In preparation for filming the Ang Lee directed version of Sense and Sensibility in 1995, the film’s cast had a letter-writing competition to see who could capture the spirit of Jane Austen’s characters best. Imogen Stubbs, who plays Lucy Steele, won the competition with a wonderfully simpering and satirical take on her character. A letter-writing contest seems a particularly good way to “get into” a character’s inner thoughts, particularly in the case of Lucy, because in the novel the content of her letter to her jilted ex-fiancé Edward Ferrars is so exemplary of all the faults we have come to see in her. The novel provides us with the text of Lucy’s letter to Edward so that we can laugh with Elinor and Edward at Lucy’s insincerity and so that we can acknowledge her lack of consequence and education, revealed through the words on the page.

In Austen’s novels, letters often serve this comic function of exposing the absurdities of the flawed men and women who send them—Mr. Collins’s proposal letter is perhaps the best comic example; Lydia Bennet’s letter announcing her ill-fated plan to elope with Mr. Wickham is perhaps the most shocking. Letters also provide confessional spaces for her novels’ male characters: Austen gives Mr. Darcy, Frank Churchill, and Frederick Wentworth, for example, ample space to explain their feelings and behavior.

It seems surprising that, after Austen moves away from the epistolary form of Lady Susan, her completed novels rarely provide us with the texts of heroines’ letters. It seems doubly striking that such letters are absent, given the heroines’ social context, in which, as Deirdre Le Faye explains, “[l]etter-writing was an essential part of social life” (108). Although marriage plots are arguably always the focus of Austen’s novels, the heroines’ written expressions of feeling are rarely “safe” in the context of the marriage plot and they are almost always judged harshly by the narrative voices.

Thus, we begin this essay with some basic questions: Why are heroines’ letters, in particular, almost entirely left out of Austen’s novels? And, when heroines’ letters do appear, in what form do they appear and what functions do they serve within their respective novels? To answer these questions, we examine the texts of letters written by Marianne Dashwood in Sense and Sensibility and Fanny Price in Mansfield Park. Even a cursory glance at these novels reveals that these letters occur in highly charged emotional settings such that the heroines feel forced to provide their suitors with written expressions of their feelings. After comparing these letters to those that appear in eighteenth-century letter-writing manuals, we want to claim that the degree to which these expressions would have been thought to breach standards of decorum may be less significant than we had assumed. The comparison between the manuals and Austen’s novels reveals these texts’ shared assumption: although writing a letter in courtship might be a potentially harmful action for women, expressing feelings in a letter is clearly preferable to not expressing them at all.

I. Dramatic Courtship in the Letter-Writing Manual

Understanding the nature of the sample letters contained in the letter-writing manuals we analyze requires some familiarity with the format and function of these manuals, as well as an awareness of their immense popularity in the eighteenth century. In Austen’s day, these anonymous manuals often went into several editions, leading us to believe they would have been well-known by the early nineteenth-century reader. The Complete Letter-Writer, which we will use as our primary example, reached over 25 editions by 1800. Similar titles include The London Universal Letter-Writer, The British Letter-Writer, The Complete Art of Writing Letters, and The Young Secretary’s Guide.
The manuals share a generic form. The most common type of letter-writing manual, which we will focus on here, offers anonymously written model letters addressing a variety of “everyday” situations. These situations fall into discrete categories, such as business, family and friendship, courtship and marriage, and miscellaneous advice; these categories (with only the slightest of variations) are repeated and used as chapter headings by every manual we have examined. Each chapter contains a selection of ten to thirty model letters, and these letters follow standardized types and are often copied near-verbatim from manual to manual.

In addition, each section of the manual presents a short series of letters, back-and-forth correspondences between two unnamed but clearly defined writers. Each series of letters responds to some crisis or event, such as an unwanted marriage proposal or an accusation of inconstancy, and the reader is thus encouraged to follow a brief, highly focused relationship centered on a dramatic issue. The letters thus begin to create both character and plot, taking a novelistic shape. As a result, it becomes difficult to tell if the letters are to be read as models of “real life” or as fictional epistolary plots. The letters seem to connect the real and the fictive, working to play up not proper courtship practices but the “real” nature of courtship experiences—the parental pressures, the unhappy alliances, and social judgments—which also form the core of many epistolary novels. In other words, the manuals appear to be more aligned with Austen’s fictional world than with some sort of prescriptive, pedagogical, model text.

