

Article

'& Not the Least Wit': Jane Austen's Use of 'Wit'

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Abstract: Jane Austen is celebrated for her wit and wittiness. She famously defended novels in *Northanger Abbey*, for example, on the basis that they display 'the liveliest effusions of wit'. Critics have long been occupied with detailing the implications of Austen's wit, but without due attention to Austen's own explicit deployment of the word within her writing. Offering a re-evaluation of Austen's use of 'wit', this article provides a much-needed examination of how the term is implemented by Austen in her fiction (from her juvenilia, and through her six major novels), contextualises wit's meaning through its seventeenth-, eighteenth-, and nineteenth-century senses, and reveals that 'wit' did not necessarily have the positive connotations often presumed in modern suppositions. It transpires that, seemingly paradoxically, Austen routinely adopts the label 'wit' ironically to expose an absence of true wit, whilst concurrently avoiding the application of the word in moments displaying true wit. This article argues for the need to understand the crucial distinction between wit and true wit in Austen's fiction.

Keywords: Jane Austen; wit; wittiness; witticisms; Thomas Hobbes; John Dryden; John Locke; Joseph Addison; Richard Steele; Alexander Pope; Samuel Johnson; William Hazlitt; juvenilia; *Northanger Abbey*; *Sense and Sensibility*; *Pride and Prejudice*; *Mansfield Park*; *Emma*; *Persuasion*; *Plan of a Novel*

Introduction

Austen championed wit. It is a truth universally acknowledged. Her brother, Henry Austen, described her as possessing 'the keenest relish for wit' (H. Austen [1817] 2006, p. 329). More recently, in 2013, Mark Carney, Governor of the Bank of England, in a speech given at Jane Austen's House Museum, Chawton, explained that she 'merits her place' on the new ten-pound note because her 'sharp wit . . . has ensured her place among the country's favourite authors' (Carney 2013, p. 2). The epithet 'witty' is frequently applied to her heroines too. In an introduction to *Pride and Prejudice* (1813), for instance, Fiona Stafford describes 'Elizabeth's witty intelligence' (Stafford 2008, p. xix). There is much truth to this, but we might also remember that, within the novel itself, the only character who explicitly applauds Elizabeth Bennet's 'wit' is Mr Collins (*Pride and Prejudice*, J. Austen 2006d, pp. 98, 119).¹ Other characters refer to Elizabeth's 'quickness' and 'liveliness'.² It is, in fact, Caroline Bingley to whom the word 'wit' is most frequently applied within the novel. Austen's satirical *Plan of a Novel, According to Hints from Various Quarters* (written between November 1815 and April 1816) archly proclaims that a 'Heroine' must be 'a faultless Character herself', who is 'perfectly good' and therefore has 'not the least Wit' (*Later Manuscripts*, J. Austen 2008, p. 226). We know that perfect faultlessness in a heroine made Austen 'sick & wicked', but should a heroine, or indeed a hero, really have no wit?³

Many critics have examined the implications of Austen's and her characters' wittiness, but have assumed the meaning of the word 'wit' without full interrogation.⁴ In the long eighteenth century, in an attempt to cognize and rationalise its myriad disparate connotations, the definition of the term 'wit' was much debated and policed.⁵ Histories of long-eighteenth-century wit demonstrate its imperative significance to the period's intellectual and literary context.⁶ What remains to be clarified and articulated, however, is Austen's understanding of the term, and therefore why and how she deployed the word 'wit' within



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her novels in the way that she did. Hitherto, Austen's utilisation of the word 'wit' as it appears in her fiction has never been subject to a detailed analysis. This is a considerable gap in critical scholarship, given the centrality of wittiness to Austen's novels and to many readers' appreciation of her writing. This article overturns accepted understandings of Austenian 'wit' by demonstrating that, within Austen's lexicon, the word does not have the positive associations that critics have often assumed. In this essay, I survey the development of the term 'wit' in its seventeenth-, eighteenth-, and nineteenth-century conceptions in order to illuminate what 'true Wit' (in Joseph Addison's phrase) might be.⁷ I examine how the word 'wit' is employed within Austen's novels; and contextualise the usage of the term as a designation of insincere language, common-place banality, antagonism, and false cleverness. Habitually in Austen's diction, what is categorised as 'wit' in the novels is, with wonderful irony, in fact a failure of true wit.

Contextualising Wit

"A Propriety of Thoughts and Words . . . Elegantly Adapted to the Subject"

In his 'Life of Cowley' (1779), Samuel Johnson adroitly summarises the problem for the semantic-historiographer when it comes to defining 'wit': 'Wit, like all other things subject by their nature to the choice of man, has its changes and fashions, and at different times takes different forms' (Johnson [1779] 2014, p. 199). The multiplicity of interpretations is evident in the apparently contradictory designations ascribed to the term in Johnson's *Dictionary of the English Language* (1755). According to Johnson, on the one hand, 'Wit' is a mental faculty, sense, judgment, a sound mind, intellects; and on the other hand, it is also imagination or quickness of fancy; as well as the sentiments and expressions produced. Charting the various definitions of the polyvalent term, and the connotations the word accumulated over time, allows us to contextualise the word's sense in the period when Austen was writing and publishing.

Thomas Hobbes in *Leviathan* (1651), in a section considering 'the Virtues Commonly Called Intellectual; and Their Contrary Defects', observed that 'by virtues INTELLECTUAL, are always understood such abilities of the mind, as men praise, value, and desire should be in themselves; and go commonly under the name of a *good wit*' (Hobbes [1651] 1998, p. 45). This understanding of wit, as intellectual prowess, is what Johnson would later deem 'the original signification' (Johnson 1755). 'Natural wit', Hobbes continues, is '*celerity of imagining* (that is, swift succession of one thought to another)', or 'quickness' of perception, which is opposed to 'a slow imagination . . . commonly called DULLNESS, *stupidity*, and sometimes by other names that signify slowness of motion' (Hobbes [1651] 1998, p. 45). Originality is also integral, since the unusual linking of ideas, observing 'similitudes . . . such as are but rarely observed by others', is '*good wit*' (Hobbes [1651] 1998, p. 45).

While Hobbes identified 'quickness' as the root of wit, John Dryden, in 'The Authors Apology for Heroique Poetry; and Poetique Licence' (1677), focussed on expression and propriety: 'From that which has been said, it may be collected, that the definition of Wit (which has been so often attempted, and ever unsuccessfully by many Poets) is only this: That it is a propriety of Thoughts and Words; or in other terms, Thoughts and Words, elegantly adapted to the Subject' (Dryden 1677, p. xii). Later, in his preface to *Sylvæ* (1685), Dryden elaborated that delight and pleasure were the natural ends of good wit: where 'thoughts and words . . . are proper they will be delightful' and 'Pleasure follows of necessity as the effect does the cause' (Dryden 1685, p. ix). Johnson quotes Dryden to elucidate his third definition of wit, 'Sentiments produced by quickness of fancy' (Johnson 1755). Dryden's conception was later cogently reformulated by Alexander Pope, in *An Essay on Criticism* (1711), as '*True Wit*' is 'What oft was *Thought*, but ne'er so well *Express*' (ll.297–98; Pope [1711] 1961–1969). Exceptional '*True Wit*' is distinct from everyday conversational wittiness, which demands only quick thought and easy expression. Pope remarks, in a witty assemblage of disparate ideas in 'Thoughts on Various Subjects' (1727), that:

WIT in Conversation is only a readiness of Thought and a facility of Expression, or (in the Midwives Phrase) a quick Conception and an easy Delivery. (Pope 1727, p. 350)

For Hobbes, a quick and ready fancy could not rescue wit from the jaws of inappropriateness:

And in any discourse whatsoever, if the defect of discretion be apparent, how extravagant soever the fancy be, the whole discourse will be taken for a sign of want of wit[.] . . . The secret thoughts of a man run over all things, holy, prophane, clean, obscene, grave, and light, without shame, or blame; which verbal discourse cannot do, farther than the judgement shall approve of the time, place, and persons. . . . So that where wit is wanting, it is not fancy that is wanting, but discretion. (Hobbes [1651] 1998, p. 47)

Including Hobbes' requirement of discretion, we might revise Dryden's definition to include good wit adapting to the occasion—'time, place, and persons'—as well as the subject-matter.

John Locke, writing towards the end of the seventeenth century in *An Essay Concerning Human Understanding* (1690), vis-à-vis 'Of Discerning, and other Operations of the Mind', moved away from considering wit in relation to expression, as Dryden had done, and argued that wit differed from judgement and reason. 'Judgment', for Locke—drawing on Hobbes—concerns distinctions, and 'Wit' similitudes:

Men who have a great deal of Wit, and prompt Memories, have not always the clearest Judgment, or deepest Reason. For *Wit* lying most in the assemblage of *Ideas*, and putting those together with quickness and variety, wherein can be found any resemblance or congruity, thereby to make up pleasant Pictures, and agreeable Visions in the Fancy: *Judgment*, on the contrary, lies quite on the other side, in separating carefully *Ideas* one from another . . . This is a way of proceeding quite contrary to Metaphor and Allusion, wherein, for the most part, lies that entertainment and pleasantry of Wit, which strikes so lively on the Fancy; and [is] therefore so acceptable to all People, because its Beauty appears at first sight, and there is required no labour of thought, to examine what Truth or Reason there is in it. (Locke 1690, Book II, ch.xi, p. 68)

Johnson quotes Locke to illustrate his second meaning of wit, 'Imagination; quickness of fancy' (Johnson 1755).

