COMMUNITIES OF GOSSIP IN LATE EIGHTEENTH-CENTURY FICTION

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COMMUNITIES OF GOSSIP IN LATE EIGHTEENTH-CENTURY FICTION

Gossip has long been a subject of critical attention in Jane Austen’s novels, particularly regarding individual characters, such as “the ladies Jennings, Gardiner, Bates and Norris” (Gordon 58), who are known for their chatter. Less recognized in eighteenth-century studies of gossip have been Eliza Haywood’s *The History of Miss Betsy Thoughtless* and Frances Burney’s *Evelina*, despite the fact that each of these works provides rich material for such exploration. This thesis, then, will attempt to fill gaps in Haywood and Burney scholarship, while also adding to Austen criticism by approaching the idea of gossip in *Emma* and *Pride and Prejudice* from a new angle. Rather than focusing on individual “gossips,” I will attempt to draw attention toward the presence of a seamless gossip network that forms under the surface in each of the above narratives, functioning as a collective character. Of particular interest will be the speed and efficiency with which news and gossip travel through these close-knit communities, the ways in which Haywood, Burney, and Austen represent the phenomenon of behind-the-scenes information sharing, and the interactions that take place between gossip networks and the novels’ respective female protagonists.
INTRODUCTION

DEVELOPMENT OF THE GOSSIP PHENOMENON IN ENGLISH SOCIETIES

On the most general level, this thesis will be a study of gossip in novels from the mid-to-late eighteenth century by Eliza Haywood, Frances Burney, and Jane Austen. Before I present the more specific overarching aims for my project, however, it will be beneficial to say a bit more about the idea of gossip as I will use it here. Most people intuitively know, or at least have certain strong ideas about what the word “gossip” refers to, but when pressed for an exact definition they tend to hesitate and become uncertain (Jaeger 154). This is not surprising; gossip is a slippery term, both as a sociological phenomenon and as an element of fictional literature. There is disagreement and debate even among the “experts,” a category which includes not only sociologists, who must pin down precise parameters for the purposes of experimentation with and study of the phenomenon, but also literary scholars, who struggle to establish the word as they will use it in their critical work. Definitions of gossip among the latter group varies widely, ranging from “distilled malice” (Spacks 4) to the “essential dynamic of forming a bond through talking about others not present” (Schantz 17), and involving both positive and negative connotations. Researchers have long debated the moral element of gossip, focusing significant attention on the negative undercurrent that has continued to prevail in many societies, and a good deal of recent study in the social sciences has contributed to the backlash of writing about gossip’s redemptive qualities and essential contributions to individual and social functioning. Robert Goodman and Aaron Ben-
Ze’ev, for example, have compiled a collection of theoretical essays called *Good Gossip* which Goodman calls “a vigorous attack on the traditional [condemnatory] view” held by “traditional moral codes—Christian, Jewish, and no doubt others as well” (1). Combining this type of contemporary sociological lens, which recognizes gossip as a potentially positive vehicle for information sharing, with the “traditional,” negative view of the practice that Goodman points to, I will use “gossip” in this project in a rather broad way to signify almost all oral communication, be it positive or negative, that focuses on people or events with which the participating parties are mutually familiar. I may also refer to gossip by such terms as “information sharing” or “news sharing,” and I will occasionally substitute more casual or negatively shaded descriptions such as “speculation,” “talk,” or even “censure,” depending on the context.

Since its origin, gossip has hinged on ideas of inclusion and exclusion, closeness and separation; as these ideas will play a significant role in my project, a brief explanation of their part in gossip’s development will be beneficial here. The beginnings of gossip as a social phenomenon, if we can even assign a starting point to something so ubiquitous and unquantifiable, might be traced alongside the development of separate, gendered spaces in early seventeenth-century agricultural and rural England. While husbands were out working the land or conducting public business in town, their wives were left at home to tend to the household and children. Thus, as Bernard Capp notes, women became identified with the private, domestic sphere, and they shared this space with their close friends (50). One significant activity that took place in this space, perhaps the “most important and symbolic manifestation” of interaction between a
woman and her gossips, was the delivery of children. Neighbors and friends would gather with the mother to provide support, encouragement, and assistance as she labored. As “being invited to attend a neighbor’s delivery was a significant rite of passage in itself, signaling acceptance within a network or community” (50), the term ‘gossip’ took on a similar tone of closeness and inclusion within a group. The new mother and her assistants marked the achievement of childbirth with a celebration in the house that did not involve men (50-51). A woman’s gossips were the ones closest to her during times of physical trial and pain as well as overwhelming joy and celebration, and the shared experiences of both hardship and happiness served to bond the community’s women together, creating a network of female-only communication and support.

Of course, this network extended past childbirth and into women’s daily lives. Confined to the domestic space of the household and lacking the modern avenues for information sharing that we enjoy today, they did not get out into the public sphere as often as their husbands and were instead forced to rely on their female friends for news. They shared snippets of conversation when they went out to run errands and met at the marketplace or in other common areas; through gossip, women were able to feel a sense of connection and belonging—after all, “if neighbours were willing to share their trivial news and concerns, and listen to her own, a woman knew she was accepted” (57). In addition to their quick meetings at the marketplace, women also caught up with friends as a way of entertaining themselves while doing other work, usually manual labor. “Monotonous work such as knitting and spinning devoured large swathes of women’s lives, and company helped to relieve the tedium, just as for assembly-line workers
centuries later” (52). Women also gossiped at bakehouses, while they waited for their bread to bake, or in the fields, as they tended livestock.

Even though women most often gossiped while they worked, men frequently condemned their wives’ gossip as a sign of idleness or lack of productivity. They also regarded female networks of communication with a bit of suspicion. Although men understood the importance of women’s friendships and subsequent gossip, they also felt threatened by them to a certain degree. Communication among women was usually conducted away from male ears, so many men grew curious and suspicious about what was being said, perhaps assuming or fearing that they themselves might be topics of women’s discussion and criticism (62). Men were not the only ones who viewed women’s gossip as a negative activity, however. Because their talk often centered on the actions and concerns of their fellow townspeople, women inevitably relayed judgment, opinion, and bias with their news; they were not above pointing out each other’s shortcomings, whether domestic, social, religious, or otherwise. Gossip’s tendency to turn women against each other meant that female networks became “judgmental as well as supportive” (62). As both men and women began to view gossip in a negative light, two things occurred, both of which we see echoes of in the female characters I will study in the following chapters: those who engaged in gossip were increasingly viewed with suspicion and criticism, and those who were its potential subjects behaved with heightened caution, attempting to avoid its censure.

Certainly, though this time period played a crucial role in gossip’s development leading up to the era in which Haywood’s, Burney’s, and Austen’s novels are set, the
middle and upper class societies that these authors represent in their respective works are a far cry from the early rural communities that Capp describes. David Spring emphasizes that “Jane Austen’s was not the England of the Durham coal miners, or of the plain-living aesthetes like the Wordsworths, or of London shopkeepers like Francis Place, or of London bohemians like the Prince Regent . . . Instead, her England was that of the local rural elite” (54-55). By the middle of the eighteenth century, as larger English cities and towns were beginning to develop in earnest, incorporating an increasing amount of industry and technology, a social class began to emerge that was characterized by a higher income and more time for social activities. Christopher Chalklin illustrates the rise of this elite group of people as follows:

Improved education, more leisure time and by 1800 greater religious zeal in some families, as well as increased wealth, encouraged recreational and social pursuits. Shrewsbury’s entertainments before 1760 have been analysed in detail by McInnes; they included weekly assemblies, formal balls, racing, bowling, tennis, concerts and plays; facilities included coffee houses, public walks and bookshops . . . Public concerts were supplemented by music societies and local choirs. Visiting drama companies performed plays of various types at increasingly sophisticated venues . . . Assemblies provided opportunities for dancing and card-playing, and opportunities to see many friends and relations in one evening. (55)
This social atmosphere is a much closer analogue to the situations I will deal with in the following chapters. In these populations, work was much less common, especially for women—servants generally took care of both childcare and daily household tasks—and gossip became a way to fill the time that the earlier, more agrarian community might have spent tending to the crops and the homestead. Spring writes that Jane Austen called it [the society that she wrote about in her novels] “neighborhood”—one of the prime words in her social vocabulary. She meant by it not the tenant farmers, the rural laborers, the country-house servants, or the village tradesmen. They did not belong to the world of neighborhood. Rather she meant by neighborhood their social superiors, who lived in large houses and whose dining, dancing, and marrying provided the substance of her stories. (55)

Although Spring’s interest here is purely in Jane Austen’s work, we can apply his statements to Haywood’s and Burney’s communities as well. All of these authors portray groups of people who enjoy a certain level of financial comfort and who mostly spend their days (and nights, for that matter) socializing. Spring points to Leicester historian Alan Everitt’s term ‘pseudo-gentry’ as an apt descriptor of the social set that Austen and, I would argue, Haywood and Burney, take as their chief subjects. This class of people might not have owned land like the aristocracy or the gentry, but still would have possessed the “trappings” of the gentry, which included

the schooling, the accent, the manners (from style of conversation to dressing for dinner), the sports, the religion, the habit of command, the
large house in its own grounds, servants, carriages and horses, appropriate husbands and wives, and, last but not least, an appropriate income, which Jane Austen called ‘independence’, that most desirable of all social states.

(60-61)

In this thesis I will look closely at the section of society outlined above, referring to it alternately by names such as “community,” “townspeople,” “society,” “the public,” and so forth as I discuss the gossip networks that appear within my central texts. My interest lies in the speed and efficiency with which news and gossip travel through these close-knit circles of friends and acquaintances, the ways in which Haywood, Burney, and Austen represent this phenomenon of behind-the-scenes information sharing, and the interactions that take place between such gossip networks and the novels’ respective female protagonists.

Since its publication in 1751, The History of Miss Betsy Thoughtless has received a surprisingly small amount of critical attention, especially in the context of gossip and reputation, and for this reason much of my first chapter will draw on my own close reading and analysis. In this chapter, I will show how Haywood orchestrates the narrative emergence of a gossip network in her novel through the narrator’s and various characters’ secondary references to the spread of news and the existence of shared knowledge. Against the constant humming of the community’s talk, Betsy Thoughtless is isolated as someone who formulates her own system of standards, behaving the way she deems acceptable and largely disregarding the opinions of the masses. Her coquettishness brings her into the public spotlight as a subject of ridicule, but by devoting
herself not to appearances but rather to the truth behind them, Betsy proves to be more
genuine, caring, and upstanding than many of her detractors give her credit for. Through
the relationship that she illustrates between her protagonist and the larger gossiping
community in this text, Haywood inverts the standard attitude toward female reputation
that we might expect from a novel during this time period, emphasizing the importance of
true virtue over the mere appearance of it. She also uses Betsy’s botched marriage to Mr.
Munden toward the end of the narrative as proof of the negative effect that gossip can
have on those who become its victims.