Finally, the manuals are surprisingly self-aware, critiquing the use of letters in courtship—the very practice that they seem to be inscribing. The manuals’ criticism of courtship highlights problems of artifice, deception, insincerity, and indecision, thus resembling Austen’s plots; but their epistolary form highlights a crucial difference from Austen’s novels as a whole: the manuals have no narrator or mediating voice commenting on the letters. They comment on courtship practices from the inside, not the outside; they are written from the position of the courtship actor, not the courtship narrator. In this way, the manuals encourage interpretation by the reader, allowing the reader to judge the behavior, ideals, and emotions captured in each letter and decide what aspects of the letter the reader might apply to his or her own life.

II. Genuine Courtship and the Letter

In contrast to the absence of narrative voice in the manuals, Austen uses her narrative voice to carefully frame and cast judgment on the “included” letters her heroines write within courtship plots. In Sense and Sensibility Austen provides the complete texts of Marianne Dashwood’s passionate letters to her beloved Willoughby as if to create the impression that the reader has encountered them at the same time that Marianne’s sister Elinor has; our reading of the letters can’t help but be affected when the narrator quickly informs us that Elinor is distressed at their impropriety. Similarly, in Mansfield Park a flustered Fanny Price writes a hasty note ostensibly to Mary Crawford in the desperate hope of discouraging Mary’s brother Henry’s affections; but as she writes, Fanny knows that Henry will have full access to her letter. Immediately following the text of the letter, the narrator describes Fanny’s judgment that her letter is “excessively ill written” (308). And yet, in both cases the narrator’s judgments of the letters (in the perspectives of Elinor Dashwood and Fanny Price respectively) seem to have less affective power over the reader than do the texts of the emotionally charged letters themselves, particularly given each heroine’s quite disempowered position within the courtship plot.

Furthermore, Austen provides good reasons for readers to question the narrators’ summary judgments, reasons which our comparison of these letters to the letter-writing manuals’ sample letters helps us to elucidate. In addition to reading Marianne’s and Fanny’s letters within the context of Austen’s courtship plot, we want to place the included letters within in a broader cultural context of eighteenth-century models of letters.

In Epistolary Bodies, Elizabeth Heckendorn Cook emphasizes that, during the long eighteenth century, the letter was synonymous with female self-expression; she explores the epistolary genre’s identification “with women and with what are often seen as women’s concerns” and its perceived “valor[ization] of ‘authenticity’ and ‘sincerity’ in women’s writing, most frequently coded as the ostensibly natural expression of passionate emotion” (22). In her investigation of epistolary novels that feature women correspondents, April Alliston similarly investigates letter writing as a feminine act enabling subservive forms of sympathetic exchange which, ultimately, can critique patriarchal structures such as inheritance (94, 186). The letter’s space of female expression was by no means untroubled; as Cook explains, in the eighteenth century, “The letter as such carried two contradictory sets of connotations . . . On the one hand, it was considered the most direct, sincere, and transparent form of written communication,” but, on the other, “the letter was simultaneously recognized as the most playful and potentially deceptive of forms as a stage for rhetorical trickery” (16). The letter offers a unique opportunity for women’s affective self-expression, but carries with it the pressure to prove that expression genuine.