'NOTHING is so much admired and so little understood as Wit' opined Joseph Addison in May 1711.⁸ In an attempt to get to the bottom of the term's meaning, Addison dedicated a week of *Spectator* essays (nos. 58–63, 7–12 May 1711) to defining wit, classifying it into high True Wit, concerning ideas, and low False Wit, involving merely language (that is, expression only). Allan Ramsay would later grumble, in *An Essay on Ridicule* (1753), in line with Addison's account, that 'Much of that sort of cunning nonsense, usually called wit, owes its being to the corruption and abuse of language' (Ramsay 1753, p. 11). Addison rejects Dryden's characterisation, arguing that it 'is not so properly a Definition of Wit, as of good Writing in general'.⁹ He does, however, retain Dryden's notion that wit should 'delight', and adds this to Locke's articulation, which Addison deems to be 'the best and most philosophical Account that I have ever met with of Wit'—he quotes the passage above in *Spectator* no. 62 (11 May 1711)—adding 'That every Resemblance of Ideas is not that which we call Wit, unless it be such an one that gives *Delight* and *Surprize* to the Reader: These two Properties seem essential to Wit' (Dryden 1685, p. ix; Locke 1690, p. 68; Addison and Steele 1987, vol. 1, p. 264). Addison does reject Locke's claim, however, that 'Wit' does not necessarily abide 'by the severe Rules of Truth, and good Reason' (Locke 1690, p. 68). Ultimately, for Addison, 'the Basis of all Wit is Truth; and that no Thought can be valuable, of which good Sense is not the Ground-work'.¹⁰ Pope, like Addison, articulated that 'good Sense . . . common Sense' should not be sacrificed 'In search of Wit' (*Essay on Criticism*, ll.25–28, Pope [1711] 1961–1969). Addison had argued that Abraham Cowley 'abounds' in a kind of 'mixt Wit', which consists 'partly in the Resemblance of Ideas, and partly in the

Resemblance of Words'.¹¹ In considering the conceits of the metaphysical poets, particularly Cowley, Johnson required that justness between the resemblances—or in Hobbes's term 'similitudes'—must also be a feature of wit. Where the 'most heterogeneous ideas are yoked by violence together' without sense, this should not be regarded as sound wit:

If by a more noble and more adequate conception that be considered as Wit, which is at once natural and new, that which, though not obvious, is, upon its first production, acknowledged to be just; if it be that, which he that never found it, wonders how he missed; to wit of this kind the metaphysical poets have seldom risen. Their thoughts are often new, but seldom natural; they are not obvious, but neither are they just; and the reader, far from wondering that he missed them, wonders more frequently by what perverseness of industry they were ever found. (Johnson [1779] 2014, p. 200)

The fact that the 'new' conceit, or piece of wit, is 'not obvious', but is immediately recognised as being 'just' and 'natural', is what produces the 'Surprise' and 'Delight' that Addison added to Locke's understanding of wit.

Amalgamating these definitions, then, a working understanding of the polysemantic term 'wit', in its eighteenth-century guise, might be a quick and ingenious assemblage of ideas, expressed with elegantly adapted diction, comprising truth, good sense, discretion, and aptness.

"Wit, as Distinguished from Poetry": Romantic Wit

By the Regency period, however, the term 'wit' had descended somewhat from these lofty heights. Romantic poet John Keats, in a letter to his brothers in 1817, remarked, of a dull evening spent in modish company, that it served to convince him 'how superior humour is to wit in respect to enjoyment—These men say things which make one start, without making one feel, they are all alike; their manners are alike; they all know fashionables'.¹² For Keats, 'humour' and 'wit' are distinct; people of 'wit' are mere trivial 'fashionables', concerned with 'manners' above 'feel[ings]', whose aim in speaking is simply to shock listeners (rather than to delight them as propounded by Dryden and Addison). The fact that 'they are all alike' in what they 'say' implies that 'wit' had become associated with fashionable conformity and display rather than sound and original thinking.

The word 'wit' had acquired, by the nineteenth century, an additional connotation of essential anti-poeticism; evident, for example, in William Hazlitt's essay 'On Wit and Humour' (1819). Poeticism here meaning Wordsworthian 'elevated thoughts; [and] a sense sublime' (*Tintern Abbey*, l.96, Wordsworth [1798] 1992, p. 118). 'Wit', according to Hazlitt, upends what is valuable (the poetic) by distracting one with 'mean', 'light and worthless' trivialities that 'make the little look less' (Hazlitt 1819, p. 23). The effect of wit is 'to divert our admiration or wean our affections from that which is lofty and impressive, instead of producing a more intense admiration and exalted passion, as poetry does' (Hazlitt 1819, p. 23). For Hazlitt, high seriousness is incompatible with wit: 'Wit hovers round the borders of the light and trifling, whether in matters of pleasure or pain; for as soon as it describes the serious seriously, it ceases to be wit, and passes into a different form' (Hazlitt 1819, p. 23).

The anti-poetic strain to Romantic conceptions of wit might explain Mary Cooke's aversion to the idea of an unfeeling witty heroine. In Austen's *Plan of a Novel*, it had been Mary Cooke, a distant relative, who desired that novels' protagonists have 'much tenderness & sentiment, & not the least Wit' (*Later Manuscripts*, J. Austen 2008, p. 226). As with Keats and Hazlitt, the two—wit and feeling—are presented as though they were mutually exclusive. That which is labelled as 'Wit' should be rejected not only in the heroine herself, but she should rebuff it in her friends too:

The heroine's friendship to be sought after by a young Woman in the same Neighbourhood, of Talents & Shrewdness . . . but having a considerable degree of Wit, Heroine shall shrink from the acquaintance. (*Later Manuscripts*, J. Austen 2008, p. 227)

This could be a precis of Mary Crawford's and Fanny Price's relationship in *Mansfield Park* (1814), and perhaps explains why Mary Cooke 'Admired Fanny in general' (*Later Manuscripts*, J. Austen 2008, p. 232). The ideal heroine, moreover, should 'converse' in 'a tone of high, serious sentiment' (*Later Manuscripts*, J. Austen 2008, p. 226). And if we accept Hazlitt's demarcations, high seriousness can never take the form of wit. Austen might reject the distinction between wit and high seriousness, subsequently articulated by Hazlitt, and assumed by Mary Cooke, but be sensitive to the language. In other words, Austen embraces the high and serious concept of true wit, as articulated by Hobbes, Dryden, Locke, Addison, Pope, Johnson et al., but simultaneously avoids what the word 'Wit' had come to denote by the Regency period.

'Wit' in Austen

Austen's Use of "The Original Signification"

Turning to Austen's fiction. Austen does occasionally use 'the original signification' of 'Wit', as defined by Johnson: 'The powers of the mind; the mental faculties; the intellects' (Johnson 1755). Mr Knightley in *Emma* (1816), for instance, refers straightforwardly to Harriet Smith's 'little wit' (*Emma*, J. Austen 2005a, p. 64). In *Northanger Abbey* (1818), practical 'philosophic' Mrs Morland, after Catherine's adventures at the abbey, has these words of comfort: 'you always were a sad little shatter-brained creature; but now you must have been forced to have your wits about you' (*Northanger Abbey*, J. Austen 2006b, p. 243). Earlier in the novel, albeit as part of a playful conversation, Henry Tilney includes, among 'sound ... acute ... vigorous ... keen' mental 'abilities', 'observation, discernment, judgment, fire, genius, and wit' (*Northanger Abbey*, J. Austen 2006b, p. 114). Such straightforwardly positive deployments of the term 'wit', however, are rare in Austen.

When the intellectual powers of the mind are utilised for duplicity, 'wit' acquires connotations of Johnson's eighth definition: 'Contrivance; stratagem' (Johnson 1755). *Northanger Abbey's* General Tilney, for example, is assumed by Catherine to have 'certainly too much wit' not to get away with murdering his wife (*Northanger Abbey*, J. Austen 2006b, p. 199). The term 'wit', then, can suggest scheming and deception—a mis-use of the mind, however effective it might be in achieving its ends. Fanny Dashwood, in *Sense and Sensibility* (1811), similarly uses her cunning 'wit' for subterfuge: 'Fanny, rejoicing in her escape [from hosting Elinor and Marianne Dashwood], and proud of the ready wit that had procured it, wrote the next morning to Lucy [Steele]' (*Sense and Sensibility*, J. Austen 2006e, p. 287).

In Austen's novels, as in the two previous examples, the term 'wit' is generally applied pejoratively; and usually in a moment of a character's showing-off or self-aggrandising, thoughtlessly causing pain, revealing dullness, or exposing aggression. Failing, in other words, to abide by Hobbes' injection that virtuous 'Wit' requires 'steady direction to some approved end' (Hobbes [1651] 1998, p. 45).

