroine’s experience, calling attention to the limitations of Emma’s consciousness as well as of her society.

The relation between gossip as social prohibition and as narrative resource becomes explicit here: *Emma* articulates a grammar of gossip. Slightly past the mid-point of the novel, Mr. Knightley explains an important truth to Emma and Mrs. Weston. “Another thing must be taken into consideration too,” he observes—“Mrs. Elton does not talk *to* Miss Fairfax as she speaks *of* her. We all know the difference between the pronouns he or she and thou, the plainest-spoken amongst us.”¹ The entire novel glosses that difference, and elucidates the further distinction of the first-person pronoun from the others. When Emma violates decorum by talking *to* Miss Bates as she might have spoke *of* her—as a dullard—she prepares the way for a sequence of insights which ends by establishing her in a new relation to the first-person pronoun.

People talk a great deal about other people during *Emma*, for one main reason: to alleviate or forestall boredom. The lack of occupation to which some moralists had attributed the female propensity to gossip afflicts male and female characters alike. Only the male Knightleys partially escape, John working as a lawyer in London and

1 *Emma, The Novels of Jane Austen*, ed. R.W. Chapman, 3rd ed. (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1933), 4.286.

unable to comprehend the Highbury delight in trivial conversation, and George busy about his estate, willing to gossip with the others but less dependent on gossip as a resource. Unlike Austen's other novels, this one dwells on its own sense of confinement. "Imaginist" though she is, Emma faces a real, not an imaginary, problem in the lack of possibility her community affords. No new people: hence the sensational impact of Frank Churchill. No new things to do or see: hence the momentousness of an expedition to Box Hill or even to Donwell. Emma can play backgammon with her father, she can visit the few familiar people who surround her, she can shop for gloves or ribbons, do needlework or read or practice her music. Repeatedly the text emphasizes Highbury's limitations. At the very beginning, we learn that Emma, "with all her advantages, natural and domestic, ... was now in great danger of suffering from intellectual solitude" (7). Like everyone around her, she yearns for "news." "Oh! yes, I always like news" (172). The only news available, the only kind relevant to her concerns, involves people she knows or those associated with them. Her impoverished world supplies little else in the way of delight. Walking to the door of a shop while Harriet vacillates over muslins, she seeks

amusement.—Much could not be hoped from the traffic of even the busiest part of Highbury;—Mr Perry walking hastily by, Mr. William Cox letting himself in at the office door, Mr Cole's carriage horses returning from exercise, or a stray letterboy on an obstinate mule, were the liveliest objects she could presume to expect; and when her eyes fell only on the butcher with his tray, a tidy old woman travelling homewards from shop with her full basket, two curs quarrelling over a dirty bone, and a string of dawdling children round the baker's little bow-window eyeing the gingerbread, she knew she had no reason to complain, and was amused enough; quite enough still to stand at the door. A mind lively and at ease can do with seeing nothing, and can see nothing that does not answer [233].

"A mind lively and at ease." The phrase appears to come from Emma's consciousness; her self-congratulation may recall dreadful Mrs. Elton's talk of her "resources." The liveliness and ease of Emma's mind get her into trouble, as her imagination goes to work on limited raw materials to create gossip which produces false expectations and pain for others. The "he" and "she" who inhabit Emma's imagination belong to the realm of fiction. She constructs shapely plots, domestic romances, about the unmarried; and when she figures as an actress

in her own fictions, one begins to understand her difficulty with the first-person pronoun.