The two contradictory connotations attached to the letter form—affective truth and affective artifice—form an opposition that some eighteenth-century letter-writing manuals address. The Complete Letter-Writer suggests, “When you sit down to write a Letter, remember that this Sort of Writing should be like Conversation, thus they say, achieving the transmission of feelings that express ‘Nature without Affectation’” (32). The manual specifies even further that “Letter writing rejects all Pomp of Words, and is most agreeable when most familiar”; to avoid making the “stile” “low and mean,” the manual advises that writers “let an easy Complaisance, an open Sincerity, and unaffected Good-nature appear in all you say” (32). The preface to The Accomplished Letter-Writer, however, readily acknowledges the labor that might...
Despite the prefaces' calls for artless expressions of feelings in letters, we expected that the manuals' sample courtship letters would reflect standards of propriety in form and content; we assumed the manuals' letter would emphasize emotional reserve and, by contrast, show the affective self-expression in Austen heroines' letters to be immodest and perhaps even improper. To our surprise, the manuals actually contain many examples of women's letters that feature scenarios and types of female self-expression similar to those found in Austen's novels. The sample letters from women—which make up over half of letters in the sections devoted to courtship—often appear to control aspects of courtship by inviting, manipulating, or rejecting courtship through their letters. The manuals' sample letters suggest that the letter was seen as an appropriate space for genuine female self-expression within courtship. This rather surprising observation, in turn, suggests to us that Austen may use the included letter within her narrative to give her exceptional heroines' affective expressions the stamp of genuineness in part by making them seem, rather than exceptional, utterly typical. Austen's heroines' letters, like the letter-writing manuals, propose that despite conventions of style, the letter form still provided a woman a unique position from which to assert a limited power over her fate in courtship.

Our observations about the letter-writing manuals' form and content help us to reexamine Austen's purpose in the rare instances where her novels include heroines' letters. Their letters' resemblance to the "pattern" letters of these manuals perhaps encouraged the eighteenth-century reader to sympathize with the heroine, recognizing in her writing familiar models that meant to express or at least emulate affective truth. And further, we suggest that in their very typicality the letters validate for readers the heroines' affective self-presentation in ways that the more conservative narrative voice prohibits. We might thus question whether her heroines' moments of self-expression are really as improper or as shocking to eighteenth-century readers as the novels' respective narrators' commentary would indicate. Instead, we suggest that these letters allow for necessary but temporary moments of affective self-expression that also function to protect the heroines from potential misinterpretations of their behavior by those who have been observing and trying to interpret it in the absence of verbal confirmations. Marianne's and Fanny's letters allow them to perform acts of affective solicitation, manipulation, and refusal in courtship that can be read as attempts to assert the value of affective truth over both propriety and disingenuousness.

III. Affective Solicitation in Sense and Sensibility and The Complete Letter-Writer

Like the manuals' sample letters, the letters of Austen's heroines allow for temporary access to her heroine's thoughts, if only to allow the reader to see and sympathize with her genuine feelings about her position in courtship, feelings that might conflict however briefly with the judgment of that self-expression provided by the narrator. Both Marianne and Fanny use the letter as a way to control courtship, although their letters seem at first glance to position them as powerless. When they turn to letters, both are in desperate positions in the courtship process and both are forced to express their feelings in writing as an effort to control their fate: Marianne asserts her feelings to solicit a similar expression from her suitor Willoughby; by contrast, Fanny expresses her feelings to rebuff the suit of her would-be suitor (and/or suitor), Henry Crawford, and his accomplice, his sister Mary. Though the amount of power afforded to the letter is necessarily limited, the letter does provide a space for self-expression and courtship manipulation that may not be replicated elsewhere in Austen's world.

Marianne writes three letters to Willoughby after he suddenly leaves Barton Cottage, apparently ending their brief but intense relationship and subsequently failing to contact her on her arrival in London. Eve Sedgwick has challenged the critics' tendency to interpret Marianne's dire cases of fever as punishment for breaching acceptable conduct in her behavior with Willoughby—the letters being the most tangible evidence of that breach of conduct. Resisting this punitive critical impulse Sedgwick chooses instead to read Marianne's illness in conjunction with eighteenth-century medical tracts' descriptions of autoeroticism and hysteria in women (125). Heeding Sedgwick, we explore Marianne's letter-writing not as a shocking act that Austen felt she needed to publish, but as a typical behavior by an exceptional young woman attempting to exert the only means of power in courtship at her disposal.