Social Display

"Wit and Vivacity", "Bonmots and Repartees", versus "Plain" Speaking

Mary Cooke's notion of an ideal heroine seems to accord with the terms in which Squire Allworthy, in Henry Fielding's *Tom Jones* (1749), praises Sophia Western: 'I never heard anything of pertness, or what is called repartee, out of her mouth; no pretence to wit' (Fielding [1749] 2020, Book 17, Ch.3, p. 779). The irony, of course, is that Sophia is intelligent, articulate, and makes apt comparisons. She wittily argues, for example, that she would 'never ... consent to any marriage contrary to [her father's] inclinations', and so hopes that likewise 'he will never force me into that state contrary to my own' (Fielding [1749] 2020, Book 7, Ch.3, p. 290). But Squire Allworthy's associations of 'wit', 'pertness', and 'repartee', help to elucidate what the appellation might imply. Similarly, half a century later, Thomas Gisborne in *An Enquiry into the Duties of the Female Sex* (1797)—a text which Austen read and was 'pleased with' in 1805—approved of spirited conversation provided it was not insincere or unkind, but warned against any concomitant 'thirst for admiration and applause'.¹³ Whilst 'gay vivacity and quickness of imagination' were 'acknowledged' to be

‘superior’ ‘qualities’, these should not lead ‘to an unreasonable regard for wit’ (Gisborne 1797, p. 34). Gisborne refers scathingly to that ‘flippancy and pertness’ which is falsely ‘denominated wit’ (Gisborne 1797, p. 94).

Elizabeth Bennet receives ‘a compliment on her wit’ explicitly within the text (*Pride and Prejudice*, J. Austen 2006d, p. 98). In fact, she receives it repeatedly from Mr Collins: ‘she observed his increasing civilities towards herself, and heard his frequent attempt at a compliment on her wit and vivacity’ (*Pride and Prejudice*, J. Austen 2006d, p. 98). He even repeats this ‘compliment’ verbatim in his proposal to her:

your wit and vivacity I think must be acceptable to her [Lady Catherine], especially when tempered with the silence and respect which her rank will inevitably excite. (*Pride and Prejudice*, J. Austen 2006d, p. 119)

By quoting him using the exact phrase twice, Austen is proving, ironically, his own lack of wit, of original thought. Mr Collins’s intellectual powers are called into question here, as throughout the novel. He imagines that ‘wit and vivacity’, paradoxically, will be good bedfellows with ‘silence’, and does not appear to notice the contradiction. Mr Collins clearly imagines his ‘compliment’ is a ‘civilit[y]’, a social politeness. It is as if Mr Collins supposes that to be witty and vivacious is what all elegant folks seek to be, and so reiterates the epithet. We remember that Mr Collins—in a perverse parody of Drydenian wit—admits, ‘I sometimes amuse myself with suggesting and arranging such little elegant compliments as may be adapted to ordinary occasions’ (*Pride and Prejudice*, J. Austen 2006d, p. 76).

Elsewhere in Austen’s fiction, the terms ‘wit’ and ‘vivacity’, are similarly deployed as tags for the wannabe elegant. The narrative voice in *Emma* archly ascribes the same seeming compliments to Mrs Elton:

Mr. Elton made his appearance. His lady greeted him with some of her sparkling vivacity . . . Mr. Elton was so hot and tired, that all this wit seemed thrown away. (*Emma*, J. Austen 2005a, pp. 498–99)

The dry, sarcastic tone of the narrative voice is increased given that the terminology seems to come from Mrs Elton’s own perspective. Charlotte Millar, in *The Female Philosopher* (composed c.1793), receives the same, conventional, praise from Arabella Smythe: ‘her face is expressive . . . of Vivacity the most striking. She appears to have infinite Wit’ (*Juvenilia*, J. Austen 2006a, p. 216). Vivacious wittiness, in this form, is aligned with a certain kind of language and expression, with *bon mots* and *repartees*. Charlotte Millar’s ‘conversation . . . was replete with humorous Sallies, Bonmots and repartees’ (*Juvenilia*, J. Austen 2006a, p. 216). Margaret Lesley in *Lesley Castle* (written c. spring 1792) similarly complements herself and her sister on their wittiness, writing ‘there never were two more lively, more agreeable or more witty Girls, than we are’, and that their conversation is infused with ‘smart bon-mot, and witty repartee’ (*Juvenilia*, J. Austen 2006a, p. 144). Furthermore, Margaret continues, ‘the greatest of our Perfections is, that we are entirely insensible of them ourselves’ (*Juvenilia*, J. Austen 2006a, p. 144). Her dearth of intellect, a foundational requirement of proper wit, is evident in Margaret’s ridiculous lack of sense and self-awareness. She is also absurdly unfeeling: ‘How often have I wished that I possessed as little personal Beauty as you do; that my figure were as inelegant; my face as unlovely; and my Appearance as unpleasing as yours!’ (*Juvenilia*, J. Austen 2006a, p. 172).

According to the *Oxford English Dictionary*, a *bon mot* is ‘A clever or witty saying; a witticism, repartee’. In his *Dictionary*, Johnson defines ‘Repartee’ as a ‘Smart reply’, and pointedly uses Dryden’s quotation from Du Fresnoy’s *Art of Painting* (1695) to expose his low assessment of the term, that it is merely ‘fools’ and ‘the intended wits’ who ‘overflowed with smart *repartees*’ (Du Fresnoy 1695, p. xxxix; Johnson 1755). An ‘intended wit’ is one who seeks to be celebrated as witty by society. Edmund Bertram, applauded by Fanny Price, and in contrast to Mary Crawford, scorns such performative wittiness in *Mansfield Park*. Mary Crawford imagines that Edmund might intend a pun on the word ‘wilderness’, and ‘forestall[s]’ him, to which Edmund responds:

You need not hurry when the object is only to prevent my saying a bon-mot, for there is not the least wit in my nature. 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. (*Mansfield Park*, J. Austen 2005b, p. 109)

Edmund's deployment of the same diction verbatim as Mary Cooke had used, 'not the least wit', clarifies how we are to interpret the phrase. In this conception, 'wit' is primarily aligned with *bon mots* and repartee, and put in opposition to sincere, matter-of-fact plain speaking.

In *Northanger Abbey*, meanwhile, the term 'wit' is used in relation to dullard John Thorpe's absurd boasts:

Catherine listened with astonishment; she knew not how to reconcile two such very different accounts of the same thing; for she had not been brought up to understand the propensities of a rattle, nor to know to how many idle assertions and impudent falsehoods the excess of vanity will lead. Her own family were plain matter-of-fact people, who seldom aimed at wit of any kind . . . they were not in the habit therefore of telling lies to increase their importance, or of asserting at one moment what they would contradict the next. (*Northanger Abbey*, J. Austen 2006b, p. 62)

Even in this early novel, where Austen's playfulness abounds, sincere 'plain matter-of-fact people' are again contrasted with those who 'aimed at wit'. Talk which aims 'at wit' in polite society involves 'idle assertions', 'telling lies', and 'contradict[ing]' oneself, only to increase the speaker's social 'importance'. This neglects an imperative element of proper wit: truth. Wit and plain-speaking are not antithetical to one another, but each has their moment of appropriateness. In the words of Pope,

As Shades more sweetly recommend the Light,
So modest Plainness sets off sprightly Wit

(*Essay on Criticism*, ll.301–02, Pope [1711] 1961–1969)

Even lively Elizabeth Bennet recognises the value of plain-speaking. Following her refusal of him, Mr Collins retreats into the notion that Elizabeth's 'wit and vivacity' mean that she speaks in repartees: 'your refusal of my addresses are merely words of course' (*Pride and Prejudice*, J. Austen 2006d, p. 121). Offended, Elizabeth responds that she speaks plainly and means what she says:

I do assure you, Sir, that I have no pretension whatever to that kind of elegance which consists in tormenting a respectable man. I would rather be paid the compliment of being believed sincere . . . Can I speak plainer? Do not consider me now as an elegant female intending to plague you, but as a rational creature speaking the truth from her heart. (*Pride and Prejudice*, J. Austen 2006d, p. 122)

In contrast, Caroline Bingley, in her interactions with Mr Darcy, might have 'pretension[s] . . . to that kind of elegance which consists in tormenting a respectable man'. She might imagine herself to be 'an elegant female' who 'intend[s]' wittily 'to plague' him as part of a social dance. But Elizabeth would rather be 'paid the compliment of being believed sincere' than be paid 'a compliment on her wit'.

Conservative Hannah More, in *Strictures on the Modern System of Female Education* (1799), had railed against the so-called elegance of vivacious wittiness, arguing of young women that:

Instead of hearing their bon-mots treasured up and repeated . . . they should be accustomed to receive but little praise for their vivacity or their wit, though they should receive just commendation for their patience, their industry, their humility, and other qualities which have more worth than splendour. (*More 1799*, vol. 1, p. 142)

In the character of Elizabeth Bennet, Austen is not adopting a rejection of wit along such traditionalist, gendered, lines. For More, 'wit' should be tempered because women should

‘distrust their own judgment’, patiently and humbly acquiescing to ‘expostulation’ and ‘opposition’ (More 1799, vol. 1, p. 142). Elizabeth Bennet, on the other hand, does not reject Mr Collins’s ‘compliment on her wit’ because she distrusts her judgement or values passive compliance, but because she interprets vivacious wittiness to be antithetical to being a ‘sincere’ ‘rational creature’—note the gender neutrality of ‘creature’—who is confident of the ‘truth’ she is ‘speaking’.

Elsewhere in Austen’s fiction the term ‘wit’ is associated with public display, competition, and social manoeuvring. In *Emma*, Mr Knightley means it as a compliment that ‘Cole does not want to be wiser or wittier than his neighbours’, in response to which Emma insults Mrs Elton by remarking that she, competitively, ‘wants to be wiser and wittier than all the world!’ (*Emma*, J. Austen 2005a, p. 311). The use of ‘wit’ as a tool of social control is evident in the opening of *Persuasion* (1818) where Mr Shepherd, Sir Walter Elliot’s agent, is aware that he is required to laugh at Sir Walter’s witticisms. Trying to persuade Sir Walter to let Kellynch Hall, Mr Shepherd says:

‘If a rich Admiral were to come in our way, Sir Walter—’

‘He would be a very lucky man, Shepherd,’ replied Sir Walter, ‘that’s all I have to remark. A prize indeed would Kellynch Hall be to him; rather the greatest prize of all, let him have taken ever so many before; hey, Shepherd?’