Moving from Betsy Thoughtless to Evelina Anville, the second chapter will
examine a similar characterization of the gossip network, and isolation of the heroine
from her society. Lisa Zunshine’s work on illegitimacy in eighteenth-century England
will be of particular importance as a framework for this section; I argue that what
separates Evelina from the community of gossip is not necessarily her own choices, as is
the case with Betsy Thoughtless, but instead her biological father’s unwillingness to
acknowledge her legally. There is a strong tension between text and speech in this
narrative that is central to the action of the story—that is, the conflict between the spoken
claims of Evelina and the need for a written document that will “prove” these claims and
legitimize her as Sir John Belmont’s daughter. For most of the novel Evelina, as a
‘nobody’, is stranded in an undefined gray area within the society she enters into,
incredibly perceptive and critical of the upper class and yet unable to speak up or claim
her rightful place in this group. The epistolary form allows us to see the situation from
the heroine’s perspective, through her letters to her guardian, Mr. Villars, and other
friends such as Miss Mirvan. In her newly-formed relationships and frequent public faux pas, we see a certain level of class in Evelina that is not present in her socially superior acquaintances. Burney uses this discrepancy to draw a distinction between true sophistication and shallow pretension, one which is independent of actual social status.

A study of two works by Jane Austen, *Emma* and *Pride and Prejudice*, will comprise the final chapter, as Austen forms a natural endpoint of sorts for the literary period studied here. I chose to divide my attention between these novels in order to give a slightly broader look at an author whose work has been so frequently examined and analyzed, and also to provide balance for the striking lack of critical study that exists regarding Haywood’s and Burney’s novels. This chapter relies on the work of several notable Austen scholars, including Jan Gordon, Mary Hong, Casey Finch, and Peter Bowen, in its discussion of the increasingly stronger and more streamlined networks of community gossip that exist in the Highbury and Longbourn areas. Regarding *Emma*, I rely heavily on Adela Pinch’s study of the term ‘every body’, which very accurately represents the presence in this novel of the strong, unified, yet anonymous mass character that is the gossip network of Highbury. I argue that letters come into play in a noticeable way here, interacting with gossip quite influentially both as vehicles to facilitate news spread and as potential subjects to provide content for community discussion. This section also continues the previous chapters’ focus on ideas of isolation, in this case employing Gordon’s argument about weak or absent parents as a lens through which to understand Emma’s separation from her family and her subsequent turn to the community for entertainment and intellectual stimulation. Unlike either of the heroines discussed in
the first two chapters, Emma approaches gossip not with fear or defensiveness, but openly, even welcoming and inviting public attention. She enjoys being known throughout Highbury for her charming manner and excellent matchmaking skills, but her local fame has a downside as well; I argue that because of her desperate need to be noticed, the mistakes that she seems to make so often are multiplied in their effect, bringing all the more embarrassment when they occur.

Finally, I end this thesis with a look at *Pride and Prejudice*, perhaps the most well-known and beloved of Austen’s novels. Elizabeth Bennet, on whom this section focuses, is unique among the heroines studied here in that she is not nearly as isolated as her counterparts; she lives with her whole family, including a mother and father who are both still alive, as well as several sisters. She also stands apart from Betsy, Evelina, and Emma in her ambivalence toward gossip; throughout the narrative Elizabeth alternates between being seduced by the gossip network as a gullible participant and adamantly pushing it away in disgust and vexation. Of particular significance in this section is the connection between gossip and the marriage market, as each contributes to and benefits from the other. The focus on marriage also seems partially to explain Elizabeth’s reaction toward gossip as she equates the two issues and, like Betsy Thoughtless, is disgusted by the idea of being “married off” on the basis of money alone.

Ultimately, I hope to show that Haywood, Burney, and Austen portray underlying gossip networks in their books in similar ways, all emphasizing the ever-present and almost omniscient nature of such entities while simultaneously underlining their anonymity. They are all careful to differentiate the clearly identifiable individual gossip
figures, such as *Emma’s* famous Miss Bates, from the low hum of the community’s constant and indistinguishable chatter. Still, each positions her heroine(s) in slightly different situations with respect to the gossip machine, and by doing so shows us something new, whether it is the value of listening to one’s own voice at the expense of reputation in *Betsy Thoughtless*; the ability to find one’s place in the world simply by being oneself in *Evelina*; the need for less attention seeking and more serious reflection in *Emma*; or even the simple urgency of understanding how to make up one’s mind in *Pride and Prejudice*. In the end, each of these heroines, a “me” set up against the “them” of community gossip networks, comes away from her experience with a deeper knowledge of herself.
CHAPTER ONE

APPEARANCE, AUTHENTICITY, AND MISS BETSY THOUGHTLESS

Although gossip exists behind the scenes in The History of Miss Betsy Thoughtless, its presence is an extremely prevalent and powerful force on the novel’s individual characters. My argument in this chapter will focus particularly on Miss Betsy herself, as Haywood uses the underlying network of gossip here to bring out, through contrast, her heroine’s more earnest, sincere mindset and interest in authentic essence as opposed to mere surface appearance. Through a look at the gossip culture’s development and presence in this novel, as well as an examination of Betsy’s reactions to and interactions with it, I will unpack Haywood’s somewhat unexpected relationship to the overarching, conservative ideas about female virtue and reputation that were prominent in societies like the one she depicts here.

Since the novel contains few, if any, firsthand scenes showing gossip on a large scale, we are left to discover the existence of such networking through other, more subtle means. One way that Haywood gestures at the idea of a shared information network is to have individual characters mention things they have heard “on the street,” so to speak. When Lady Trusty arrives at Mr. Goodman’s house early in the novel, hoping to talk to Betsy about the importance of her reputation, it is because “she had heard some accounts, which gave her great dissatisfaction” (Haywood 56). The ambiguity, even anonymity, of Lady Trusty’s source indicates its insignificance, that is, the relative unimportance of the gossiper compared to the gossip itself, as well as the universal quality of the information...
shared. We are meant to assume that the accounts Lady Trusty mentions could have come from anyone, since, she implies, everyone knows about Betsy’s flirtatious, coquettish behavior.

Haywood’s narrator also points to gossip’s presence by reporting it secondhand. When a gentleman commoner at Oxford attempts to take advantage of Betsy during her visit, the result is a heated argument and, later, a duel between the young man and Betsy’s brother Francis. We find out that news of the spat “was presently blazed over the whole town; it spread like wildfire, every one made their several comments upon it, and few there were who endeavored to find any excuses for the share Miss Betsy and Miss Flora had in it” (82). In this community, information is not the only thing that spreads quickly from person to person; opinions, too, are added and factual accounts shaped until news stories are no longer what they were when the process began. Malice can enter the equation as well, when the somewhat innocent spread of news becomes the intentional creation of rumors meant to tarnish an individual’s reputation. Betsy is fully aware of this negative side to gossip, and her understanding is clear when she later imagines Miss Harriot, who is being courted by Mr. Trueworth and of whom she is slightly jealous, as “a lady bred in the country, and unacquainted with the artifices frequently practiced in town to blacken the fairest characters” (449). The casual manner in which Betsy glosses the issue of rumor-spreading and malicious gossip emphasizes just how deeply this “dark side” of networking is ingrained in the polite, city society. Lies and slander are accepted as just another part of the information sharing process. Later in the narrative, Lady Trusty demonstrates her own assumption concerning the way news spreads. After Betsy
has married Mr. Munden and the two are in the middle of a huge fight, on the verge of separation, Lady Trusty warns her that “‘the whole affair, perhaps with large additions to it, will soon become the talk of the town, — every one will be descanting upon it, and how much soever Mr. Munden may be at fault, you cannot hope to escape your share in the censure”’ (529, italics mine). Through Lady Trusty, Haywood again highlights the arbitrary and fictionalizing nature of gossip; that people will communicate the story, adding their own (false) details is taken for granted since the process is apparently so common in this world.

The underlying yet powerful nature of the community’s gossip is so persistent and widely acknowledged, in fact, that Haywood has to spend an entire paragraph at the beginning of Chapter XXII in Part III justifying Betsy’s ignorance about Mr. Trueworth’s and Sir Bazil Loveit’s respective marriages. “Those of her acquaintance whom she at present chiefly conversed with, were either ignorant of it themselves, or had never happened to mention it in her presence; so that knowing nothing of Mr. Trueworth’s affairs of late . . . is not to be wondered at” (466). The implication here is that, without Haywood’s careful explanation of these logistics, the situation would seem completely improbable and ridiculous. Of course Betsy would have heard about Trueworth’s wedding; we would expect news of this sort to spread rapidly through the community and inevitably attract Betsy’s attention. The almost defensive tone that Haywood adopts in her attempt to convince us that Betsy’s ignorance “is not to be wondered at” implies that the normal response would be to wonder, to question the lapse in an information sharing system that has to this point proven itself extremely efficient, far-reaching, and nearly
omniscient of community goings-on. When the lack or failure of gossip has to be specifically highlighted and explained, it becomes obvious just how influential and constant a force it normally is.

Understanding and accepting the fact that gossip is inevitable, however, does not in any way make characters in Miss Betsy Thoughtless immune to its intensity and viciousness. The ability of the community to make people feel ashamed or embarrassed with its broadcasting of their mistakes is clear in the various characters’ repeated consideration of “what people will say.” Mr. Goodman, particularly, exhibits a strong fear about how the news of Lady Mellasin’s treachery will be publicly received during and after their separation.

The thoughts of appearing before the doctors of the civil law, to several of whom he was known, to prove his own dishonour, — the talk of the town, — the whispers, — the grimaces, — the ridicule, which he was sensible this affair would occasion when exposed, — the pity of some, — and the contempt he must expect from others; — all these things, though little regarded by him while at a distance, now they came more near at hand, and just ready to fall upon him, gave him a shock, as all the courage he had assumed was not sufficient to enable him to resist. (301)

Mere speculation about how the community will react to his wife’s behavior and his own humiliation is enough to affect Mr. Goodman physically. He is not the only one with this problem, either. Haywood uses this specific situation and other similar ones in Miss Betsy Thoughtless to give us a sense of the deep dread created by the anticipation of
being discussed publicly. Gossip not only serves as a source of news and information, then, but also creates a networked judgment machine whose opinion is so influential that it can make or break a person based on flawed accounts or even blatantly (sometimes intentionally) false rumor.

Through the same means she uses to establish gossip’s general prevalence in the novel, Haywood specifically connects the concept with Betsy Thoughtless. There are almost no scenes involving townspeople explicitly gossiping about Betsy, yet her reputation as a coquette seems to precede her wherever she goes. At Westminster, while wandering among the gravestones, Betsy is accosted by one Mr. Bloomacre and a few other gentlemen. “‘What,’ said he, ‘the celebrated Miss Betsy Thoughtless! — Miss Betsy Thoughtless! the idol of mankind! alone, unattended by any of her train of admirers, and contemplating these mementos of mortality!’” (156). Other men, too, frequently recognize Betsy’s name when they meet her, having previously heard through the grapevine of her ability to command attention, her mass of past and present suitors, and her tendency to juggle several gentlemen at a time. The slightly mocking tone and feigned shock that Mr. Bloomacre expresses here just serve further to stress the presence of this widespread communal knowledge, as he, and by extension, others who know about her, expect to find Betsy in the company of one or more gentlemen at any given time.