From some points of view, Emma seems all too completely at ease with what Virginia Woolf calls the vertical pronoun. Accustomed to rule in her small domain, suffering only the "real evils" of possessing "the power of having rather too much her own way, and a disposition to think a little too well of herself" (5), unchastened by fears of the world, Emma functions insistently as an "I." Yet her version of "I" bears a troubling similarity to her notion of "he" and "she." She sees herself too, repeatedly, as a fictional character, imagining the audience that the village cannot adequately supply. Her entire relationship with Frank Churchill derives from and depends on her capacity to perceive herself from the point of view of admiring spectator. When she and Frank first dance together, "she found herself well-matched in a partner. They were a couple worth looking at" (230). Dwelling as she does on the idea of being looked at, she neglects to recognize what she feels, thinking, rather, of what she might, or should, feel. When Frank reappears, after an absence from Highbury, she concludes that she has not, after all, really fallen in love with him. She gives him, however, "friendly encouragement, ... which now, in her own estimation, meant nothing, though in the judgment of most people looking on it must have had such an appearance as no English word but flirtation could very well describe. 'Mr Frank Churchill and Miss Woodhouse flirted together excessively.' They were laying themselves open to that very phrase—and to having it sent off in a letter to Maple Grove by one lady, to Ireland by another" (368). This preoccupation with what might be said about her, with, in fact, the gossip she may generate by her self-presentation as well as by her imagination—this preoccupation helps to make possible her thoughtless insult of Miss Bates. She has become so involved in her immediate social role, in her fantasy of being perceived as powerful, witty, and attractive, that she has lost awareness of others' feelings.

Harriet Smith, for all her stupidity and indecisiveness, parodies Emma. She too keeps construction fictions round herself, less imaginative fictions than Emma specializes in, but constructions in the same genre. She too has trouble knowing her own emotions and accurately assessing other people's. Her failure to function as a full center of consciousness stems from intellectual inadequacy, Emma's, from more complicated sources; but both alike fall into gossip's trap of objectification. Gossip deprives other people of reality; it ends, the novel implies, by doing the same to the self.

Harriet's fictions, of course, in the neat structure of *Austen's* fiction, bring an end to Emma's. When it darts through Emma with

the speed of an arrow that Mr. Knightley must marry no one but herself, she moves rapidly from self-dramatization to self-knowledge, toward the marriage that will chasten the excesses of her imagination. She starts now to concentrate on her feelings rather than her performance: to know herself as “I” rather than “she.”

Gossip has provided not only an obstacle to the happy ending but a means toward fruition. In the penultimate chapter, Knightley offers Emma a brief account of how the engagement between Harriet Smith and Robert Martin finally came to pass. “This is all that I can relate,” he concludes, “of the how, where, and when. Your friend Harriet will make a much longer history when you see her.—She will give you all the minute particulars, which only woman’s language can make interesting.—In our communications we deal only in the great” (472). Despite the ironic overtones of Knightley’s commentary, he speaks literal truth: woman’s language *can* make the trivial and mundane interesting, it can create histories of its own, and it differs from man’s language, although men may also employ it. The history Austen has spun out of the daily experience of Highbury precisely demonstrates the point.

Homer Brown has observed, “Traditionally, two of the ways the novel has had of at once disguising and validating itself have been as letters and as gossip. ... It is probable that part of the pleasure we derive from the classic novel is a pleasure similar to that derived from gossip.”¹ Gossip’s hermeneutic power generates the internal dynamic of *Emma*: we see its heroine interpreting minute particulars of her own and other people’s experience; her acts of interpretation create the plot. Emma exists so completely as an “insider” that “outside” has virtually no existence for her. Her tiny society enables her to function with utter authority; no amount of experience convinces her of her final incapacity to know the meanings of other people’s actions within that confined setting. Knightley’s condemnation of her rudeness to Miss Bates also derives from the insider’s position. In Highbury, one cannot judge people—as, elsewhere, the world does—on the basis of their social performances: one knows too much. Emma should have remembered Miss Bates’s history, her personality, her emotional and economic situation. To operate always from inside carries its own penalties—not least of them Emma’s inability to distinguish among the pronouns. Her self-objectification declares her yearning for an audience that *will* assess her performance, instead of one for which her performance merges with her history. ...