Mr. Shepherd laughed, as he knew he must, at this wit. (*Persuasion*, J. Austen 2006c, p. 19)

The bitter tone—Mr Shepherd laughs only because ‘he knew he must’, not because he is genuinely amused—exposes ‘wit’ as a mere vehicle for exerting social power over others. The term ‘wit’ here, ironically, calls attention to a moment of *unfunny*ness.

Painful Want of Penetration

“Their Witticisms Added Pain”

Aiming at wit is elsewhere shown to be in the pursuit of merriment rather than self-aggrandisement. Elizabeth Bennet is introduced to the reader through her father’s reference to her ‘quickness’ (*Pride and Prejudice*, J. Austen 2006d, p. 5). As evident in the definitions by Hobbes, Locke, Addison, and Johnson, ‘quickness’ had long been synonymous with ‘Wit’. But that Mr Bennet values ‘quickness’ in Elizabeth perhaps reveals more about him than about her. Added to quickness, for true wit one should also have good judgement, good understanding, and good sense. Pope jokes that:

For Wit and Judgment often are at strife,

Tho’ meant each other’s Aid, like Man and Wife.

(*Essay on Criticism*, ll.82–83, Pope [1711] 1961–1969)

Richard Steele put it more strongly in the *Spectator* no. 422 (4 July 1712), that ‘great Wit’ must be ‘accompanied with that Quality (without which a Man can have no Wit at all) a sound Judgment’ (Addison and Steele 1987, vol. 3, p. 583). Mr Bennet’s raillery on receiving Mr Collins’s news of a presumed union between Elizabeth and Mr Darcy is classified in the text as ‘wit’, but ‘Never had his wit been directed in a manner so little agreeable to her’ (*Pride and Prejudice*, J. Austen 2006d, p. 402). Mr Bennet continues even when he perceives that Elizabeth is ‘not diverted’ (*Pride and Prejudice*, J. Austen 2006d, p. 403). The effect of Mr Bennet’s ‘wit’ is not dissimilar to Sir John Middleton’s and Mrs Jennings’s ‘witticisms’ in ‘add[ing] pain to many a painful hour’ (*Sense and Sensibility*, J. Austen 2006e, p. 98). Mr Bennet might imagine that he is being very witty, but actually he is causing his daughter anguish, even if unintentionally: ‘Her father had most cruelly mortified her, by what he said of Mr. Darcy’s indifference, and she could do nothing but wonder at such a want of penetration’ (*Pride and Prejudice*, J. Austen 2006d, p. 404). Mr Bennet might be quick, but his ‘wit’ in fact reveals his ‘want of penetration’, a lack of judgment, Hobbes’s ‘defect of discretion’ that is ‘a sign of want of wit’ (Hobbes [1651] 1998, p. 47).

Two of Austen's most determined merrymaking wits are *Sense and Sensibility's* Mrs Jennings and Sir John Middleton. Sir John is full of 'boisterous mirth', and readers are introduced to Mrs Jennings as:

a good-humoured, merry, fat, elderly woman, who talked a great deal, seemed very happy, and rather vulgar. She was full of jokes and laughter, and before dinner was over had said many witty things on the subject of lovers and husbands. (*Sense and Sensibility*, J. Austen 2006e, pp. 40, 41)

Mrs Jennings 'said many witty things' according to whom? According to herself, and Sir John Middleton, presumably. Certainly not to the Dashwood women. Apparent wittiness is again associated with insincerity as she 'pretended to see them blush whether they did or not' (*Sense and Sensibility*, J. Austen 2006e, p. 40). A 'Witticism' according to Johnson is 'A mean attempt at wit' ('mean' in the sense of 'Low-minded; base'); the word 'attempt' suggests that it in fact falls short of real 'wit' (Johnson 1755). Although her introduction makes Mrs Jennings appear harmless, her so-called witty comments cause pain for the Dashwood sisters. After Willoughby's desertion of Marianne, for instance:

It was several days before Willoughby's name was mentioned before Marianne by any of her family; Sir John and Mrs. Jennings, indeed, were not so nice; their witticisms added pain to many a painful hour. (*Sense and Sensibility*, J. Austen 2006e, p. 98)

As with Mr Bennet, their lack of perception about the impact of their 'witticisms'—they intend jocularity but cause suffering—exposes their limitations. In the words of Fanny Burney's Lord Orville from *Evelina* (1778), 'wit without judgment', whether consciously or unconsciously, will 'generally give as much pain as pleasure' (Burney [1778] 2020, [Letter XX] p. 83). Indelicacy masquerading as 'wit' is frequently the term applied when appropriate boundaries are overstepped, causing painful embarrassment for those who have private concerns exposed to public examination. Mrs Jennings and Sir John might imagine that their 'wit' is mere harmless folly for them to amuse themselves, just the *bon mots*, repartee, and raillery of supposedly polite society—although Lady Middleton cannot bear it; she had a 'great dislike of all such inelegant subjects of raillery as delighted her husband and mother' (*Sense and Sensibility*, J. Austen 2006e, p. 72)—but the reader is made to see otherwise. In line with what Mary Poovey calls their 'superficial urbanities', Mrs Jennings and Sir John clearly see 'wit' and 'raillery' as a playful contest 'sprung' 'against' others in their company:

With the assistance of his mother-in-law, Sir John was not long in discovering that the name of Ferrars began with an F. and this prepared a future mine of raillery against the devoted Elinor. (Poovey 1984, p. 188; *Sense and Sensibility*, J. Austen 2006e, p. 114)

'The letter F', furthermore is 'found productive of such countless jokes, that its character as the wittiest letter in the alphabet had been long established with Elinor' (*Sense and Sensibility*, J. Austen 2006e, p. 144). In the absurdity of the idea that one letter can be wittier than another, and in the inanity of a letter being the source of myriad jests, readers understand that the pair indulge in the kind of linguistic 'false Wit' of mere wordplay that Addison denounces in the *Spectator* no.61 (10 May 1711) (Addison and Steele 1987, vol. 1, p. 259). The dry aside by the narrative voice showing that Elinor has long been bored by their 'wit', exposes the pair's failure to provoke the delight and surprise necessary for true wit.

If we accept J. R. Firth's observation that 'You shall know a word by the company it keeps', then we can better understand how to 'know' the meaning of the word 'wit' by other words it is associated with (Firth 1957, p. 11). In the paragraphs describing the 'wit' of Mrs Jennings's teasing of Colonel Brandon and Marianne, for example, the accompanying words reveal how we might understand the term: 'endless jokes', 'laughed at', 'raillery', 'absurdity', 'impertinence', and 'wishing to throw ridicule' (*Sense and Sensibility*, J. Austen 2006e, p. 144).

Dullness

“Every Common-Place Phrase by Which Wit Is Intended”

What might once have been ingenious and witty is rendered dull through repetition. Marianne objects to Sir John’s overworn apparent witticisms:

‘I abhor every common-place phrase by which wit is intended; and “setting one’s cap at a man,” or “making a conquest,” are the most odious of all . . . if their construction could ever be deemed clever, time has long ago destroyed all its ingenuity.’

Sir John did not much understand this reproof; but he laughed as heartily as if he did. (*Sense and Sensibility*, J. Austen 2006e, pp. 53–54)

That Sir John does not understand Marianne’s complaint exposes his lack of intellectual abilities, his paucity of ‘wit’ in its ‘original signification’ (Johnson 1755). Elsewhere, the text refers to ‘such common-place raillery as Mrs. Jennings’s’ (*Sense and Sensibility*, J. Austen 2006e, p. 40). Anne Toner observes, in a discussion particularly related to Elizabeth Bennet, that the exact moment where wit becomes banality is hard to determine (Toner 2020, p. 112). Sayings that at first had amazed whole rooms with their brilliancy become mere commonplaces endlessly retold. The ‘eclat of a proverb’ might have its social uses—Mr Musgrave in *The Watsons* (written c.1804–5), for example, ‘had a great deal to say, and though with no wit himself, could sometimes make use of the wit of an absent friend; and had a lively way of retailing a commonplace, or saying a mere nothing, that had great effect at a card table’—but it is hardly good conversation (*Pride and Prejudice*, J. Austen 2006d, p. 103; *Later Manuscripts*, J. Austen 2008, p. 131). It is, furthermore, obviously not true wit, given that ‘good wit’ had long been associated with making ‘rare’ observations (Hobbes [1651] 1998, p. 45). ‘Surprize’, we remember, is, according to Addison, ‘essential to Wit’.¹⁴ Oft-uttered, conventional common-places, that have been retold to the point of dullness and stupidity, and have only been assigned the sobriquet ‘Wit’, do not meet the necessary criteria for true wit. Austen observes such a distinction—stupid commonplace nonsense as opposed to true wit—in her wry recollection of an evening in April 1805, spent enduring the kind of common-place talk described in *Sense and Sensibility*: ‘There was a monstrous deal of stupid quizzing, & common-place nonsense talked, but scarcely any Wit;—all that border’d on it, or on Sense came from my Cousin George, whom altogether I like very well’.¹⁵

Aggression

“The Evening Was Spent in a Sort of War of Wit”