At the same time that this culture of gossip exists to spread information about Betsy’s coquetry, it also serves as a gauge for and judge of socially acceptable behavior. To the gossip machine, appearance is everything, even maintained at the expense of what
is actually happening underneath, and Haywood uses the superficial value judgments of
the community to highlight Betsy’s more authentic ones. When Betsy associates with
people of lower quality, then, worthy as they may be of her friendship, she meets with
disapproval and criticism from the public, which responds by making assumptions and
spreading rumors. When she spends time with her friend Miss Forward, for example,
who is a prostitute, Betsy herself is mistaken for one as well. Sir Bazil Loveit, the one
who assumes her to be such, defends himself to Mr. Trueworth later, saying that “‘my
Nancy, indeed . . . told me she was virtuous, but I did not regard what she said on that
score; — I know it is a trick among them to set off one another, to draw in us
men’” (230). In this case, Sir Bazil’s misguided assumption persists even after Miss
Forward corrects him, indicating the lack of weight that the latter’s word holds but also,
more importantly, demonstrating the power of personal associations in determining one’s
reputation. Sir Bazil is familiar with Miss Forward’s profession, so once he sees Betsy
openly displaying a friendship with her, he automatically assumes that she is involved in
the same line of work. Another gentleman makes the same mistake when Betsy later
accompanies Miss Forward to a play; when she asks who he thinks she is, he replies “‘I
take you for a pretty, kind, obliging creature, and such I hope to find you, as soon as we
come into a proper place — in the mean time . . . none of this affected coyness’” (239).
Whereas Betsy looks beyond Miss Forward’s profession and realizes that she is a friend
in need of help and companionship, both of these men are completely unable to see past
the appearance of Betsy’s association with a known prostitute and cannot at all imagine
the possibility that she is not one herself.
Gossip in this appearance-obsessed society also tends to twist what are actually good deeds into what seem like scandalous ones on the surface. Take, for example, Betsy’s philanthropic decision to join with Miss Mabel in caring for the child of their laundress, who dies soon after giving birth. Pure sympathy and kindness of heart motivate this action, but when Miss Flora anonymously tells Mr. Trueworth that the baby is in fact Betsy’s own bastard offspring, he instantly believes her and assumes the worst about the situation. “Who would imagine,” the narrator wonders, “that such a glorious act of benevolence should ever be made a handle to traduce and vilify the author? — yet what cannot malice, accompanied with cunning, do? — It can give the fairest virtue the appearance of the foulest vice, and pervert the just estimation of the world into a mistaken scorn and contempt” (249). As in the case of Betsy’s and Miss Forward’s friendship, outsiders only see what they choose to see on the surface, not thinking or caring to look deeper, to discover the true nature of the issue in question. Consequently, Betsy’s reputation takes a hit, even though underneath the scandalous appearance, she is really behaving honorably, doing nothing at all to deserve the censure of the gossip mill.

Many of Betsy’s friends and family members, also constituents of this judgmental, gossiping community, understand both sides — Betsy’s underlying good intentions as well as her tendency to give the wrong impression — and take steps to warn or reprimand her for behaving in a way that “looks” bad. When Betsy meets up with Mr. Saving after he has married someone else, and he shows her the letter from “A.Z.” (Miss Flora) revealing the treachery of the same, he recommends against Betsy’s initial inclination to take action and show the letter to Mr. Goodman:
“I own with you, that treachery and calumny, such as hers, cannot be too severely exposed and punished; but, madam, consider, that in order to do this, the accident which brought the letter into my possession, and the opportunity you have allowed me of presenting it to you, must be made known, the latter of which you may be confident she would not fail to make such representations of, as would not only hurt me, both with my father and my wife, but also furnish the malicious world, too apt to judge by appearances, with some pretence for casting a blemish on your own reputation.” (199-200, italics mine)

Obviously Mr. Saving, having himself been tricked by Miss Flora out of a chance to court Betsy, feels an anger similar to Betsy’s and likely wishes that A.Z. could be outed and brought to justice. However, he also exhibits a degree of understanding about the norms of gossip that Betsy either has yet to grasp or simply chooses to ignore, and realizes that the consequences of sharing the letter with anyone else would drastically outweigh the benefits in this case.

Mr. Trueworth similarly straddles the line between Betsy and the community that so often loves to scrutinize her. As he sees Betsy’s rekindled friendship with Miss Forward begin to develop in earnest, he warns her that “‘friendships begun in childhood . . . ought to be continued or broke off, according as the parties persevere in innocence, or degenerate into vice and infamy. — This caution ought to be more peculiarly observed in persons of your sex, as reputation in you once lost, is never to be retrieved’” (232). Significantly, he does not accuse Betsy of any real wrongdoing, but
instead is careful to caution specifically against giving the wrong impression. Even if her virtue remains intact throughout her friendship with Miss Forward, people will assume that Betsy has been somehow compromised by association; as Theresa Braunschneider notes, at the same time that Miss Forward functions to emphasize Betsy’s virtue through contrast, “the prostitute’s sexuality is treated almost as an infectious disease, something that might rub off on the virtuous young woman if she does not keep up her guard” (123). Trueworth continues, begging Betsy, “‘do not think of going to the play where so many eyes will be upon you: — reflect, for heaven’s sake, what your modesty will suffer, in seeing yourself gazed and pointed at, by those to whom [Miss Forward] sells her favours; and reflect yet farther, what they will judge of you’” (234). His emphasis on eyes, sight, and seeing here continue to highlight the importance that this society places on outer appearance, even when what is readily visible on the surface is not an accurate depiction of what is really happening underneath.

Betsy’s brother Francis takes this idea one step further by suggesting that appearance is not only as important as the real story, but actually can be more so. “‘What avails your being virtuous?’” he asks Betsy, “‘I hope, — and I believe you are so; — but your reputation is of more consequence to your family: — the loss of the one might be concealed, but a blemish on the other brings certain infamy and disgrace on yourself, and all belonging to you’” (384). Of course, Betsy responds, assuming “the courage to tell him, his way of reasoning [is] neither just nor delicate” and implying that committing a crime or doing a bad deed is much worse than merely being accused of one. She suggests that “‘the loss of innocence must render a woman contemptible to herself, though she
happen to hide her transgression from the world,’” to which Francis counters, “‘but then her kindred suffer not through her fault: — the remorse, and the vexation for what she has done, is all her own. . . . a woman brings less dishonour upon a family, by twenty private sins, than my one public indiscretion’” (384). It is surprising that someone so close to Betsy and, we assume, familiar with her way of thinking and motivation for acting, would hold this opinion. Because Francis is her brother, it would seem logical for him to value her virtue above all, based on a concern for her safety and modesty, so his counterintuitive emphasis on the value of appearance really speaks to his priorities as well as those of the society in which he lives. He, like the gossiping community, seems to care more about Betsy’s reputation, and specifically its effect on his own, than for her actual emotional well-being and physical health.

Later in the narrative, Betsy’s brothers even go so far as openly blaming her for the bad things that happen to her as a result of her coquettish reputation. When Sir Frederick stages an elaborate ruse to convince Betsy that he is dying, promising her two thousand pounds per year as his widow so she will marry him on his deathbed, Betsy is almost forced into a marriage and physically taken advantage of against her wishes. Saved from ruin at the last minute when Mr. Trueworth fortuitously bursts into the room, she is quite shaken following the incident. Still,

Though the condition Miss Betsy was in, made these gentleman [her brothers] treat her with the above-mentioned tenderness, yet both of them were highly incensed against her, for so unadvisedly encouraging the pretentions of a man, whose character she knew nothing of, but from the
mouth of a little mantua-maker; — her consenting to sup with him at the house of that woman, and afterwards running with her into his very bed-chamber, were actions, which to them seemed to have no excuse.

(430)

Again, the Thoughtless brothers only see what they want to see on the surface, without digging deeper to find out the truth of the matter. Betsy’s motivation is not considered, nor is her version of the story requested; although we definitively understand her to the be the victim here based on our presence at the scene as it unfolds, both of her brothers paint her instead to be the cause of the problem.

The understood “solution” to Betsy’s coquetry, and the decline her reputation has suffered based on the surface appearance of her behavior, is marriage. The community, by consistently judging her for her flirtatious ways, close calls, and misadventures, not-so-subtly pushes her toward becoming a wife, as it is the “proper” and expected thing for a woman her age to do. After all, a wife is essentially the opposite of a coquette, as Braunschneider points out: the latter chooses all things (suitors, entertainments, material objects) while the former has made her one choice (that of a husband) and therefore has no more deciding power (99). A letter from Lady Trusty makes explicit the wishes of society, which she herself shares. She writes, “‘you have no tender mother, whose precepts and example might keep you steady in the paths of prudence; — no father, whose authority might awe the daring libertine from any injurious attack; and are but too much mistress of yourself. — In fine, environed with temptations, I see no real defence for you but in a good husband’” (Haywood 207). While Betsy enjoys her independence
and takes pleasure in public entertainments, plentiful gentleman callers, and the occasional slightly scandalous adventure, society looks down on this state as a dangerous and undesirable one. She later says of her brothers that they “‘are in such haste to get me out of the way of what they call temptation, that I believe they would marry me to any man, that was of a good family and had an estate’” (415). The assumption is that if and when Betsy finally marries, she will be rid for good of the questionable behavior that has caused all the judgmental and even malicious gossip about her.

However, Haywood deliberately sets Betsy up in opposition to the force of gossip in her community. As a character, we hardly ever see her actively gossiping. She does confide in close friends, but this usually occurs on a more introspective, emotional level; she is less apt to participate in the casual, frivolous, and sometimes slightly biting type of gossip that is more common among her fellow townspeople. When Mr. Staple and Mr. Trueworth threaten to oppose each other in a duel, for example, we are told that Betsy lost, however, a great part of the satisfaction this adventure might have afforded her, for want of a proper person to whom she might have talked freely on it. — She had, indeed, many acquaintance, in some of whom she, doubtless, might have confided; but she did not choose to be herself the reporter of this story to anyone who had not heard of it from other hands. (184-185)

The fact is not necessarily that Betsy is immune to the entertainment value of sharing news and commenting on events, but rather that she values gossip more as a mode of reflection and method of bonding with friends than as a meaningless activity exercised
for its own sake. She does not want to spread the incident to people who do not already
know about it, which is what the typical member of the gossiping community might do.
Betsy, instead, would have enjoyed simply discussing and elaborating on the situation
with a close friend or acquaintance already familiar with what happened.

When she does engage in frivolous gossip, it is to escape her normal mode of
thorough assessment and musing, and we understand that this is not typical behavior.
Concerning the apartment belonging to the two ladies who “exactly suited with her, in the
most volatile of her moments,” where Betsy retreats to soothe her disappointment
regarding Trueworth, the narrator says: “here was all the news and scandal the town
could furnish; — here was music, dancing, feasting, flattery; — in fine, here was every
thing, that was an enemy to care and contemplation” (294-295). By describing this
environment as one that Betsy enters when she is emotionally upset, Haywood sets it up
as an atypical situation that is not in line with Betsy’s true nature. Gossip is not a habit
for her, but an escape to which she resorts only in the direst of moments. One of the only
other occasions during which Betsy gets involved with the gossip machine occurs when
she is still upset over Trueworth and wanting revenge. Mr. Munden, a man whom she
meets at the apartment, asks for permission to call on her at home, and “this was a favour
Miss Betsy was never very scrupulous of granting, and consented now the more readily,
as she thought the report of a new lover would gall Mr. Trueworth, who, she heard by
some who had very lately seen him, was not yet gone out of town” (295). Obviously
hurt, Betsy wants to get back at the person who is responsible for her pain and thus
behaves here in a way that is unusual. These two moments of Betsy’s retreat to, reliance
on, and manipulation of gossip, shown to be outliers from her standard behavior, confirm by contrast her typical position of dissent from the cruel, gossiping public.