1 Homer Brown, “The Errant Letter and the Whispering Gallery,” *Genre*, 10 (1977), 574–5.

Gossip carries particularly complex meanings in *Emma* because of the reader's implication in its patterns. The novel consistently invites us too to participate in acts of interpretation. Revealing again and again Emma's interpretive mistakes, giving us the grounds to judge them and her, it may lure us into believing ourselves more competent than she to understand particularities. Guided by the knowing narrator, we can feel ourselves *super*-insiders. The test offers many particularities to understand. When Emma calls on Jane Fairfax shortly after the delivery of her new pianoforte, a gift which, Emma has decided, must come from Mr. Dixon, Jane does not at once sit down at the instrument. "That she was not immediately ready, Emma did suspect to arise from the state of her nerves" (240); and Emma of course believes herself to understand the proximate cause of nervous tension. The reader possesses the same data as Emma. If we have become, by this point in the novel, wary of Emma's hasty explanations, we face the problem of providing our own. Like a detective novel, the book keeps offering raw material for interpretation, the raw material of gossip, and requiring us to do something with it. The "correct" interpretation for many previous events emerges finally, in the revelation of the secret engagement between Frank and Jane. At this point we must assess the quality of our own interpretations, realize the degree to which we, as readers, have participated in the making of the fiction—and realize, perhaps, that such participation belongs to a continuum with Highbury's endless speculation. Instead of the pleasure of reading other people's letters, we have been offered the gratifications of complicity—only to have our satisfaction in it repeatedly undermined. Women or not, we have been lured into acting like the women of moralistic stereotypes: lured into rewards and betrayals of speculative gossip. We do not talk out loud, of course; but our inner voices ask gossip's questions, make its judgments.

As usual, Austen provides a conservative text and a challenging sub-text. Emma will presumably settle down and behave herself and stop interpreting so wildly; Harriet will stop interpreting at all. The "longer history" of her engagement that Harriet might provide would surely prove tedious in the extreme. Highbury's gossip substitutes for meaningful life; the village's confinement limits growth and pleasure. Although Knightley jokes when he asserts that men "deal only in the great," his superiority to those around him indeed derives partly from his consistent stress on moral rather than merely social judgment. All these facts argue for a view of the novel as supporting values embodied in the moral commentary cited earlier: trivial and malicious talk reflects impoverished minds as well as experience, male talk about ideas communicates more meaning and value than female talk about

people; by extension, the male realm provides the standard by which females can judge themselves and know themselves wanting. On the other hand, the vitality of *Emma* as a fiction, like that of Emma as a character, depends on insatiable interest in personality and its individual manifestations. The reader who has found herself or himself amused, entertained, and impressed by the vagaries of Emma's imagination, by her will to make interest where little obvious stuff of interest exists—such a reader must feel the loss involved in Emma's settling down under Mr. Knightley's exemplary tutelage. Emma has kept herself alive while all around decayed, kept herself alive with the energies of gossip. The novel has lured the reader into direct knowledge of the same energies. Talking of "he" and "she" must not substitute for knowing the self as "I" or for valuing the sensibilities of others as "you." On the other hand, the exercise of imagining "he" and "she" and dwelling on the possibilities of their experience enlivens the mind. And recognition of that fact implies at least temporary acceptance of a set of values and assumptions associated with the female and opposed to the usefulness of dealing only in the great. Fully accepting the standards of "society," *Emma* yet declares the need to evade them.

In both *Evelina* and *Emma*, female gossip ... functions as a language of feeling, as a mode of personal development, as an evasion of external restriction. Indeed, it becomes a means of discovering selfhood, of declaring the self an expressive, judging consciousness. As a sub-text for the major line of narrative, it supports the imaginative and improvisational, valuing the private, implying the saving energies of female curiosity and female volubility, celebrating the possibility and the importance of a narrative of trivia. It exemplifies the subversive resources of the novel as genre. The official criticism of gossip derives from and depends on a realm of public value; it assumes the dominance of "society" as standard and sanction. Novels too declare the importance of society, but they value the individual. Inasmuch as eighteenth-century fiction delineated and defended the private, it often implicitly defended also what public moralists attacked. In fiction if not in didactic texts, the "talent of ready utterance" found its supporters: supporters who managed successfully to uphold the values of a women's sub-society even while articulating those of traditional social conformity. Fiction reveals more clearly what didactic texts only hint: that gossip, "female talk," provides a mode of power, of undermining public rigidities and asserting private integrity, of discovering means of agency for women, those private citizens deprived of public function. It provides also often the substance and the means of narrative.

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