In addition to denoting oft-repeated banal common-places, the term ‘Wit’ was simultaneously applied to a certain kind of social battling. Pope’s famous exclamation, in his preface to the *Works* (1717), that ‘The life of a Wit is a warfare upon earth’ lived on (Pope 1717, p. iv). Such ‘Wit’ implies hostility, antagonism, unpleasantness, unkindness. In *MacFlecknoe* (1682), Dryden had decreed that it is only in ‘the realms of Nonsense’ and ‘true dullness’ that inhabitants ‘wage immortal war with wit’, ‘Ne’er to have peace with wit, nor truce with sense’ (l.6, l.115, l.12, l.117; Dryden [1682] 2003). To be ‘Witty’, according to one definition in Johnson’s *Dictionary*, is to be insulting: ‘Sarcastick; full of taunts’ (Johnson 1755). Similarly, Henry Fielding, in *The Covent-Garden Journal* no.4 (14 January 1752) could joke, in his popular ‘A Modern Glossary’, of wit’s modern connotations of abusiveness:

WIT. Prophaneness, Indecency, Immorality, Scurrility, Mimickry, Buffoonery. Abuse of all good Men. (Fielding [1752] 1988, p. 38)¹⁶

From Austen’s early juvenilia, we encounter ‘wit’ being associated with social combat. Making a ‘very witty answer’, in *Lesley Castle*, is aligned with being ‘very severe’, ‘and extremely satirical’ in ‘pubic’ (*Juvenilia*, J. Austen 2006a, p. 166). In ‘LETTER the THIRD From A young Lady in distress’d Circumstances to her freind’ (written c. autumn 1792),

Lady Greville wields her ‘wit’ against the heroine, Maria Williams, in order to demean her socially:

Miss Greville laughed excessively, as she constantly does at her Mother’s wit.

Such is the humiliating Situation in which I am forced to appear while riding in her Ladyship’s Coach—I dare not be impertinent, as my Mother is always admonishing me to be humble and patient . . . She [Lady Greville] was determined to mortify me. (*Juvenilia*, J. Austen 2006a, pp. 199–200)

Meanwhile in *The Watsons*, a ‘witty smile’ is the preface to combative ‘raillery’ and ‘arch sallies’ (*Later Manuscripts*, J. Austen 2008, pp. 120–21). The Thorpes, in *Northanger Abbey*, also engage in this kind of petty one-upmanship. Upon Isabella Thorpe’s and James Morland’s engagement, the Thorpe family divide into two camps, those who know about the engagement, and ‘the unprivileged younger sisters’ who are not openly let into the secret:

the evening was spent in a sort of war of wit, a display of family ingenuity; on one side in the mystery of an affected secret, on the other of undefined discovery, all equally acute. (*Northanger Abbey*, J. Austen 2006b, p. 123)

The Thorpes are presented as being primarily concerned with performing a contrived ‘display’ of their ‘ingenuity’ rather than with genuine feeling. ‘To Catherine’s simple feelings, this . . . seemed neither kindly meant, nor consistently supported’ (*Northanger Abbey*, J. Austen 2006b, p. 123). Its ‘unkindness’, Catherine does not understand (*Northanger Abbey*, J. Austen 2006b, p. 123).

Sense and Sensibility’s Robert Ferrars is another character whose ‘wit’ exposes his fundamental unfeeling selfishness. A guffawing Robert ‘could conceive nothing more ridiculous’ than Edward becoming a poor clergyman after Mrs Ferrars has disowned him (*Sense and Sensibility*, J. Austen 2006e, p. 338). Robert clearly does not subscribe to Elizabeth Bennet’s principle that ‘I hope I never ridicule what is . . . good’ (*Pride and Prejudice*, J. Austen 2006d, p. 62). In response to ‘such folly’, Elinor gives Robert a hard stare.

He was recalled from wit to wisdom, not by any reproof of her’s, but by his own sensibility.

‘We may treat it as a joke,’ said he at last, recovering from the affected laugh which had considerably lengthened out the genuine gaiety of the moment—‘but upon my soul, it is a most serious business. Poor Edward! he is ruined for ever.’ (*Sense and Sensibility*, J. Austen 2006e, p. 338)

The term ‘wit’ is again associated with unkindness: Robert ‘laughed most immoderately’ at Edward’s misfortunes (*Sense and Sensibility*, J. Austen 2006e, p. 338). The narrator’s terse comment that he was ‘recalled from wit to wisdom’ drips with sarcasm. While Robert Ferrars may imagine himself adorned with the qualities of both ‘wit’ and ‘wisdom’, it is clear to readers he is not. A person who cannot distinguish between a ‘joke’ and a ‘serious business’ possesses neither ‘wit’ nor ‘wisdom’.

The narrative voice observes of Caroline Bingley that ‘angry people are not always wise’, and this underlines the problem of her intended wit (*Pride and Prejudice*, J. Austen 2006d, p. 299). She is not wise in how she deploys it. It is malicious rather than thoughtful, used to humiliate others and to parade her own perceived superiority. When Mr Darcy observes, for example, ‘I have been meditating on the very great pleasure which a pair of fine eyes in the face of a pretty woman can bestow’, and Caroline is ‘all astonishment’ at hearing that those eyes belong to Elizabeth Bennet, her response is to attack with ‘wit’:

‘You will have a charming mother-in-law, indeed, and of course she will be always at Pemberley with you.’

He listened to her with perfect indifference, while she chose to entertain herself in this manner, and as his composure convinced her that all was safe, her wit flowed long. (*Pride and Prejudice*, J. Austen 2006d, p. 30)

Falling foul of William Shakespeare's assertion that 'brevity is the soul of wit', Caroline might 'entertain herself', but if her wit was perceived to have 'flowed long' then it cannot have been very amusing for others.¹⁷ Caroline is convinced, ironically, 'that all was safe', not realising that the longer her 'wit' flows the more Mr Darcy's 'perfect indifference' to her will grow. That Caroline uses 'wit', explicitly, as a tool for 'censure' and implied scorn, is made explicit when Elizabeth is staying at Netherfield while her sister Jane is ill:

Elizabeth returned instantly to Jane, leaving her own and her relations' behaviour to the remarks of the two ladies and Mr. Darcy; the latter of whom, however, could not be prevailed on to join in their censure of *her*, in spite of all Miss Bingley's witticisms on *fine eyes*. (*Pride and Prejudice*, J. Austen 2006d, p. 50)

Remembering that a 'Witticism', in Johnson's formulation, is 'A mean attempt at wit' ('mean' here in the sense of 'ungenerous'), Caroline's decided lack of generosity, indeed the resentment behind her attempted 'witticisms', are what separates them from, for example, Mrs Jennings's and Sir John Middleton's (Johnson 1755). They misguidedly employ their wit, however painful it might be and however oblivious they are to that pain, in pursuit of genuine laughter and amusement. Caroline's wit, however, is not without thought, and her apparent laughter is not without hostility. Caroline's witticisms have the purpose of trying to shame Mr Darcy out of his admitted attraction to Elizabeth. Caroline seems to imagine that such displays of 'wit' will elevate her in the eyes of Mr Darcy, but instead, ironically, it demotes her to the kind of elegant female that Mr Collins has in mind when he applies the term to Elizabeth. Over and over again, Caroline mocks Mr Darcy's interest in Elizabeth by emphasising her 'low connections' (*Pride and Prejudice*, J. Austen 2006d, p. 40). (Forgetting, conveniently, that the Bingleys' 'fortune ... had been acquired by trade' (*Pride and Prejudice*, J. Austen 2006d, p. 16).) Caroline jokes, for example, 'Do let the portraits of your uncle and aunt Philips be placed in the gallery at Pemberley' (*Pride and Prejudice*, J. Austen 2006d, p. 57). Caroline's brandishing of 'wit' is a socially acceptable way to cover her shallow malice, imagining that she conceals her meanness with 'wit'. According to Hazlitt, 'The favourite employment of wit is to add littleness to littleness, and heap contempt on insignificance by all the arts of petty and incessant warfare' (Hazlitt 1819, p. 24). Caroline's censuring wittiness fits such a mould of contemptible petty warfare. Not only is a 'professed wit', for Hazlitt, 'contemptible and tiresome', but such behaviour has a more significant deleterious effect: 'an affectation of wit by degrees hardens the heart, and spoils good company and good manners' (Hazlitt 1819, p. 48).

Matthew Ward has argued that Romantic-period writers moved away from appreciating the attacking wit associated with ridicule in favour of a more sympathetic humour (Ward 2017). Austen's use of the term 'wit' in her novels accords with her Romantic contemporaries' notion that wit implies a selfish disregard of or even disdain for the feelings of others. In other words, as per Marianne Dashwood's thinking, that 'wit' is 'unfeeling' (*Sense and Sensibility*, J. Austen 2006e, p. 144). When Mr Knightley chastises Emma Woodhouse for her 'wit' at Box Hill, he asks rhetorically 'How could you be so unfeeling to Miss Bates?' (*Emma*, J. Austen 2005a, p. 407). In Austen's novels the inability to perceive or comprehend the feelings of others when in dialogue is evidence of a failure of true wit.

As is apparent from the examples above, Austen, with beautiful irony, consistently applies the term 'wit' to expose a moment, paradoxically, of a *lack* of true wit.