Elsewhere, Haywood constantly portrays Betsy as someone who judges not based on appearance, as society does, but on true character and first-hand evidence. “Young as she was,” the narrator reports, Betsy “might be said to have seen a great deal of the world; and . . . she had a fine understanding, and a very just notion of things” (212). While her community continues to approach her with suspicion and slight distaste based solely on the appearance of her actions, Betsy maintains an open mind and makes judgments cautiously, considering what she knows of a given person from her own experience before deciding what she thinks. Despite Lady Mellasin’s and Miss Flora’s negative gossiping about Miss Mabel, for example, Betsy sees her as she is: modest without affectation, reserved without austerity, cheerful without levity, compassionate and benevolent in her nature, — and, to crown all, was perfectly sincere: — Miss Betsy had never wanted penetration enough to see, and to admire the amiable qualities of this young lady, nor had been at all influenced by the character given of her by Lady Mellasin and Miss Flora. (215)

Betsy’s hesitation toward the report of Miss Mabel that the other two women give stands in stark contrast to the eagerness and speed with which the rest of the townspeople spread information and opinions about Betsy’s own character. We see a similar hesitation to judge in response to Mr. Trueworth’s warning about associating with Miss Forward, when Betsy maintains, “I love Miss Forward, and neither know, nor will believe, any ill of her.
— Whenever I am convinced, that she is unworthy of my friendship, it must be by her own actions, not by the report of others” (232). The problem with making decisions based on the report of others, as much of Betsy’s society tends to do, is that said report can be altered, added to, or even completely made up, which makes it unreliable and an unfair basis for criticism. By focusing on the words and actions of the person in question instead of on what others say, one is enabled to form a much more just and accurate opinion. Even when things go wrong, Betsy continues in the same line of reasoning. After finding out about Trueworth’s marriage, she receives a letter from Miss Forward requesting a loan, and despite her anger toward her former love interest, “the natural goodness of her disposition got the ascendant over all considerations that opposed the grant of Miss Forward’s request. — ‘My acquaintance with her has been fatal to me,’ said she; ‘but that was less owing to her fault than my own folly’” (479). The narrator says about Betsy, in this instance, that “though no one could have more refined notions of virtue, nor a greater abhorrence for vice, than this young lady, yet never did she hate the persons of the guilty, nor would judge with that severity of their faults, which some others, much less innocent, are apt to do” (480). Betsy looks below the surface to find out the real story and then responds accordingly, unlike the outward appearance-obsessed community of gossip that instead rushes to act on hearsay or potentially incorrect impression alone.

By pointing out Betsy’s abstinence from her society’s habits of maliciously gossiping and judging on mere appearance, I do not mean to suggest that she is overly naïve or somehow ignorant of the importance of reputation. She recognizes the truth in
the warnings she receives about behaving “properly” and acknowledges that appearances
do matter in the formation of her reputation, but she still does not seem to concern herself
with what others think and is instead determined to do what makes her happy. Even
despite Trueworth’s warnings about going to the play with Miss Forward, for example,
Betsy follows through with her plans because she enjoys her friend’s company and thinks
that going out with her will be fun. Following their arrival,

Mr. Trueworth’s words ran very much in her mind; — she had lost
no part of them, and though she could not bring herself to approve of the
freedom he had taken, yet in her heart, she could not forbear confessing,
that his admonitions testified the most zealous and tender care for her
reputation; and if given by any one, except a lover, would have demanded
more of her thanks than her resentment.

But, alas! those serious considerations were but of short duration:
— the brilliant audience, — the musick, — the moving scenes exhibited
on the stage, and above all the gallantries, with which herself and Miss
Forward were treated . . . soon dissipated all those reflections, which it
was so much her interest to have cherished, and she once more relapsed
into her former self. (236).

The objective part of Betsy’s mind understands the import of Trueworth’s warning and
the care that motivates it, but this understanding is not enough to alter her way of
thinking completely. She does not value reputation as highly as everyone else does, and
is content with knowing personally that she has done nothing wrong; she feels no need to
convince other people of her innocence and virtue. If she enjoys herself while spending time with someone she likes, experiencing the excitement and glitz of the theater, she sees no reason to stop doing so on account of anyone else’s potential—and unfounded—criticism of her behavior. Further, as Braunschneider suggests, Betsy’s friendship with Miss Forward also demonstrates her “refusal to be controlled. She insists on maintaining her intimacy with Miss Forward precisely because it signifies her resistance to the codes of patriarchal marriage that demand her obedience to a potential husband’s expectations regarding her behavior, including her relationships with other women” (123). Just as she ignores what the community might think of this friendship when deciding to spend time with Miss Forward, she also disregards what Mr. Trueworth, the “potential husband” figure, advises, asserting her independence by opting instead to make her own choice.

A similar thought process extends to Betsy’s approach to marriage as well; she expresses a lack of interest in and sometimes even an active distaste for it, despite the pressure she feels from her community to settle down and become a wife as soon as possible. After Trueworth’s first proposal, when she is still relatively unsure of how she feels about him, she replies, “‘Heavens, how insipid! . . . you may be the Strephon of the woods, if you think fit; but I shall never envy the happiness of the Cloe that accompanies you in these fine recesses. What! to be cooped up like a tame dove, only to coo, and bill, and breed?’” (Haywood 225). Still, her aversion is not necessarily in response to marriage in general, but to the idea of being forced into it for the wrong reasons, such as security or status. Betsy would rather take her time and really get to know and love her future spouse, marrying for love instead of the surface concerns of polite society. We see
proof of this depth and commitment to ideals when she adamantly refuses to marry Sir Frederick as he is supposedly on his death bed and to receive two thousand pounds per year as his widow. “'All the world would condemn you, should you refuse,' cried the surgeon. — 'A virgin widow with two thousand pounds a year,’ added Mrs. Modely” (423). Still, Betsy resists, and when the ring is forced onto her hand, “this action so incensed her, that the instant she got her hand at liberty, she plucked off the ring, and threw it on the ground: — ‘What do you mean?’ said she, — ‘Do you think to compel me to a marriage? — Modely, you have not used me well’” (424). Granted, Sir Frederick is feigning illness to trick and trap her, but were the situation legitimate, it would be a tempting offer. Betsy remains unmoved, however, and maintains that she would not marry him, obligation free, for inheritance money alone. She shows an equal amount of resistance toward her own brothers, who also attempt to persuade her to marry. While she does love them as family, and therefore recognizes and appreciates their suggestions, she ultimately wants to make her own decision. “'The love I have for them,’ said she to herself, ‘will always make me take a pleasure in obliging them, and doing every thing they desire of me; but they are entirely mistaken, if they imagine it in their power to awe me into complaisance with their injunctions’” (342). Just as she forms her own opinions about people, refusing to be swayed by the potentially flawed or false rumors she hears about them, she wants the allowance to select her own husband, on her own timeline, without simply accepting the first wealthy, landed gentleman her family throws her way.
When Betsy at last agrees to marry Mr. Munden, then, we might interpret her behavior as a moment of weakness in which she finally submits to the pressure of gossip and the force of society’s wishes. In choosing him, she gives up her hope of true love, as she has previously mused, “‘I have no aversion indeed to the man, but I am equally as far from having any love for him; — there is nothing in his person, or behaviour, that might make a woman ashamed of being his wife, yet I can see nothing so extraordinary in him, as to induce me to become so’” (415). Even after she is in fact “induced to become so,” she remains uncertain and hesitant about the idea. Her emotional reservations and impending regret are clear as she wonders, “‘what can make the generality of Women so fond of marrying? — It looks to me like an infatuation. — Just as if it were not a greater pleasure to be courted, complimented, admired, and addressed by a number, than be confined to one, who from a slave becomes a master, and perhaps uses his authority in a manner disagreeable enough’” (488). Yet unconvinced of Mr. Munden’s alleged merits, Betsy already longs for the life she will leave behind through marriage, even before her wedding has taken place. Still, she honors her promise and stays true to her word, saying to Lady Trusty,

“I am convinced by my own reason as well as by what your ladyship has been pleased to say, that I have indeed gone too far with Mr. Munden to be able to go back on my honour, and since I find he has the approbation of all my friends, shall no longer attempt to trifle with his pretensions.”
“You will marry him, then?” cried Lady Trusty. — “Yes, madam,” answered Miss Betsy; and added, though not without some hesitation, “since my marriage is a thing so much desired by those to whose will I shall always be ready to submit, Mr. Munden has certainly a right to expect I should decide in his favour.” (484)

Betsy focuses solely on duty, submission, and the desires of others here, never once indicating any degree of love or regard for Mr. Munden. It is her own fault that she has led him on, so to maintain her honor, she will do her duty and marry him; she might not love him, but because so many other people that she cares about seem to, she will follow through. She even uses the word ‘submit,’ suggesting that her impending marriage will be just that—a submission to those who have been pressuring her all this time to settle down. As Mr. Munden could easily represent the community’s emphasis on façade, receiving the news of Betsy’s acceptance “with all the seeming transport of a man passionately in love” even though this is not really the case, the marriage stands even more clearly as a symbol of Betsy’s surrender to the gossip culture and its values. Betsy, normally concerned with the true essence of people, the real personalities that exist under the surface, finally bows to the obsession with appearance.