The three letters Marianne writes to Willoughby feature a dynamic of affective solicitation. Her first letter initiates contact, showing her expectation of a favorable response; her second letter continues to show her expectation that courtship will proceed as she has envisioned it: "I cannot express my disappointment in having missed you the day before yesterday, nor my astonishment at not having received any answer to a note which I sent you above a week ago" (187). Her last letter "demands an explanation" for his disengagement, that she is "prepared to meet him," and that she wants to recreate past "pleasure," "familiarity," and "intimacy," though she has "passed a wretched night in endeavoring to excuse a conduct which can scarcely be called less than insulting" (187). Marianne broadens her definition of the terms of courtship to include her family, explaining that she fears Willoughby's "regard for us all was insincere, that your behaviour to me was intended only to deceive" (188). What might appear to be hyperbole in her expressions of dismay actually serves a function other than making Marianne seem hysterical; Willoughby's deception is thrown into relief by the genuine
Immediately after the letter, the narrator provides Elinor’s judgment: “That such letters, so full of affection and confidence, could have been so answered, Elinor, for Willoughby’s sake, would have been unwilling to believe. But her condemnation of him did not blind her to the impropriety of their having been written at all; and she was silently grieving over the impropriety which had hazarded such unsolicited proofs of tenderness” (188). Elinor’s critical thoughts are interrupted, however, by Marianne’s countering rationale “that they contained nothing but what any one would have written in the same situation” (188). Marianne’s claim is well worth examining in the context of eighteenth-century letter writing and letter-writing manuals. She argues that her behavior is typical of any one else’s, thus de-emphasizing her gender; she also makes her act of writing and her words seem typical, thus challenging her sister’s sense of the letters as an exceptional breach of conduct: they are in Marianne’s eyes and perhaps the readers’ “nothing” exceptional.

The manuals would appear to affirm Marianne’s defense of her letters—such attempts at affective solicitation were not so shocking or unusual, if the content of letter-writing manuals can be taken as any indication of the type of letter a woman could write, or even imagine writing, in courtship situations. In The Complete Letter-Writer, a series of letters constructs a scenario of affective solicitation very similar to that of Marianne in Sense and Sensibility, allowing a comparison of the manual to the novel. In The Complete Letter-Writer’s section on “Courtship and Marriage,” letters 33 and 34 feature an unnamed lady who declares her “passion” for an unnamed gentleman; when this passion is unreturned and even mocked, she critiques the gentleman, his use of the courtship letter, and the larger societal norms that deny women control over courtship. In her first letter, she won’t reveal her identity but suggests a private meeting. At the end of this letter, she, like Marianne, counters the suggestion that this solicitation is exceptional, arguing, “I doubt you will think such a declaration as this, from a Woman ridiculous; but you will consider, ‘tis Custom, not Nature, that makes it so” (124). She claims to be doing what any woman would naturally do. In letter 34, she writes that she has learned that her desired suitor has mocked her letter and passed it around to friends, putting her solicitation into circulation; “custom” has made her solicitation worthy of censure. In response, the female letter-writer forcefully takes control of this courtship gone awry; she attacks the gentleman, using very forward language: not only is he “unworthy of a Woman’s Love,” but he displays a “Want of Generosity,” “Cruelty of Mind,” “Vanity of Temper,” “incurable Defect of Understanding,” and “Emptiness and Deformity within”; in sum, he is a “Coxcomb” (124-25). The female letter-writer does admit to her own “imprudent” behavior and “weakness,” but she thanks the gentleman for his ill usage, as it forces her to learn from her own mistake.

By allowing their affections to take the concrete form of a letter that can be refused or cruelly used by a lover, both Marianne and this letter-writer make themselves vulnerable to mistreatment. Both women seem at first to be modeling improper female behavior: in both cases, the letter writer suffers public exposure for expressing her feelings. But, in both cases there is a strong sense of the woman’s justification in writing. Elinor performs the important function of confirming the genuineness of Marianne’s feelings by contrasting them to Willoughby’s; even as Elinor stresses that her sister’s feelings took a precarious form, she proves their depth. The manual’s letter-writer goes so far as to encourage the gentleman to show this rebuking letter to his friends—to put this new letter into circulation, too—because she is sure that his behavior will appear worse than her own. Like Marianne, she is less afraid of public circulation than of not genuinely expressing her feelings. And, although each woman learns a lesson, neither apologizes for her behavior and neither cedes control of the courtship process to the man.