Misplaced Cleverness

"I Meant to Be Uncommonly Clever"

In the latter half of *Pride and Prejudice*, Elizabeth Bennet recognises her own failure of true wit in earlier attempts to be witty. She reveals that she had sought to be 'witty', or 'continually abusive', in her responses to Mr Darcy (*Pride and Prejudice*, J. Austen 2006d, p. 250). Highly ironically, then, given her rebuff to Mr Collins, in her initial exchanges with Mr Darcy, Elizabeth had in fact had 'pretension[s] ... to that kind of elegance which consists in tormenting a respectable man' (*Pride and Prejudice*, J. Austen 2006d, p. 122). In conversation with Jane, after she has read Mr Darcy's post-proposal letter, she says:

And yet I meant to be uncommonly clever in taking so decided a dislike to him, without any reason. It is such a spur to one's genius, such an opening for wit to have a dislike of that kind. One may be continually abusive without saying any thing just; but one cannot be always laughing at a man without now and then stumbling on something witty. (*Pride and Prejudice*, J. Austen 2006d, p. 250)

The term 'wit', again, is associated with antagonism and unkindness. Elizabeth had been concerned with flaunting 'wit', rather than using her 'reason', with exhibiting her 'clever[ness]', rather than being 'just'. There is a paradox between 'now and then stumbling on' and 'wit', given that one would normally think of 'wit' as being deliberately 'clever'. This might even seem like a contradiction in terms—for something to be truly witty, it should combine good thought with proper expression, and thus cannot be unintentional. In this moment, Elizabeth playfully embraces the terms 'wit' and 'witty' and applies them to herself, but in recognition of the previous failure of her true wit.

After their engagement, Mr Darcy compliments Elizabeth on the 'liveliness' of her 'mind', which is, of course, a requirement of true wit, but he avoids the word itself (*Pride and Prejudice*, J. Austen 2006d, p. 421). Echoing Squire Allworthy's language in denouncing 'pertness' in women, Elizabeth playfully asks, 'Now be sincere; did you admire me for my impertinence?' (*Pride and Prejudice*, J. Austen 2006d, p. 421). Impertinence had long been associated with the figure of the Intended Wit. The *Tatler* no. 219 (2 September 1710), for example, had decried 'a Couple of professed Wits' as mere 'pert Puppies' who 'entertained each other with Impertinences': 'These People are all the more dreadful, the more they have of what is usually called Wit: For a lively Imagination, when it is not governed by a good Understanding, makes such miserable Havock' (Steele and Addison 1987, vol. 3, p. 144).¹⁸ Fortunately, Elizabeth's lively imagination is (ultimately) governed by a good understanding.

"How Could You Be So Insolent in Your Wit?"

Austen's habitual practice of ironically indicating true wit's failure by using the term 'wit', helps to elucidate the representation of the Box Hill incident in *Emma*. Emma's wit, ironically, is not quite so ready as she imagines it to be. She repeatedly considers Mr Elton's odd use of 'ready wit' in his charade, apparently to describe Harriet Smith, without realising her own failure of wit in not recognising the charade's intended recipient (that is, herself) (*Emma*, J. Austen 2005a, pp. 76, 90, 119). Emma does curtail an urge to be rude, or 'witty', about Mr Elton, when he returns to Highbury married:

As for Mr Elton, his manners did not appear—but no, she would not permit a hasty or a witty word from herself about his manners. (*Emma*, J. Austen 2005a, p. 292)

A 'witty word' here is clearly in the same vein as Caroline Bingley's 'witticisms' of 'censure'; that is, wittiness aligned with criticism, antagonism, and unkindness (*Pride and Prejudice*, J. Austen 2006d, p. 50). Emma still has consciously to restrain herself, emphasised in the textual long em dash that interrupts her, but she manages it. Emma 'could not resist' being witty later, however, in the crucial scene at Box Hill (*Emma*, J. Austen 2005a, p. 403). What prompts events is Frank Churchill's demand for the group to make a 'clever' remark:

[Emma] only demands from each of you either one thing very clever, be it prose or verse, original or repeated—or two things moderately clever—or three things very dull indeed, and she engages to laugh heartily at them all. (*Emma*, J. Austen 2005a, p. 403)

Frank is asking for professed wit. Immediately, Emma unthinkingly sees her chance to perform wittiness. Frank, furthermore, elides something 'very clever' with that which is both 'original' and 'repeated'. As Marianne Dashwood articulated, an oft-repeated cleverness is as banal as something dull. The scene is set for intellectual dullness, the antithesis of real wit.

‘Oh! very well,’ exclaimed Miss Bates, ‘then I need not be uneasy. ‘Three things very dull indeed.’ That will just do for me, you know. I shall be sure to say three dull things as soon as ever I open my mouth, shan’t I?—(looking round with the most good-humoured dependence on every body’s assent)—Do not you all think I shall?’

Emma could not resist.

‘Ah! ma’am, but there may be a difficulty. Pardon me—but you will be limited as to number—only three at once.’

Miss Bates, deceived by the mock ceremony of her manner, did not immediately catch her meaning; but, when it burst on her, it could not anger, though a slight blush showed that it could pain her. (*Emma*, J. Austen 2005a, p. 403)

Emma’s ‘mock ceremony’ implies pretence, insincerity, and a lack of plain-speaking. The pointed comment might be a quick assemblage of ideas, but it exposes a failure of good sense. It does not show the ‘discretion’ required, by Hobbes, of proper wit (Hobbes [1651] 1998, p. 47). Steele, indeed, in the *Spectator* no.422 (4 July 1712) had gone so far as to claim that such raillery—that which perplexes, pains, and induces blushes, as in the Box Hill case—‘is a degree of Murder’:

I DO not know any thing which gives greater disturbance to Conversation, than the false Notion some People have of Raillery . . . Your Gentleman of a Satyrical Vein is in the like Condition. To say a thing which perplexes the Heart of him you speak to, or brings blushes into his Face, is a degree of Murder; and it is, I think, an unpardonable Offence to shew a Man you do not care, whether he is pleased or displeas'd. But won't you then take a Jest? Yes, but pray let it be a Jest. (Addison and Steele 1987, vol. 3, pp. 582–83)

Austen personally possessed a copy of the *Spectator* that included this essay.¹⁹

In the words of Sandra Gilbert and Susan Gubar, ‘Austen’s heavy attack on Emma . . . depends on the abject failure of the girl’s wit’ (Gilbert and Gubar 2000, p. 159). But it is only subsequently that the term ‘wit’ is directly applied to Emma’s rude comment. It is with condemnation of her misplaced ‘wit’ that Mr Knightley chides Emma: ‘How could you be so insolent in your wit’ (*Emma*, J. Austen 2005a, p. 407). As with Elizabeth Bennet’s realisation that she had desired ‘to be uncommonly clever’ in showing off with false wit, it is in a moment of failure of true wit that the label ‘wit’ is applied to Emma.

Belisa Monteiro argues that in the Box Hill episode, Emma demonstrates a Drydenian skilfulness (Monteiro 2014, p. 89). In *A Discourse Concerning the Original and Progress of Satire* (1693), Dryden had contended:

How easie it is to call Rogue and Villain, and that wittily? . . . Yet there is still a vast difference betwixt the slovenly Butchering of a Man, and the fineness of a stroak that separates the Head from the Body, and leaves it standing in its place. (Dryden 1693, p. xlii)

Molly Anne Rothenberg, on the other hand, argues that in the Box Hill episode it is in fact Miss Bates who bests Emma in displaying a Drydenian wit—decapitating herself, and then turning the tables by demanding a response from her audience (Rothenberg 2016, pp. 198–202). How do they answer her question without insulting her? In Emma’s effort to out-trump Miss Bates, Rothenberg argues, Emma in fact displays a spectacular failure of wit, or in Drydenian terms performs a mere slovenly butchering. If we accept Rothenberg’s account, then this is perhaps an example of what Virginia Woolf vividly describes as Austen’s ‘supreme delight’ in ‘slicing [the] heads off’ ‘her creatures’ (Woolf 1925, p. 176). Emma attempts to behead Miss Bates without realising that she (Emma) has already been scalped.

The conversation descends into inanity with Mr Weston’s ‘conundrum’ (*Emma*, J. Austen 2005a, p. 403). Mr Weston ‘doubt[s] it’s being very clever’:

‘What two letters!—express perfection! I am sure I do not know.’

‘Ah! you will never guess. You, (to Emma), I am certain, will never guess.—I will tell you.—M. and A.—Em—ma.—Do you understand?’

Understanding and gratification came together. It might be a very indifferent piece of wit; but Emma found a great deal to laugh at and enjoy in it—and so did Frank and Harriet.—It did not seem to touch the rest of the party equally. (*Emma*, J. Austen 2005a, p. 404)

Here, ‘wit’ is exclusionary. Mr Weston might mean his ‘indifferent piece of wit’ to be taken in the same way that ‘wit’ marks polite social banalities elsewhere (for example, Mr Musgrave in *The Watsons*), and some do ‘laugh at and enjoy’ it (Emma, Frank, and Harriet)—and it rather lessens our opinion of these characters that they ‘laugh’ and ‘enjoy’ such outrageous, ill-timed flattery—but those who do not think Emma is perfect, particularly after she has just been cruel to Miss Bates, are excluded. Frank had ‘engage[d]’ Emma ‘to laugh heartily at . . . all’ the wittinesses the company could provide (*Emma*, J. Austen 2005a, p. 403). In the words of Hazlitt, railing against the misplaced ‘levity’ of ‘A professed laugher’, nothing is ‘more troublesome than what are called laughing people’ as they are always ‘contriving something to laugh at’, however ‘thoughtless’ (Hazlitt 1819, pp. 47–48). Although rather po-faced, Mrs Elton’s implied criticism of Emma’s behaviour in her refusal to participate in Frank’s entertainment appears justified:

I am not one of those who have witty things at every body’s service. I do not pretend to be a wit. (*Emma*, J. Austen 2005a, p. 404)

Mrs Elton will not perform her part as a professed or intended wit, despite, hypocritically, elsewhere clearly aspiring to be one.