Although we see some lingering defiance in Betsy’s thoughts before the wedding, as she realizes, “‘I see I am at the end of all my happiness . . . and that my whole future life is condemned to be a scene of disquiet,’” she approaches her new station with determination and resolve, concluding that “‘there is no resisting destiny; — they will have it so: — I have promised, and must submit’” (489). Once she has submitted to the
will of the masses, she sets out to be the best wife she can be and to fulfill her duties accordingly. She “had promised nothing at the altar, that she was not resolved religiously to perform” and “soon became fully convinced that on a strict observance of [her duties] depended her honour, — her reputation, — her peace of mind, and in fine, all that was dear to a woman of virtue and understanding” (497). Combined with her lack of true affection for her new husband, this determination to be a perfect wife shows a striking level of commitment on Betsy’s part. Of course, despite her best efforts, the happiness she and Munden experience after their wedding proves to be “a golden dream, which could not be expected to be of any long continuance: — the gaudy scene vanished at once, and soon a darkening gloom overspread the late enchanting prospect” (498). The couple has money troubles, for which Mr. Munden blames Betsy. He accuses her of using his money for her own frivolities, and despite her meticulous bookkeeping, does not believe she is allotting it wisely. During one of their arguments on this subject, Mr. Munden picks up Betsy’s pet squirrel, a gift from Trueworth, and in anger throws it against a wall, killing it immediately (507). And although Betsy still remains committed to her wifely duties, enduring her husband’s accusations, unfairness, and rage, it is obvious that going along with what everyone else told her to do was not the right decision at all. Her continued submission leads not to happiness and contentment in the role of wife, as the community implied through its pressure on her to marry, but instead to continued arguing and pain; Betsy’s extreme marital dissatisfaction emphasizes just how mistaken she was in compromising herself in order to satisfy others and “save” her coquettish reputation.
Only when hints of her former independence and self-determination begin to return does Betsy gradually start regaining her happiness. She first makes the decision to sleep in a different room, and when Mr. Munden comments, “‘I suppose you fancy this obstinate disobedience to your husband is mighty becoming in you,’” she answers, “‘When a husband . . . is ignorant of the regard he ought to have for his wife, or forgets to put it in practice, he can expect neither affection nor obedience, unless the woman he has married happens to be an idiot’” (510). Lady Trusty insists that living the way the Mundens do, in separate bedrooms and constantly fighting, “‘cannot but be displeasing in the eye of heaven, and must also expose both of [them] to the censure of the world, when once it comes to be known and talked of,’” but Betsy resists (511). Apparently being married is not enough; to avoid gossip, a couple also has to maintain the illusion of happiness and contentment. In Betsy’s opinion, however, reconciliation is not going to happen and it is “‘impossible . . . for me ever to look with any thing but disdain and resentment on a man who, after so many protestations of eternal love, eternal adoration, has dared to treat me in this manner!’” (511). It takes the revelation of Mr. Munden’s affair with Mademoiselle de Roquelair, and his continued permission for her to stay in the house against Betsy’s wishes, to finally break up the marriage; at this point the threat of gossip works for Betsy for once, instead of against her. The lawyer, Mr. Markland, tells Mr. Munden that “as Mrs. Munden is determined to live apart, you have no way to preserve her but by confinement, and I appeal to your own judgment how that would look in the eyes of the world, and what occasion for complaint it would afford to all her friends, who would doubtless have a strict watch on your behaviour’” (599).
It is only through an extremely fortunate series of events that Betsy escapes from this horrible, toxic marriage and is allowed a second chance with Mr. Trueworth. After Mr. Munden’s affair gives Betsy an excuse to separate from him legally, Mr. Trueworth just happens to come upon her as she is standing in her nightgown, gazing at the portrait of him that she stole so long before (606). Following this accidental meeting, Betsy has a revelation:

As to Mrs. Munden, she found that she had no less occasion for exerting the heroine when alone, than when encircled in the arms of Mr. Trueworth: — the accident, which had betrayed the secret of her heart to him, had also discovered it to herself. — She was now convinced, that while she most resisted the glowing pressure of his lips, she had felt a guilty pleasure in the touch, which had been near depriving her of doing so, and that though she had resolved never to see him more, it would be very difficult to refrain wishing to be for ever with him. (612)

Finally, Mr. Munden just happens to die after he gets sick from all the emotional agitation he is going through, which fortunately allows Betsy to act on this revelation. She begins to receive letters from Mr. Trueworth after her husband’s death and “after this an uninterrupted intercourse of letters continue[s] between them for the whole remainder of the year [Betsy’s mourning period]” (625). Had it not been for any one of these links in such a coincidental, fortuitous chain of events, Betsy well may have found herself stuck in a lifeless, threatening marriage to Mr. Munden forever. That is to say, her decision to
go through with the marriage, pushed on her by the community through its gossip about her lifestyle, turns out to prove almost fatal to her lively spirit and true ideals.

Haywood uses the botched relationship with Mr. Munden both as a lesson to Betsy personally and as a more general indictment of gossip’s negative effects on individuals. Following her husband’s death, a wiser, reformed Miss Betsy Thoughtless says to Lady Trusty, “‘I shall always pay a just regard to the advice of my friends, and particularly to your ladyship; but as I have been once a sacrifice to their persuasions, I hope you will have the goodness to forgive me, when I say, that if I ever become a wife again, love, an infinity of love, shall be the chief inducement’” (630). In being granted a second chance with Mr. Trueworth, Betsy is finally getting her way in this regard. She has a whole year before they even think about getting back together to get to know him thoroughly via his letters, and to be sure about her decision. She also gets to choose for herself whom to marry this time, a privilege she should have possessed in the first place. Although Betsy’s brothers are offended that they are not notified prior to Betsy’s and Mr. Trueworth’s wedding, Lady Trusty affirms her newly reclaimed decision-making power when she assures them, “‘I knew nothing of the affair till yesterday, nor had ever seen before the gentleman your sister has made choice of, but love and destiny . . . are not to be resisted’” (633).

Interpreting Betsy’s first marriage to Mr. Munden as a final surrender to the gossip network that she has previously resisted for so long allows us to speculate about Haywood’s stance toward this type of information and opinion sharing. She names her heroine Thoughtless, but Betsy’s choices are almost always well-informed and fully
considered—until the decision she makes to marry Mr. Munden—and the correlation between her choices and her happiness has to be more than pure coincidence. By portraying the first marriage as so unbearable, Haywood underscores the potential for disaster that exists when one allows others to intrude and impose their bias on his or her opinions, desires, and courses of action. We might have expected, from a novel of this time period and genre, some type of thinly veiled propaganda in support of conservative female virtue and modesty, but Haywood gives us something different. She seems to suggest, instead, that appearances are not everything, that what is underneath is what really matters, and that decisions must be made by and for oneself. Ultimately, as in Betsy’s case, too much attention given to appearances, reputation, and the sometimes misguided opinions of the masses will only lead to disaster.
‘NOBODINESS’ AND THE BURDEN OF EVIDENCE IN *EVELINA*

As my focus shifts from Betsy Thoughtless to Evelina Anville, heroine of Frances Burney’s *Evelina*, I will illuminate an important aspect of the latter’s situation that deeply influences her relationship to the communities of gossip in which she spends time—her legal illegitimacy, or ‘nobodiness’. Lisa Zunshine reports that Burney was acutely aware of the public infanticide prevention campaign going on in the late 1700s, and that she was closely connected with the Foundling Hospital through her father’s desire to turn it into a school of music in the 1770s (128). Because of this connection, she was also very familiar with the issue of bastardy; the phrase “by none are they owned” was used in the proposal that Charles Burney presented to Foundling Hospital officials, and Zunshine points out that, regardless of who came up with this exact wording (Charles himself or Frances, acting as his secretary), it “summed up succinctly in the father and daughter’s mind and in the public mind the situation of the young inmates of the Hospital” (131). The idea of ‘nobodiness’ was prevalent in the eighteenth century, when “such appellations as ‘nobody,’ a ‘child owned by none,’ and a ‘son of nobody’ were used in a variety of contexts—including works of fiction . . . to denote illegitimacy, so it was only fitting that the Burneys adapted one such appellation for their argument” (131). We see the same theme come across in *Evelina*, as the heroine is orphaned by the death of her mother and the lack of legal acknowledgment from her father; her guardian, Mr. Villars, calls her a “deserted child” (Burney 108) and she even self-identifies as “to nobody
belonging” (479). In this chapter I will look at Evelina’s relationship to gossip through the lens of her ‘nobodiness,’ which serves to isolate her from much of her company throughout the text. Whereas Betsy Thoughtless’s coquettishness and authentic system of values separates her from her community in Haywood’s novel, this chapter will argue that it is Evelina’s unique position in the social hierarchy, as one born to wealth but unclaimed by such, that sets her apart and makes her the subject of gossip.

The presence of the ingrained communication network in *Evelina* is revealed, as it is in *The History of Miss Betsy Thoughtless*, not through firsthand scenes depicting the active exchange of information and rumor but by way of indirect references to shared knowledge. In a letter to Lady Howard, for example, Mr. Villars casually prefaces a bit of news with “Your Ladyship may probably have heard” (Burney 102). His assumption places him in the position of mere messenger, removing authorship of whatever tidbit he imparts from himself and assigning it instead to an unnamed collective identity, or “grapevine,” so to speak. We see similar, retroactive evidence of a gossip network toward the end of the narrative, when the scandal surrounding Evelina and the false Miss Belmont, who has allegedly stolen her place as heiress, begins to surface. Evelina and Mrs. Selwyn decide to visit the pump-room in Bristol and of their experience, Evelina writes, “It was full of company! and the moment we entered, I heard a murmuring of, ‘That’s she!’ and, to my great confusion, I saw every eye turned towards me’ (463-464). Although no one in the pump-room is in this moment discussing Evelina or her attempt to gain legal acknowledgment from her birth father, the obvious implication is that they have just left off doing so and that everyone knows the state of her private affairs.
Moments later, Evelina comes across Sir Clement Willoughby, who again confirms the presence and operation of a communal gossip network by admitting his knowledge of her being in town, via what he calls “the voice of fame” (465). Even if we cannot directly see gossip spreading from person to person in this novel, Burney makes hints of this process obvious throughout.

Much of this gossip of which we see evidence stems from a certain tension between the spoken and the written word; Evelina’s overarching struggle, to be legally recognized by Sir John Belmont as his daughter and thus attain the money and status to which she is entitled by birth, depends almost completely on a written document. After his marriage to Evelina’s mother, Miss Caroline Evelyn, Belmont “infamously burnt the certificate of their marriage, and denied that they had ever been united,” which leaves Evelina stranded in the status of bastard child. “Every body believed [Miss Evelyn] innocent,” according to Mr. Villars (104), but without official, written documentation, Evelina’s mother can prove neither her marriage to Sir Belmont nor her child’s status as his legal, legitimate offspring. The financial ramifications of Belmont’s actions are outlined by Mr. Villars in a letter to Lady Howard, when he urges her to

Consider, Madam, the peculiar cruelty of [Evelina’s] situation; only child of a wealthy Baronet, whose person she has never seen, whose character she has reason to abhor, and whose name she is forbidden to claim; entitled as she is to lawfully inherit his fortune and estate, is there any probability that he will properly own her? And while he continues to persevere in disavowing his marriage with Miss Evelyn, she shall never, at
the expence of her mother’s honour, receive a part of her right, as the
donation of his bounty. (108)

Mr. Villars’s focus here is mainly on the financial aspect of Sir Belmont’s refusal to acknowledge Evelina, but there are certainly social consequences as well. As the unclaimed daughter of a wealthy gentleman, Evelina finds herself stuck in a gray area of the social hierarchy; she knows herself to be Sir John Belmont’s child, part of an upper-class lineage, but she is prohibited from claiming his name and taking her rightful place in that heritage. Money is important to Evelina for the maintenance of a certain lifestyle, but public acknowledgment and the ability to claim her true name are more what she and Mr. Villars are after, as one of the problems stemming from her ‘nobodiness’ is that she will be seen as a nobleman’s “natural” (illegitimate) daughter and thus shamed (Zunshine 132-133). Evelina’s mother, too, suffers from a sullied reputation as a result of Belmont’s denial, and several of the people closest to Evelina see this as an important factor in the campaign to obtain his written, legal recognition of her as his late wife and Evelina as his daughter. In a letter to Sir John Belmont himself, urging such recognition, Lady Howard writes that

the memory of that excellent lady [Miss Evelyn] has but too long remained under the aspersions of calumny; surely it is time to vindicate her fame! — and how can that be done in a manner more eligible, more grateful to her friends, or more honourable to yourself, than by openly receiving as your child, the daughter of the late Lady Belmont? (Burney 241)
By highlighting the multiple people who would be affected by Sir Belmont’s written testimony, Burney effectively demonstrates how powerful it is, both through its lack as necessary “proof” of what is asserted orally, which has tarnished Miss Evelyn’s reputation and caused Evelina to be the subject of public rumor, and through its potential achievement, which would restore the good names of both child and late mother.