Familiarity with The Complete Letter-Writer’s sample letters suggests that the scene in Sense and Sensibility is not as unequivocally critical of Marianne’s behavior as Austen critics have assumed. Both the manual’s letter-writer and Marianne appear to be punished for stepping out of their gendered courtship role and attempting to control courtship practice. But the manual’s letter-writer sees her error, remedies her actions, and proves more admirable than the man who abuses her. Although it takes Marianne a bit longer than one letter to effect this change, she, too, learns from her errors and proves more admirable than Willoughby, largely because of her belief that courtship can and should be based on genuine expressions of feeling. As the scenes depicting John Dashwood’s gradual abandonment of his promise to look out for the financial welfare of half sisters and step mother indicate, a lack of genuine human feeling is more threatening to society than the expression of genuine feeling. Both the novel and the manual may feature a letter writer who suffers humiliation, but both texts are also engaged in a larger critique of the customs of courtship. Society and its courtship rituals are threatened more by men who use courtship for selfish social advancement than by these female letter writers. Both the manual and the novel re-inscribe the courtship customs they criticize—both Marianne and the letter-writer must articulate and circulate feelings to prove them genuine—but the implied critique rests more heavily on the men who abuse those customs than on the women who use the letter to create a space of genuine expression within them.

IV: Affective Refusal in Mansfield Park and The Complete Letter-Writer

While Marianne’s letters are written in desperation to solicit an affective response from a suitor, Fanny Price’s letter, though written in equally desperate straits, responds to a different set of courtship pressures. Mary Crawford has written to Fanny in a clear effort to manipulate her into an engagement (or at least a liaison) with Mary’s brother, Henry Crawford; Mary’s letter assumes Fanny’s acceptance of Henry and proclaims that she is “sending [Fanny] a few lines of general congratulation, and giving my most joyful consent and approbation” (303). Fanny wants to reject this courtship proposal, but she is uncertain how to express that impulse in a letter. Fanny needs to respond in a way that is genuine;
Fanny's letter emphasizes her rejection of—and equation of—courtship and the letter conveying courtship. After a sentence thanking Mary for sending congratulations on her brother William, Fanny's complete response reads:

The rest of your note I know means nothing; but I am so unequal to any thing of the sort that I hope you will excuse my begging you to take no further notice. I have seen too much of Mr. Crawford not to understand his manners; if he understood me as well, he would, I dare say, behave differently. I do not know what I write, but it would be a great favour of you never to mention the subject again. With thanks for the honour of your note.

I remain, dear Miss Crawford, &c. &c. (307)

Fanny disengages from courtship by refusing the terms laid out in Mary's letter. Instead of accusing Mary of being disingenuous, Fanny claims to be incapable of registering the meaning of the parts of Mary's letter dealing with Henry's suit. Austen seems to want us to believe Fanny when she claims these parts "mean nothing" to her; unlike Mary, Fanny is "unequal" to recognizing deception and manipulation, and thus Austen and Fanny can claim that Fanny genuinely "does not know what [she] write[s]" in reply to such a letter as Mary's (307). She does not attribute the fault for her incomprehension to Mary, nor is any fault laid at Fanny's own feet—she simply cannot register courtship terms that "mean nothing" and she cannot respond to the letter in any other way than by rejecting Mary's meaning.

Whereas Marianne labeled her own writing "nothing but what anyone else would have written" because she saw it as an unexceptional expression of affective truth, Fanny labels Mary's letter "nothing" because it represents a disingenuous expression of feeling. In both cases, the heroine attempts to dictate the ways that letters and the courtship issues they convey should be interpreted. Fanny emphasizes that she reads and judges Henry's behavior—he should "behave differently"—as a more meaningful sign of courtship than the letter from Mary. Although she has disengaged from reading Mary's letter, her own letter makes sure to convey a strong message of rejection: the note—and by extension Henry's suit—"mean nothing." Fanny's ability to negotiate the courtship in such a deft and careful way is especially striking given the exceptionally precarious position that Austen has placed her in. Her uncle and her beloved cousin Edmund desire her to accept Henry's proposal, and her lower middle-class family in Portsmouth stand to benefit from her marriage as well.

Mansfield Park's emphasis on the woman as an active reader, who can disengage from and reject the terms of courtship offered her in the name of affective truth, also appears in letters collected in The Complete Letter-Writer's courtship section. In letters 24 through 27, a gentleman declares his passion to a lady, claiming to reject what he calls the "tedious forms of courtship," stressing the sincerity of his passion and providing as evidence of his claim the fact that he acts like a fool when he's with her. He distinguishes his letter from the "fashionable letter" of the disingenuous suitor who might appear to "lov[e] up to the greatest Hero of Romance" (114). The suitor critiques courtship forms as unnatural and disingenuous, but uses that claim as an excuse to engage in a secret courtship; the recipient of this letter must, like Fanny, label a claim to truth as deceit and replace it with affective truth.