All this is not to say, however, that Austen did not value wit. In Austen’s novels true wit is promoted, even though it is not demarcated as ‘wit’ in-text.

Drydenian- and Addisonian-Inspired Austenian True Wit

Elizabeth Bennet’s True Wit

Surely Elizabeth Bennet, so celebrated as a witty character, is lauded within the novel itself for her wit? After all, Austen herself considered Elizabeth to be ‘as delightful a creature as ever appeared in print’, delight being the natural effect, according to Dryden and Addison, of true wit.²⁰ Marilyn Butler speaks for many when she notes that ‘The reader cannot help admiring Elizabeth’s wit’ (Butler 1987, p. 216). Much of ‘the playfulness & Epigrammatism of the general stile’ is achieved through Elizabeth’s finely expressed aphorisms.²¹ One example is Elizabeth’s retort to Charlotte Lucas about Mr Darcy the morning-after-the-night-before, ‘I could easily forgive *his* pride, if he had not mortified *mine*’ (*Pride and Prejudice*, J. Austen 2006d, p. 21). The tight, expletive-free, chiasmic antithesis gives the phrase its witty turn.²² This accords with Dryden’s and Pope’s notion that wit involves the elegant adaptation of thoughts and words most ‘well *Exprest*’ (Dryden 1677, p. xii; *Essay on Criticism*, l.298, Pope [1711] 1961–1969).

Beyond her witty expression, Elizabeth’s deployment of Addisonian ‘*true Wit*’ is evident in her arguments showing a just ‘Resemblance and Congruity of Ideas’.²³ The aptness of her comparison, for instance, of Mr Darcy’s not troubling to practise talking to strangers, her own failure to practise playing the piano, and their relative culpability—‘I have always supposed it to be my own fault—because I would not take the trouble of practising’—delights and surprises the reader, as well as Mr Darcy who ‘smiled and said, “You are perfectly right”’ (*Pride and Prejudice*, J. Austen 2006d, p. 197). Elizabeth’s observation ‘is a propriety of Thoughts and Words . . . elegantly adapted to the Subject’, fulfilling the criteria for Dryden’s definition of ‘Wit’; her ‘assemblage of *Ideas*’ is put ‘together with quickness and variety’ and ‘its Beauty appears at first sight’ to the surprise and delight of the reader and interlocutor, fulfilling Locke’s and Addison’s criteria for ‘Wit’; and her ‘natural and new . . . though not obvious’ but ‘just’ conceit fulfils Johnson’s criteria of ‘noble’ ‘Wit’. Elizabeth’s analogy is an example of long-eighteenth-century true wit, without being demarcated as such within the text.

Similar episodes of true wit undesignated in-text as such pepper Austen's fiction.

Mr Darcy's True Wit

Mr Darcy's exchanges with Caroline Bingley are often overlooked by readers because they seem peripheral to the real matter of his relationship with Elizabeth. Yet, in many ways these interactions give a first glimpse of the true Darcy. The very fact that Mr Darcy confesses his attraction to Elizabeth to, of all people, Caroline Bingley suggests a certain playfulness in him. Their conversation shows that his true wit can be as ready as Elizabeth's. When Caroline accuses Elizabeth of being 'one of those young ladies who seek to recommend themselves to the other sex, by undervaluing their own', for instance, Mr Darcy's witty response, that 'there is a meanness in *all* the arts which ladies sometimes condescend to employ for captivation', indicates that he sees through Caroline's own attempt to 'recommend' herself to him by 'undervaluing' Elizabeth (*Pride and Prejudice*, J. Austen 2006d, pp. 43–44). But, however witty we may find Mr Darcy's riposte, it is not designated as 'wit' in the text.

Elinor Dashwood's True Wit

In *Sense and Sensibility* Elinor demonstrates true wit while aligning her position with that of a preference for 'sense' (key, of course, to Addisonian 'true Wit'). In conversation with Willoughby, she compares those who praise and censure Colonel Brandon. Willoughby deems it an 'indignity' to be 'approved by such women as Lady Middleton and Mrs. Jennings', to which Elinor wittily retorts:

But perhaps the abuse of such people as yourself and Marianne will make amends for the regard of Lady Middleton and her mother. If their praise is censure, your censure may be praise, for they are not more undiscerning, than you are prejudiced and unjust. (*Sense and Sensibility*, J. Austen 2006e, p. 60)

Apparently rather surprised at Elinor's response, Willoughby declares that 'In defence of your protégé you can even be saucy' (*Sense and Sensibility*, J. Austen 2006e, p. 60). Deriving from the Latin *salsus*, meaning salty, Johnson aligns 'saucy' with being 'impertinent' (Johnson 1755). But hers is not the 'dreadful' 'Impertinenc[e]' of the 'professed Wit' as described in the *Tatler* no. 219 (2 September 1710), because Elinor's 'lively' mind (like Elizabeth's) is 'governed by a good Understanding' (Steele and Addison 1987, vol. 3, p. 144). Elinor does not take the bait of Willoughby's supposed compliment, responding 'My protégé, as you call him, is a sensible man; and sense will always have attractions for me' (*Sense and Sensibility*, J. Austen 2006e, p. 60).

Mr Knightley's True Wit

Returning again to the fallout from Emma's faulty 'wit' at Box Hill, in response to Mr Weston's 'M. and A.' conundrum:

Mr Knightley gravely said,

'This explains the sort of clever thing that is wanted, and Mr Weston has done very well for himself; but he must have knocked up every body else. *Perfection* should not have come quite so soon.' (*Emma*, J. Austen 2005a, p. 404)

Mr Knightley displays the real cleverness and wit 'that is wanted' by the rest of the party. Wittily this '*Perfection*' is doubly imperfect: it arrives too quickly in the game, given that Mr Weston's 'perfect' conundrum means that others cannot follow him; but also that Emma should not be labelled as '*Perfection*' 'so soon' given the evidence of her failings just a moment previously. Mr Knightley it transpires is also a Drydenian beheader.

Emma Woodhouse's True Wit

As we have seen, true wit in Austen's novels is not gendered in that both female and male characters fail and succeed in true wit.²⁴ This is not to negate existing scholarship that draws out the gendered implications for Austen's understanding of wit. This article

supplements such scholarship, shows that the subject is worthy of further analysis, and provides a springboard from which to launch such interrogations. Debates about wit were clearly gendered in eighteenth- and nineteenth-century culture, especially in relation to conversation and societal expectation (as More's *Strictures* and Gisborne's *Enquiry* testify), but a full examination of the gendered implications of wit are beyond the scope of this essay. My point here is that, within Austen's fiction, both men and women fail and succeed in exemplifying true wit, and that the extent to which they do so is no mere function of their gender. In their seminal work of feminist criticism *Madwoman in the Attic*, Gilbert and Gubar contend that Austen's lively heroines must learn to become subdued, even silenced: 'in other words, she learns to give up wit' (Gilbert and Gubar 2000, p. 162). But one of Emma Woodhouse's profoundest moments of true wit comes after her failure of 'insolent . . . wit' at Box Hill, when her liveliness has, according to Gilbert's and Gubar's account, been suppressed. Emma compares the poverty of women in Jane Fairfax's predicament, and what it makes her do, to the apothecary from Shakespeare's *Romeo and Juliet* (1595–96), whose 'poverty, but not [his] will' impels his actions (Shakespeare 2008, p. 1734, V.i.78). Romeo had said to the apothecary:

Famine is in thy cheeks,
Need and oppression starveth in thy eyes,
Contempt and beggary hangs upon thy back:
The world is not thy friend nor the world's law:
The world affords no law to make thee rich.
(Shakespeare 2008, p. 1734, V.i.72–76)

Emma (slightly mis-) quotes Romeo to make the 'rarely observed' 'similitude', a foundation of Hobbesian 'good wit', that:

If a woman can ever be excused for thinking only of herself, it is in a situation like Jane Fairfax's.—Of such, one may almost say, that 'the world is not their's, nor the world's law.'

(Hobbes [1651] 1998, p. 45; *Emma*, J. Austen 2005a, p. 436)

What is more (having previously used 'unfeeling . . . insolent . . . wit') Emma makes this witty observation 'feelingly' (*Emma*, J. Austen 2005a, pp. 407, 436).