At the beginning of the narrative, of course, such a document has yet to be obtained, and as a result Evelina has been raised by a guardian, Mr. Villars. Just as her bastard status separates her from the social position that she should legally occupy, Mr. Villars raises her in relative physical isolation, apart from polite, city society. Evelina’s guardian has kept her away from “the world” to protect her, to keep her innocent and safe from what he sees as temptations and dangers, but as Lady Howard argues, “it is time that she should see something of the world” (106). Attempting to obtain his permission for Evelina’s travels, she claims that “When young people are too rigidly sequestered from it [the world], their lively and romantic imaginations paint it to them as a paradise of which they have been beguiled; but when they are shown it properly, and in due time, they see it such as it really is, equally shared by pain and pleasure, hope and disappointment” (106). Ostensibly, then, Evelina’s “entrance into the world” should remove her from the isolation that characterizes her life with Mr. Villars, introducing her to a multitude of new people and providing the opportunity for many new experiences and relationships.

Still, even after she enters the home of the Mirvan family, whose existence revolves around entertainment of company and regular attendance at balls, Evelina finds herself isolated in several ways and thus the subject of conversation and lighthearted
ridicule. A large part of this social separation results from her naïveté and ignorance of norms, which has developed as a consequence of her isolated upbringing with Mr. Villars; after several particularly embarrassing social situations, she writes to her guardian, “I think there ought to be a book, of the laws and customs à-la-mode, presented to all young people, upon their first introduction into public company” (185). Of course, she has no such reference and is instead forced to learn as she goes, awkwardly stumbling through assemblies, social calls, and outings at the theater or local gardens. Her first ball is one such uncomfortable event, at which Evelina finds herself completely off-guard, unprepared, and unfamiliar with the protocol of accepting or rejecting potential partners (120-127). At her second assembly, she still has not gotten the hang of things, as she tells a gentleman that she is already engaged, which is a lie. She ends up having to spend the rest of the evening covering her tracks by making up information about the partner who has allegedly stood her up (134). Throughout this embarrassing process, Evelina feels completely out of place and uncomfortable, and her isolation from the new social circle that she inhabits is evident in Mrs. Mirvan’s response to hearing her various faux pas recounted: “she good-naturedly blamed herself for not having better instructed me [Evelina], but said she had taken it for granted that I must know such common customs” (126). No one thinks to explain “such common customs” to her since they are so deeply ingrained in this community’s existence and functioning, and yet because of her lack of understanding, as I will discuss in more depth later, Evelina repeatedly finds herself set apart from the crowd and scrutinized by those who know better.
Another factor contributing to Evelina’s sense of isolation in this community is her association with her grandmother, Madame Duval. Even before we find out her identity and relationship to Evelina, Madame Duval is introduced as an outsider who incurs the suspicion and disdain of Captain Mirvan. She is called “the old French hag” (150) and looked down on for several aspects of her “Frenchness,” including the tendency to “palaver in French gibberish” (158). Evelina almost immediately feels embarrassed to be at all associated with this foreigner, of whom she writes to Mr. Villars, “O, Sir, to discover so near a relation in a woman who had thus introduced herself! — what would become of me, were it not for you, my protector, my friend, and my refuge?” (148). As the party grows more familiar with Madame Duval, they grow to like her less, to the point that Evelina finds herself caught in the middle, motivated either by familial obligation or friendly admiration to please both parties and yet unable to do so. The following scene, occurring between Sir Clement and Evelina immediately after Madame Duval has fought with Captain Mirvan, stormed out of the house, and demanded for Evelina to follow, illustrates the poor heroine’s helplessness particularly well:

“For Heaven’s sake, my dear Madam, compose yourself; surely the violence of such a wretch ought merely to move your contempt: she can have no right, I imagine, to lay her commands upon you, and I only wish you would allow me to speak to her.”

“O no! not for the world! — indeed, I believe, — I am afraid — I had better follow her.”
“Follow her! Good God, my dear Miss Anville, would you trust yourself with a mad woman? for what else can you call a creature whose passions are so insolent? No, no; send her word at once to leave the house, and tell her you desire that she will never see you again.”

“O Sir! you don’t know who you talk of! — it would ill become me to send Madame Duval such a message.” (188).

Here, Evelina can neither follow Sir Clement’s advice nor give him a suitable explanation for not doing so; she is related to Madame Duval but cannot disclose this relationship on account of her undetermined legal identity. Burney uses situations like this one to emphasize her heroine’s detachment, both from polite society, which forms the novel’s gossip network, and from its outcasts, of whom she is embarrassed and ashamed. Betty Rizzo aptly highlights this “social suspension” of Evelina’s, describing her as “uncomfortably poised in a world that can sense [her] fineness but cannot identify [her] entitlement to it” (146). As the narrative progresses, Evelina’s grandmother continues to humiliate her, often in public. At the ball at Hampstead, for example, which Evelina attends with Madame Duval and Mr. Smith, the former “danced in a style so uncommon; her age, her showy dress, and an unusual quantity of rouge, drew upon her the eyes, and, I fear, the derision of the whole company” (Burney 347). She also tends to discuss Evelina’s personal affairs “with such bluntness and severity, that I cannot be enjoined a task more cruel than to hear her” (230). Even Mr. Villars writes of “the violence and vulgarity of this woman, her total ignorance of propriety, the family to which she is related, and the company she is likely to keep,” citing these as reasons why she should
not be allowed guardianship of Evelina (278). While young Miss Anville has a viable explanation for her occasionally inappropriate behavior, that is, her ignorance of customs and the recency of her entrance into society, her grandmother has no such excuse. Madame Duval, simply, is an embarrassment, further drawing the public eye toward her granddaughter through her own unrefined comportment.

If her relationship with Madame Duval does not attract enough attention to Evelina, her later association with the Branghtons certainly fills in the gaps. The more she gets to know this family to whom she is—unfortunately, in her opinion—related, the more she is embarrassed to be seen with them in public; they are, like Madame Duval but to an even greater degree, uncouth and uncultured, a significant source of shame for Evelina. “If I had not been too much chagrined to laugh, I should have been extremely diverted at their ignorance of whatever belongs to an opera,” she writes to Mr. Villars, recalling a conversation among her party about where they would choose to spend their evening. After deciding on and arriving at the opera, the Branghtons further embarrass Evelina by spending quite some time loudly haggling over ticket price. Because of them she dreads being spotted by Sir Clement Willoughby, whose opinion of herself she highly values. “I was extremely vexed, and would have given the world to have avoided being seen by him: my chief objection was, from the apprehension that he wou’d hear Miss Branghton call me cousin” (197-198). Just as she was unable to admit to her relationship with Madame Duval in front of Sir Clement earlier, she cannot now allow him to associate her with the Branghtons. If he does, he might form a less-than-favorable opinion of her based on the company she keeps and then spread this mindset throughout
the refined group to which he belongs. The same problem occurs when the group visits
the gardens at White-Conduit House later in the narrative; Evelina writes that “nothing
could be more disagreeable to me, than being seen by Sir Clement Willoughby with a
party at once so vulgar in themselves, and so familiar to me” (329). Evelina’s concern
points to a clear social hierarchy within the society she is now a part of. Despite her
recent entry into “the world” and consequent minor public blunders, she already discerns
a difference between her naïveté and their boorishness, and realizes that theirs is the type
of behavior about which the more refined members of society gossip. Also understanding
that such opinions might make her seem pompous, Evelina writes to Mr. Villars, “I fear
you will think this London journey has made me grow very proud, but indeed this family
is so low-bred and vulgar, that I should be equally ashamed of such a connexion in the
country, or any where” (198).

The difference between Evelina and her obnoxious relatives perhaps lies in her
tendency to hold back, choosing to remain silent or defer in place of talking loudly or
gossiping as they do. This shows a similarity to Betsy Thoughtless, in that both of these
young women tend to refrain from participating in their respective gossip communities
and thereby further set themselves apart from these groups. At a play that Evelina’s
whole party attends together, she writes that Captain Mirvan “turned very quick to me,
and, in a sneering tone of voice, said ‘For my part, I was most struck with the country
young lady, Miss Prue; pray what do you think of her, Ma’am?’” to which she replies,
“very much provoked, ‘I think — that is, I do not think anything about her’” (183).
Evelina, though new to “the world,” is still very closely attuned to her own ignorance,
and she behaves accordingly; in this specific instance as well as in others like it, she
decides to admit her lack of expertise instead of faking understanding and thereby risking
the embarrassment of being wrong. She also tends to avoid the idle chatter of those
around her and to value people who do the same, such as Lord Orville, who “himself did
not speak much, but the excellent sense and refined good-breeding which accompany
every word he utters, give value and weight to whatever he says” (414-415). When it
comes to verbal communication, Evelina prefers the quality of Lord Orville’s statements
over the quantity of a more foppish, superficial gentleman’s. Like Betsy Thoughtless, she
is more apt to look underneath the surface than to be impressed by mere appearance.

As I mentioned toward the beginning of this chapter, Evelina cannot definitively
claim her true identity as long as the situation with Sir John Belmont, her birth father,
remains unresolved; this makes her standing in society uncertain. Her circumstances are
even more complicated by the fact that a suit against Belmont could backfire and put her
in a worse position, drawing even more public commentary and scrutiny. In a footnote to
the Broadview edition of the text, Susan Kubica Howard points out that

As her grandmother, Madame Duval’s claim to Evelina under the law
would be stronger than that of Villars’, since he is not related to Evelina by
blood. However, Sir John Belmont’s claim would supersede even
Madame Duval’s if he chose to claim Evelina, and a will in Lady
Belmont’s hand naming Villars as guardian would also make Madame
Duval’s claim less certain. Any such lawsuit would make public the shaky
nature of Evelina’s legitimacy and would therefore be something to be avoided from Evelina’s perspective. (208)

It seems, therefore, that Evelina is stuck between the proverbial rock and hard place, with either decision—to pursue a lawsuit and risk publicizing the scandal or to resist doing so and surrender all chance of claiming the Belmont name—leading to questions and scrutiny from the general public. Mr. Villars confirms in a letter to Evelina that “the supposed obscurity of your birth and situation, makes you liable to a thousand disagreeable adventures” (223). No matter which action Evelina chooses, she appears destined to be the subject of speculation and gossip, all for no discernible fault of her own. Indeed, Zunshine notes that while the legal recognition of her biological father remains lacking, Evelina can do nothing to prevent the stigma that consequently falls on her; neither innocence nor virtue is enough to overcome the shame resulting from her status as a bastard child (133). The uncertainty surrounding Evelina’s family and origins, besides causing talk in the community, also leads to a lack of marriage offers. Lady Howard writes to Mr. Villars that “she [Evelina] would have had the most splendid offers, had there not seemed to be some mystery in regard to her birth, which, she was well informed, was assiduously, though vainly, endeavoured to be discovered” (Burney 232). As her looks and general comportment easily qualify her as worthy of male attention, the hesitance of Evelina’s potential suitors to actively seek her attention only serves to emphasize further the importance of her family background in determining her eligibility as a future wife.
After Sir John Belmont writes back to Lady Howard refusing to acknowledge even the possibility of Evelina being his daughter, Evelina refers to herself as “outcast” and “rejected for ever by him to whom I of right belong” in a letter to Mr. Villars (272). A footnote to this statement confirms that “in failing to own Evelina properly as his daughter and to admit to the legality of his marriage to her mother, Sir John Belmont not only leaves her feeling rejected emotionally but legally a bastard, an outcast in society” (272). While Evelina does not seem rejected or outcast on a personal level by the abundance of friends she has made during her time in the city with the Mirvans, Howard brings up an important point. Without the approval of Belmont and the written confirmation of her identity from the same, she will lack certain rights and privileges within the society at large, such as that of marrying well. Her lineage uncertain, she also faces the questions and suspicion, if not disapproval, of those with whom she is not already friends. For instance, she writes a letter to Mr. Villars reporting Mrs. Selwyn’s opinion of Mrs. Beaumont, a friend of a friend who belongs to the upper class: “‘She is an absolute Court Calendar bigot; for, chancing herself to be born of a noble and ancient family she thinks proper to be of opinion, that birth and virtue are one and the same thing’” (416). Mrs. Selwyn’s statement underlines the importance of legally establishing Evelina as John Belmont’s daughter, as many members of this society, though perhaps unlikely to voice it aloud, probably hold a similar view either consciously or not. With the lingering uncertainty surrounding her is likely to come inquiry. Mrs. Beaumont, for one, “somewhat distressed me by the questions she asked concerning my family, — such as, Whether I was related to the Anvilles in the North? — Whether some of my name did
not live in Lincolnshire? and many other enquiries, which much embarrassed me” (416). After spending time with this particular woman and others in the Bristol area, Evelina writes that “I knew not, till now, how requisite are birth and fortune to the attainment of respect and civility” (427).