Both Fanny and this letter writer critique their suitors' methods of courtship. By contrasting the letters, we can see just how strong Fanny's disengagement from courtship is. In the manual's Letter 25, the lady recipient replies coolly. Although, like the gentleman, she values sincere expression over fashionable courtship language, like Fanny, she claims not to "know" whether his letter is in "jest or earnest" (114). Like Fanny, she claims not to have registered the courtship gestures that he has made, claiming "your present [efforts to court me] make no great Impression" (114). When the gentleman persists in claiming the genuineness of his feelings in contrast to popular courtship practices, the lady forces him to follow traditional courtship practice, requesting that he no longer write her, but correspond instead with the person who has management of her affairs. "I do nothing in Matters of Consequence without him," she claims (115). In order for the matter to be "of Consequence," the gentleman must follow her orders. The letter-writer rejects her suitor's secretive courtship by forcing him to return to an open courtship practice.

Like Fanny, the manual's letter-writer uses affective refusal as a strategy of control. She does not want courtship to follow an informal process; she wants a formal, serious procedure that allows her to read her suitor's behavior clearly. This writer is decidedly more confident than Fanny in her rejection; she can turn to a formal courtship process for bolstering. Fanny is empowered in her rejection of Henry, but she doesn't have recourse to a formal courtship process due to her guardian's encouragement of Henry's suit and her own lack of social consequence in the family. Fanny does rise in consequence in the novel—moving from the periphery of the family and Mansfield Park to its center—but the letter scene occurs at a moment of crisis, just prior to Fanny's being sent back to Portsmouth in retribution for refusing Henry's suit.8 Austen uses the letter scene and Fanny's evasive language to highlight the trap in which Fanny is placed in the
With no one else to fall back on, Fanny must write for herself, an ironic situation given her own claims that she "prepared her materials [to write] without knowing what in the world to say!" (307). The performance of Fanny's letter is two fold. Like Marianne's letters, it provides a genuine expression of feeling—here, Fanny's desire for disengagement—while exposing the suitor's lack of "understanding" and good "behave[or]." In addition, like Marianne's letters, Fanny's letter provides a larger critique of women's position in courtship. Fanny's letter and the manual's letters show that a limited form of empowerment is available to women in the letter form: both letter-writers disengage from courtship by rejecting the terms offered to them. Thus, both provide a larger critique of women's limited roles in courtship.

V: Affective Truth as Empowerment in Courtship

From the letter-writing manuals we learn that female self-expression in writing is potentially an empowering activity that women may practice, particularly when disempowered by courtship ritual. Austen and the letter-writing manual editors bank on readers' valuing emotional genuineness over proper conduct. Thus, exceptional behavior by female characters is most sympathetic to readers when it is exemplary of what may well have been considered typical responses to the restraints of courtship ritual: affective solicitation and refusal. Both Marianne's and Fanny's examples stress the heroine's social disempowerment; both Marianne and Fanny choose to write for themselves because they have to do so if they are to extract themselves from painful and constraining courtship situations. The consequences of putting their words and feelings into circulation are registered in both cases. But the consequences of not writing seem potentially even worse. Heroines in desperate straits have to act, but only in ways that reinforce the genuineness and purity of their feelings.

In Austen's novels, as in many of the scenarios invented or represented in The Complete Letter-Writer, letters force the female writer to confront and adapt both social and narrative convention as she attempts to narrate her own emotions in a genuine and productive way. Austen allows us access to her heroines' affective interiors precisely because they struggle with the letter form, understanding its conventions even as they breach them, to varying degrees, in an effort to control courtship. When letters allow heroines to breach social convention in the interest of genuine affective self-presentation, readers are pushed furthest to empathize with that errant female character.

NOTES

1. We chose not to examine Elizabeth Bennet's celebratory letter to her Aunt Gardiner at the end of Pride and Prejudice because Elizabeth's marriage plot has effectively reached a happy conclusion and thus her communication is essentially "safe."