Genius, Wit, and Taste

The term 'wit' in Austen's novels is frequently implemented in moments of bombast or apparent cleverness, which are merely imagined or perceived to be witty by the speaker her/himself. After all, 'THERE is nothing more certain than that every Man would be a Wit if he could'.²⁵ In Austen's diction, 'wit' is consistently applied when a character *intends* to be witty, but falls short of true wit. True wit is not classified as 'wit' in-text, perhaps because—like ingenious elves—readers are supposed to recognise true wit for themselves by using their own wits.²⁶

In *Northanger Abbey*, the narrative voice, speaking directly to the reader in the first person, celebrates the novel genre's ability to showcase 'wit', and laments that 'there seems almost a general wish . . . of slighting the performances which have only genius, wit, and taste to recommend them' (*Northanger Abbey*, J. Austen 2006b, p. 31). Novels are 'only some work in which the greatest powers of the mind are displayed, in which the most thorough knowledge of human nature, the happiest delineation of its varieties, the liveliest effusions of wit and humour are conveyed to the world in the best chosen language' (*Northanger Abbey*, J. Austen 2006b, p. 31). (Conversely, and in line with Henry Tilney's observation, 'The person, be it gentleman or lady, who has not pleasure in a good novel, must be intolerably stupid'; 'stupidity', as Hobbes asserts, being elementarily oppositional to intellectual 'wit'. (*Northanger Abbey*, J. Austen 2006b, p. 107; Hobbes [1651] 1998, p. 45)). In the phrase 'best chosen language', Austen echoes Dryden's and Pope's celebration of wit as that which is elegantly adapted and well expressed. Ultimately, in *Northanger*

Abbey's apostrophe defending of the novel, Austen adopts a broader understanding of true wit (a composite of Hobbesian, Drydenian, Lockian, Addisonian, Steelean, Popean, Johnsonian conceptions), which requires more than simply elegant expression but truth and perception too, by balancing good sense—the powers of the mind' and 'thorough knowledge'—with the mode of expression—the 'happiest delineation'. At their finest, novels showcase 'genius, wit, and taste' ('genius' meaning 'superiour faculties', judgment, mental abilities, intelligence, originality; 'taste' meaning 'perception' and 'discernment' (Johnson 1755)). So too, for the characters within them, a moment of true wit must be imbued with 'genius', good-sense, 'taste', discretion. Nowadays wit is associated with funniness, but for Austen wit does not have a monopoly on laughter: in the end, 'Wisdom is better than Wit, & in the long run will certainly have the laugh on her side'.²⁷

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Notes

- ¹ All references to Jane Austen's fiction are to the *Cambridge Edition of the Works of Jane Austen*, gen. ed. Janet Todd (Cambridge, 2005–2008).
- ² Mr Bennet and Mr Darcy (*Pride and Prejudice*, J. Austen 2006d, pp. 5, 421).
- ³ Austen to Fanny Knight, 23–25 March 1817, in (J. Austen 1997, p. 335).
- ⁴ Mary Poovey, for instance, argues that the 'juxtaposition of Elizabeth's lively wit' and the Regency's 'repressive society' 'cuts both ways' in that the vacuity of her surroundings both 'highlights her energy' and 'encourages her to cultivate her natural vivacity beyond its legitimate bounds', exposing her 'charming wit' as an 'incarnation of willful desire' (Poovey 1984, p. 195); according to Nancy Armstrong, in Austen's fiction 'such traditional female attributes as chastity, wit, practicality, duty, manners, imagination, sympathy, generosity, beauty, and kindness are pitted against each other in the competition' among women, and that polite speech, of which regulated wit is a component, is 'a medium of exchange, a form of currency that alone ensures a stable community' (Armstrong 1987, pp. 50, 155); Patricia Meyer Spacks states that 'By her intelligence and wit [Elizabeth Bennet] has dominated most situations' (Spacks 1988, p. 73); while Claudia Johnson points out that Elizabeth Bennet's 'wit is occasionally marked by an unabashed rusticity bordering on the vulgar', which 'forestalls conclusiveness' about her 'indifference to decorum' in Caroline Bingley's phrase (Johnson 1988, pp. 76–77; *Pride and Prejudice*, J. Austen 2006d, p. 39); according to Eileen Gillooly, readers of *Mansfield Park* 'find the witty disruptor of the patriarchal status quo [Mary Crawford] more sympathetically engaging than its ideal woman [Fanny Price]' (Gillooly 1994, p. 332); and Belisa Monteiro argues that wit equips Elizabeth Bennet psychologically, as well as conversationally, to meet the world's social challenges, and that *Emma* dramatizes, and makes the reader complicit in, 'the dangerous pleasures of wit' as 'recreational antagonism' (Monteiro 2014, pp. 84, 89). Erin Goss's recent edited collection, *Jane Austen and Comedy*, 'invites reflection' on the 'jokes, and wit, and all the other topics that can so readily be grouped under the broad umbrella that is comedy', but while several of the chapters are fascinating and illuminating, none deals particularly with wit (Goss 2019, p. 14).
- ⁵ For a detailed account of the multiplicitous meanings of 'wit' in the late seventeenth and early eighteenth centuries, see John Sitter's second chapter, 'About Wit' in *Arguments of Augustan Wit* (Sitter 1991, pp. 49–88).
- ⁶ Alex Aronson, for example, charts the (limited) democratisation of the concept of wit during the eighteenth century, broadening from a thought-process apparently peculiar to the upperclasses and the aristocracy to a thought-pattern commonly available to anyone sufficiently educated, especially the middling sort (Aronson 1948); Stuart Tave's seminal study of the progression of comic theory over the long eighteenth century, argues that the Restoration theory of comedy was that its function was to ridicule and satirize fools, which developed into the Victorian period's promotion of cheerfulness that 'restrained raillery, satire and ridicule, the several expressions of "ill-natured" wit' (Tave 1960, p. viii); Daniel Milburn, argues that the early long-eighteenth century wrestled with the 'perplexing problem' of cultivating itself as the Age of Wit, leading to 'the first context for the meaning of wit' being 'its enigmatic quality' (Milburn 1966, p. 28); in Pope's time, argues Leopold Damrosch, wit was 'all too often synonymous with lying' (Damrosch 1987, p. 18), hence perhaps why, as I will go on to discuss, Joseph Addison insists so vehemently in his *Spectator* essays that a core characteristic of 'true Wit' was that it is founded in truth; Robert Markley argues that Dryden's wit has multiple facets: 'as a purely verbal construct; as a manifestation of "breeding"; and as an aesthetic ideal that gestures toward, rather than strictly defines, codes or language and behaviour' (Markley 1988, p. 78); and eighteenth-century writers, Roger Lund argues, struggled to define an appropriate role for wit in public discourse, complete with rules, expectations, decorums,

circumscriptions, especially, as the century progressed, as wit's 'subversive potential . . . came increasingly to inspire suspicion' (Lund 2012, pp. 4–5).

- 7 Joseph Addison, *Spectator* no. 58 (7 May 1711), in (Addison and Steele 1987, vol. 1, p. 265).
- 8 Addison, *Spectator* no. 58 (7 May 1711), (Addison and Steele 1987, vol. 1, p. 244).
- 9 Addison, *Spectator* no. 62 (11 May 1711), (Addison and Steele 1987, vol. 1, p. 267).
- 10 Addison, *Spectator* no.62 (11 May 1711), (Addison and Steele 1987, vol. 1, p. 268).
- 11 Addison, *Spectator* no.62 (11 May 1711), (Addison and Steele 1987, vol. 1, p. 265).
- 12 John Keats to George and Tom Keats, 21–27 December 1817, in (Keats [1817] 1958, vol. 1, p. 193).
- 13 Austen to Cassandra, 30 August 1805, in (J. Austen 1997, p. 112); (Gisborne 1797, p. 34).
- 14 Addison, *Spectator* no. 62 (11 May 1711), in (Addison and Steele 1987, vol. 1, p. 264).
- 15 Austen to Cassandra, 21–23 April 1805, in (J. Austen 1997, p. 104).
- 16 Bertrand Goldgar notes that Fielding's glossary was reprinted (without acknowledgment of the source) in *The New Foundling Hospital for Wit*, Part II, 2nd edn. (1768), pp. 40–44; and imitated by the *Craftsman* (8 February 1752), and in *Gray's Inn Journal*, No. 89 (29 June 1754).
- 17 William Shakespeare, spoken by Polonius in *Hamlet* (c.1600), II.ii.95, in (Shakespeare 2008, p. 1946).
- 18 It is not clear whether Steele or Addison wrote this essay (*Tatler* no. 219, 2 September 1710).
- 19 Austen 'owned at least one volume (VI) of a 1744 edition' of the *Spectator* (*Northanger Abbey*, J. Austen 2006b, p. 313). The essay appears in the 6th volume of the 1744 Tonson edition (Addison and Steele 1744, pp. 106–9). Steventon housed eldest brother James's full eight-volume set (Addison and Steele 1775; *Northanger Abbey*, J. Austen 2006b, p. 313).
- 20 Austen to Cassandra Austen, 29 January 1813, in (J. Austen 1997, p. 201; Dryden 1685, p. ix; Addison and Steele 1987, vol. 1, p. 264).
- 21 Austen to Cassandra Austen, 4 February 1813, in (J. Austen 1997, p. 203).
- 22 'Expletive' is the term Pope uses to mean linguistic padding (*Essay on Criticism*, l.346, Pope [1711] 1961–1969), and Johnson defines as 'Something used only to take up room; something of which the use is only to prevent a vacancy' (Johnson 1755).
- 23 Addison, *Spectator* no.62 (11 May 1711), in (Addison and Steele 1987, vol. 1, p. 265).
- 24 In this I align with Lawrence E. Klein who argues, of early-eighteenth-century polite social interactions, that they were 'less exclusively gendered than they are sometimes represented to be', and that good conversation and sociability for both genders included a judicious mixture of the serious and entertaining, of reason and wit (Klein 1993, p. 102).
- 25 Addison, *Spectator* no.59 (8 May 1711), in (Addison and Steele 1987, 1, p. 249).
- 26 In a letter to Cassandra, 4 February 1813, Austen declared "'I do not write for such dull Elves' 'As have not a great deal of Ingenuity themselves'" (J. Austen 1997, p. 203).
- 27 Austen to Fanny Knight, 18–20 November 1814, in (J. Austen 1997, p. 280).

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