Frances Burney’s focus on the importance of origins and name in connection with social standing and reputation in the face of a gossiping public contrasts distinctly with Eliza Haywood’s exploration of gossip and reputation as caused or determined by actions in \textit{The History of Miss Betsy Thoughtless}. Whereas Betsy develops recognition in her community as a coquette, through her own actions of manipulating men and stringing along several at a time because she enjoys it, Evelina’s role is much more passive in the determination of her own reputation. Evelina could not have chosen to be born into the situation that she faces—she did not ask Sir John Belmont to ignore her, nor does she have the power to change his behavior or convictions. She ends up in the position of gossip subject somewhat accidentally, due to circumstances beyond her control, and she stays in this position because she is trapped; there is nothing she can do on her own to escape from it. Betsy Thoughtless actively brings about the community’s discussion of her actions by setting herself apart from it, forming and acting upon her own moral standards, but Evelina is painted as a more helpless figure in the face of society’s talk.

Accordingly, Burney forms Evelina’s personality in a way that clearly sets her apart from a character like Betsy Thoughtless, emphasizing her passivity in other capacities besides that of gossip subject. In contrast to Betsy’s tendency to do what she wants, regardless of what others might think of her, Evelina relies heavily on Mr. Villars
for guidance and permission. Early in the narrative, Evelina writes to her guardian, after asking him to allow her travel to London,

Adieu, my most honoured, most reverenced, most beloved father! for by what other name can I call you? I have no happiness or sorrow, no hope or fear, but what your kindness bestows, or your displeasure may cause. You will not, I am sure, send a refusal, without reasons unanswerable, and therefore I shall cheerfully acquiesce. Yet I hope — I hope you will be able to permit me to go! (114-115)

Her substantial dependence on Mr. Villars is underlined here in several ways. First, her referencing him as “father” indicates the depth of her connection to him. Even as she desires and actively seeks the acknowledgment of her biological father, John Belmont, she recognizes the long history and almost familial nature of her relationship to Mr. Villars. She also ascribes all of her emotional reactions in life, whether “happiness or sorrow,” “hope or fear,” to this father figure, demonstrating again how intertwined with him she considers herself to be. Finally, the fact that she expresses desire to go to London, and yet reiterates that she will not do so if he forbids her, reveals the priority that she gives to her guardian’s opinion and instruction, over her own wishes. We see further evidence of this last point later in the narrative when Evelina realizes how attracted she is to Lord Orville. Despite her overwhelming praise and admiration of him, she allows Mr. Villars to convince her not to see him anymore simply through a subtle expression of his own disapproval. She writes in response, “Yes, Sir, I will quit him; — would to Heaven I could at this moment! without seeing him again, — without trusting to my now conscious
emotion!” (459). Throughout this letter, Evelina reiterates to Mr. Villars, “your counsel, your goodness, may teach me how to recover the peace and the serenity of which my unguarded folly has beguiled me. To you alone do I trust, — in you alone confide for every future hope I may form” (459). Through her extremely child-like and complete deference to Mr. Villars’ opinion in all situations, regardless of her own feelings toward whatever issue is at hand, Evelina is revealed to be a very weak, passive character when it comes to decision-making and standing up for herself. Instead of considering others’ viewpoints in combination with her own like Betsy Thoughtless does, Evelina gives preference to these external pieces of advice and completely ignores her own inclinations. The passivity with which Burney characterizes her heroine, then, parallels and lends credibility to the reading I have thus far promoted of Evelina’s involvement (or lack thereof) in the formation of her reputation and the tendency of her community to use her life as a subject of its gossip.

The ease with which Evelina can be persuaded applies not only to Mr. Villars, but also to other characters in the novel, and likely stems at least partially from her understanding that her knowledge of social customs is lacking. Early in the text, for example, despite her previous assertion that she was finished with assemblies and embarrassed at the possibility of repeating the mistakes of her first one, she recounts that “Maria laughed me out of my scruples, and so, once again — I went to an assembly” (133). Just as she later vows to stop seeing Lord Orville before Mr. Villars can even mention such an idea explicitly, Evelina here allows Maria to persuade her with the mere hint of disapproval. At this second assembly she is convinced to attend, Evelina
writes of the partner she attempts to evade, “I was hastening away from him, but he stopt me, and said that I could by no means return to my party, without giving offence, before we had done our duty of walking up the dance. As I know nothing at all of these rules and customs, I was obliged to submit to his directions” (138-139). Evelina is trapped by her own ignorance in this moment; she cannot refute the man’s statements because she is unable to verify whether or not what he says is accurate. If she were to deny him when he was in fact being truthful, she would seem extremely rude and presumptuous, so she chooses to remain silent instead.

In most situations, Evelina tends to go along with what she is told, attempting to conform to what society expects of her and thereby avoid giving people anything beyond the obscurity of her lineage to gossip about. She unfortunately finds what Mr. Villars writes to her to be true: “Alas, my dear child, we are the slaves of custom, the dupes of prejudice, and dare not stem the torrent of an opposing world, even though our judgments condemn our compliance!” (278-279). This is especially true concerning people like the Branghtons, of whom Evelina is deeply embarrassed and with whom she strongly disagrees at times. She cannot, of course, outwardly go against them, because considering Belmont’s refusal to own her, she technically is not any higher in the social order than they are and thus has no authority to oppose them. Burney illustrates Evelina’s typical reaction of yielding decision-making power numerous times throughout her narrative, and many of such occasions concern relatively unimportant matters. When Evelina’s party attempts to decide where to spend the day and everyone is invited to contribute to the discussion, for example, she writes to Mr. Villars that “I said that I
was ignorant what choice was in my power, I must beg to hear their decisions first” (311). Not only does Evelina defer the choice to someone else here, but she also further demonstrates the uncertainty she feels about her standing in society and in this particular group of people. The fact that she does not even know what choice she is qualified to make means that she is afraid to overstep the boundaries proscribed for her by her shaky social position. Thus, she passes off to others the responsibility and privilege of choosing. She is again pressured into following the will of another person at Kensington-gardens, when her party finds out that she knows Lord Orville and subsequently bullies her into using his carriage. Although Evelina resists in this moment, Madame Duval says “Ma foi, child . . . you don’t know no more of the world than if you was a baby,” which effectively shames her naïve granddaughter into compliance (372). Evelina again finds herself in the position she was in with Sir Clement Willoughby earlier at one of the assemblies—she disagrees with her grandmother and feels that it is wrong to use her acquaintance with Lord Orville to justify borrowing his carriage, yet she is prevented from speaking up on her own behalf because she still has a bit left to learn about the ways of “the world” that she has recently entered. Ironically, of course, Evelina already seems to know more than her grandmother about being socially polished and polite at this point.

Unlike Betsy Thoughtless, Evelina does demonstrate concern for what others think about her behavior and about the people with whom she associates. However, she seems to focus less on the collective opinion of society at large and more on that of individual, significant people, such as Sir Clement Willoughby and, more important, Lord Orville. These two men have a conversation about Evelina at the first ball she attends,
and when their gossip is overheard by Maria Mirvan and reported to Evelina later, the latter writes to Mr. Villars that “I cannot but be hurt at the opinion he [Lord Orville] entertains of me” (131). She is again completely mortified when she realizes that Lord Orville is present at Kensington-gardens, where she has gone for the day with the Branghtons and several other acquaintances. As she admits in a letter to her guardian, “I dreaded being seen by him again, in a public walk, with a party of which I was ashamed” (371). Later the same day, after the incident involving the party’s use of Orville’s carriage against Evelina’s better judgment, her shame is redoubled. She writes, “I was half frantic, I really raved; the good opinion of Lord Orville seemed now irretrievably lost. [. . .] I could not but conclude that, for the rest of my life, he would regard me as an object of utter contempt” (377). Such incidents really bring into relief both the helplessness that Evelina feels as a consequence of her social status and the passivity that results from this position.

Despite her general tendency to go along with what is expected of her and bow to the wishes of others, we do see in Evelina a certain skepticism of the upper class that she spends time with, and also a development of her own set of values. In Bristol, when Mrs. Selwyn advises Evelina to flatter and fawn over Mr. Lovel, Evelina recounts her saying that “‘though he is malicious, he is fashionable, and may do you some harm in the great world.’” She then retrospectively outlines her response to Mr. Villars: “I should disdain myself as much as I do him, were I capable of such duplicity, as to flatter a man who I scorn and despise” (428). Even if she does not act as definitively and defiantly as Betsy Thoughtless, she does, like Haywood’s heroine, have her own standards to which she
demonstrates a strong commitment. Further confirming her isolation from and stance toward the community, she demonstrates a pattern of setting Lord Orville apart as well. During the same trip to Bristol, she describes this separation between the man she is growing to love and the rest of the company that she keeps: “At table, where he always sits next to me, he obliges me by a thousand nameless attentions, while the distinguishing good-breeding with which he treats me, prevents my repining at the visibly-felt superiority of the rest of the company” (430). Not only does Evelina contrast Lord Orville’s behavior with that of the rest of their group of acquaintances, but she also draws a distinction between “good-breeding,” meaning genuine politeness or manners, and “superiority,” indicating the haughtiness that results, she implies, from being born to a wealthy family. Due to her own situation, Evelina is unable to claim the name of Belmont and therefore is excluded from the class of those in the latter category, but she has demonstrated on countless occasions in the text her attempts to behave in a way that would put her in the former. She is technically a bastard at this point, and yet she behaves with much more class and “good-breeding” than some of her more upper-class friends and relatives. By pointing it out in Lord Orville, she highlights the same quality in herself and subtly condemns the conduct of the bulk of high class society, of whose gossip she is often subject.