2. Our analysis of these letters suggests that they are notable exceptions to Austen's typical language, as described by Tony Tanner: "If she avoids over-direct expression, excessive and potentially distracting particularity, striking metaphors, too markedly arresting peculiarity and idiosyncrasy of individuation, and tends always towards the conceptual, the general, the communal, the sense and values which should be held 'in common', this is because she is constantly enacting and re-creating a requisite decorum and propriety in her language" (37). These letters are quite direct, particular, and idiosyncratic. Though Tanner sees such moments of direct expression as exceptional because of how rare they are, our comparison to the letter writing manuals suggests that Austen may have wanted readers to see her heroines' written expressions of feeling as typical responses to courtship difficulties.

3. It is often difficult to determine the exact edition dates of letter-writing manuals, as they are reprinted with little or no textual variation but with slightly different titles, in different locations. The Complete Letter-Writer, Containing Familiar Letters, is also titled The Complete Letter-Writer, or Polite English Secretary, Containing Familiar Letters (London, 1775). The London Universal Letter-Writer is published in a "new edition" in 1803; to illustrate the overlapping names of these manuals, The New Universal Letter-Writer is published in a second edition in Philadelphia in 1804 and The New and Complete Universal Letter-Writer authored by Thomas Cooke is published in New York in 1809. The British Letter-Writer is published in London in 1765. The Complete Art of Writing Letters is often listed as authored by Charles Johnson; it reaches a 6th London edition in 1774. The Young Secretary's Guide provides an example of a manual focusing primarily on business letters; its various editions are by John Hill or T. Goodman; it reaches a 24th edition in 1750.

4. Markman Ellis provides an almost identical analysis of the late eighteenth-century letter-writing manual form. He describes the general shift in the form of the manual from consisting primarily of advice for clerks and secretaries in the early eighteenth century to taking on more of the aspect of a conduct manual in the latter half of the century. See Ellis, "Ignatius Sancho's Letters: Sentimental Liberalism and the Politics of Form" (205).

5. A second type of letter-writing manual reprints classical models of letters, including those of Cicero, and letters written by well-known eighteenth-century authors, including Johnson, Pope, and Montague. Two such collections include: Elegant Epistles (London, 1794) and Epistles, Elegant, Familiar & Instructive (London, 1791). The letter-writing manuals that are subject-centered, rather than author-centered, provide a clearer comparison to Austen's commentary on courtship.
6. E.g., the courtship sections of these manuals (no matter its title) often contain the same letter from a suitor to a father seeking permission to court his daughter, the same letter from an aunt giving advice to a coquettish niece, and the same letter from a sailor to his beloved.

7. Even Austen’s own letters seem to produce differing critical interpretations of her power to manipulate others through letters. E.g., in her section on Austen’s letters for the Cambridge Companion to Jane Austen, Carol Houlihan Flynn argues that Austen’s strategic reserve in letters was a way of deflecting notice from her letters. Roger Sales, in his discussion of various critics’ interpretations of Austen’s own surprisingly sharp tone in letters, seems to read the power Austen exerted through letters, in particular in those that contain the notorious examples of her acerbic, even hostile temper, as a way to alternate between keeping and then losing “countenance.” He cites Marilyn Butler’s claim that Austen’s letters were not written to please others but to . . . challenge and, in her private mental universe, to master them.” As Sales points out, ironically her letters turned out to be the way she was most vulnerable to the critique of her family. See “The Letters,” in Cambridge Companion to Jane Austen. Ed. Edward Copeland and Juliet McMaster. New York: Cambridge UP, 1997. 100-114; also, Sales, Jane Austen and Representation in Regency England.

8. See Duckworth’s argument, “As the novel progresses, Fanny moves closer to the center of the house, her inward journey marking her rising worth” (75). Also see Gardiner 160-62.; Wallace 72-74.

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Secondary Sources

accomplishments: she cannot draw and plays the piano only "a little"; but rather than feeling her education "neglected", she counters that "We were always encouraged to read" (Pride and Prejudice, ch. 29). By contrast, Emma Woodhouse has grown up indulged by her governess and in consequence has picked up little real schooling.