Ironically, however, it is Evelina’s genuinely good character and attempts to be kind that sometimes result in Lord Orville’s forming the wrong opinion. For example, he catches her by the garden gate in Bristol, talking to Mr. Macartney; he is in fact thanking her for her care and support, but Orville makes (incorrect) assumptions about what is
really going on, and undoubtedly alters his opinion of her despite his assurances to the contrary (432-433). Trying to decide whether or not to meet with Macartney the following morning, Evelina writes, “Desirous as I am of the good opinion of Lord Orville, I will endeavour to act as if I was guided by your [Mr. Villars’s] advice, and, making it my sole aim to deserve it, leave to time and to fate my success or disappointment” (437). Evelina’s dependence on her father figure is still intact, but we start to see a clearer struggle emerge from this point forward, between the desire to be a good person and the necessity of maintaining a good appearance, at least in the face of Lord Orville. Having decided to talk with Macartney after all, she is again caught by Orville as she proceeds toward the appointed meeting place and confesses to Villars, “determined as I was to act honourably by Mr. Macartney, I yet most anxiously wished to be restored to the good opinion of Lord Orville” (439). Evelina resorts to her identity of uncultured “rustic” when she says to Orville in response to his unvoiced conclusions about the nature of the rendezvous, “there is no young creature, my Lord, who so greatly wants, or so earnestly wishes for, the advice and assistance of her friends, as I do; I am new to the world, and unused to acting for myself — my intentions are never wilfully blameable, yet I err perpetually!” (441-442). And err she does, ending up in the proverbial wrong place at the wrong time on multiple other occasions as well, always in front of Lord Orville. Just as Sir Clement is proclaiming his love for Evelina in the garden at Bristol, “who should come in sight, as if intending to pass by the arbour, but Lord Orville! Good Heaven, how did I start! and he, the moment he saw me, turned pale, and was hastily retiring; — but I called out, ‘Lord Orville! — Sir Clement, I insist upon
your releasing me!” (484). Evelina usually has trouble convincing Orville of her innocence in situations like this, which points to the arbitrary nature and lasting effect of initial impressions. No matter what she says, he—and, by extension, all of those who gossip about her—is not easily swayed from the assumptions he forms based on appearance. She is fully acquitted from his speculation about Macartney only when she can finally confess her true identity in connection with him. When Lord Orville comes in as she is relaying this same information to Macartney himself, the former again questions the situation. But “‘My Lord,’ cried I, eager to clear myself, ‘Mr. Macartney is my brother!’” (507). Because both siblings are now aware of their relationship, Evelina allows herself to tell Orville as well, which then rescues her from the delicate balance she has been attempting to maintain between respecting Macartney’s right to privacy and still preserving her own good reputation in Orville’s eyes.

On the plot level, it can be argued that Burney uses the ideas of gossip and reputation, specifically regarding Evelina’s obscure origins, to highlight the apparent selflessness of Lord Orville’s love for her. Evelina writes, after being sent away by Sir John Belmont the first time, “For now that all my hopes of being acknowledged seemed finally crushed, I felt the nobleness of his [Lord Orville’s] disinterested regard so forcibly, that I could scarce breathe under the weight of gratitude which oppressed me” (510-511). Worried that she will never be recognized legally and publicly by her deserved title of Miss Belmont, Evelina now by necessity turns her attention toward her
potential husband, who would be her last available avenue for attaining the respect from society that she is entitled to.¹ Still, Evelina writes,

> When I expressed my amazement that he could honour with his choice a girl who seemed so infinitely, in *every* respect, beneath his alliance, he frankly owned, that he had fully intended making more minute enquiries into my family and connections, and particularly concerning *those people* he saw me with at Marybone, before he acknowledged his prepossession in my favour. (535)

Despite the nobleness of his actions, perhaps Lord Orville’s love is not as selfless and disinterested as it seems initially to Evelina; still, whatever the true nature of his motivation, his relationship with Evelina does bring into further relief the issues of legitimacy and reputation within this society. Because of the undetermined status of Evelina’s social standing before she is confirmed by Sir John Belmont, she is forced to rely on the generosity and ostensible selflessness of those who, like Lord Orville, do not assign as much weight as the majority does to upbringing and family history.

Although the heroine’s relationship to the gossip network of her community is not quite as simple here as the one I traced in *The History of Miss Betsy Thoughtless*, there are striking parallels in addition to the complexities. Betsy and Evelina both exist in positions of relative isolation from society—whether self-imposed through difference of opinion, or inescapable due to lack of legal parentage—and they both formulate value

¹ Interestingly, although Burney portrays Evelina’s situation here (that is, her attracting a wealthy man despite her legal bastardy) as extremely fortunate and somewhat rare, Zunshine counters that her illegitimacy might not have meant complete social ruin as the novel seems to assume. In her study of majority opinion on the subject of illegitimacy at the time, Zunshine emphasizes tolerance toward this condition and gives several examples of illegitimately born children growing up to marry well, hold public office, and so on (134).
systems that clash with that of their respective communities. Betsy is able to act on her impulses, choosing to do what makes her happy even if it causes people to gossip, while Evelina does not have the same luxury. Still, Burney shows us hints of a certain perceptive and critical nature in her heroine even as she portrays the inescapable passivity or powerlessness that come from her undecided social standing. Like Betsy, Evelina sees imperfections and hypocrisy in the upper-class, and prefers to look deeper when forming ideas and relationships, but her ability to act on her own set of values is compromised by her shaky position in the social hierarchy. On one hand we find ourselves sympathizing with Evelina for the majority of the narrative, but on the other, we might celebrate with her if we read the novel’s ending as a redemptive moment of agency.

Just as Betsy gains a second chance at happiness through a combination of extremely fortunate events and her own actions at the conclusion of her story, it can be argued that Evelina ultimately emerges victorious in the battle she has been fighting with her biological father throughout this text, by supplanting the written document she has wanted all along. It is as if Evelina *becomes* text, making the paperwork confirming her identity almost unnecessary; Burney hints at this transformation earlier in the novel when Mr. Villars refers to Evelina as “‘a book that both afflicts and perplexes me’” (394) and then assures her before she visits Sir Belmont that “‘without any other certificate of your birth, that which you carry in your countenance, as it could not be effected by artifice, so it cannot admit of a doubt’” (476). Although Evelina takes to the meeting with her true father a letter from her mother, which begs him to acknowledge Caroline as his late wife and Evelina as his daughter, she does not end up needing it—her appearance is proof
enough of who she is. When Sir John Belmont finally sees his real daughter for the first
time, he cries out, “‘My God! does Caroline Evelyn still live!’” (516), and though he
doubts Evelina’s love, she assures him that if he “‘could but read my heart’” he would
understand her true feelings (529). Despite her ongoing frustration and confusion toward
the society that she inhabits, and the passivity and silence which it forces, Evelina finally
gets an opportunity to communicate her true identity at the novel’s crucial moment. We
see this as a second chance, one that frees her from the web of gossip that has kept her
trapped and finally allows her a true “entrance into the world” as the recognized daughter
of Sir John Belmont and wife of Lord Orville.
Jane Austen critics are no strangers to the subject of gossip; it is one that emerges frequently in studies of her work. Jan Gordon, Mary Hong, Casey Finch, and Peter Bowen have all looked closely at the presence of gossip in various of Austen’s novels, and each has identified it as a central component of her work that interacts with everything from plot, to character development, to narrative style. The abundance of this research stands in stark contrast to the extreme lack of attention given to the same ideas in the Haywood and Burney works of the previous two chapters, which is surprising considering that gossip’s function is very similar in these texts as compared with Austen’s. Still, much of the focus of these and other Austen critics has been on gossip in a more explicit sense, as it is clearly represented in certain scenes and through certain characters, such as Emma’s Miss Bates, the famous “great talker upon little matters” (Emma 18). Finch and Bowen do draw larger connections between Austen’s free indirect discourse style and the opinions of the Highbury community as a whole, and Gordon does discuss gossip more broadly as a process, but the closest I have found to a critical examination of the gossip community that I am interested in is Adela Pinch’s study of Austen’s use of ‘every body’ in Emma. This idea has been invaluable to my exploration of the networks of information sharing that exist behind the scenes in Austen’s novels.
Due to the wealth of critical material that already exists on Austen and her work, I will limit my discussion to *Emma* and *Pride and Prejudice*, the two books of hers that in my opinion represent most clearly the presence of gossip as its own, almost omniscient, character. It would make a certain sense to arrange the treatment of these two works in chronological order, with *Pride and Prejudice* (1813) preceding *Emma* (1815), but I have chosen to address them in an opposite arrangement. *Pride and Prejudice*, though written and published first, is the better choice to end with because of the unique situation of its protagonist, Elizabeth Bennet; of Betsy Thoughtless, Evelina Anville, Emma Woodhouse, and herself, she is the only heroine who is not particularly isolated. Betsy, Evelina, and Emma are all missing at least one parent if not both, and over the course of their respective narratives Betsy and Evelina have to readjust to one or more new environments, which they inhabit for extended periods of time. Elizabeth, on the other hand, lives with a full family, including mother, father, and even several sisters, and only leaves home occasionally, never going far or staying too long. That she does not experience any physical or symbolic isolation from her parents or her home to speak of means that her relationship to the gossiping community is slightly different from that of the other heroines, and thus I will end this chapter with her.

Gossip networks in Jane Austen’s novels appear, as they do in the works by Haywood and Burney that I have already examined, as extremely influential, yet vague and anonymous forces. The effect of community information networks is perhaps even stronger here, as they have become increasingly efficient and seamlessly ingrained into the societies that Austen creates, present in her narratives as a collective character or
voice. Pinch, as I have noted, offers a reading of this societal entity, called “every body,” specifically regarding the Highbury community in *Emma*, but a similar idea is present in *Pride and Prejudice* as well. Scenes depicting information sharing between two individuals do exist in these works, but they are rare; the assumption seems to be that everyone somehow already knows of the latest gossip, having absorbed it from the behind-the-scenes rumor mill that we can feel the effects of but cannot see. Gordon suggests that, “because it can be passed on without leaving any authorial traces, subjects and objects of gossip tend to become interchangeable: once repeated, gossip has a multiple authorship which obscures the time when a particular version (or particular person) came to be enclosed in the narrative” (72). Such is the case in the world that Austen creates in her novels, the result being a mass persona of “them,” the townspeople, set up against the “us” of an individual family or the “me” of a single female protagonist such as Emma Woodhouse or Elizabeth Bennet. No one can be singled out of this collective identity, just as no one “author” can be identified as the originator of a rumor of piece of news passed through the community by way of its verbal network. Logistically, gossip must travel from one person to another in a chain of single information exchanges, but because this process happens so rapidly, and away from our view as readers, we perceive in the text an incorporated, extremely efficient, almost invisible body of knowledge; when something of note occurs in the community its members suddenly just seem to know about it, without being told by any one person in particular.
In *Emma*, gossip emerges as its own definitive, yet authorless entity, gestured toward in the text through the use of third-person indefinite pronouns such as ‘everybody’ and ‘everyone’. These pronouns, along with frequent passive sentence constructions, make topics seem to arise organically, without any one person’s initiating them; we might read that “Mrs. Elton was spoken of” or that “somebody talked of rain” but we neither find out who is responsible for bringing up these subjects, nor does it seem to matter anyway—the point, simply, is that conversation happens and commentary is shared (*Emma* 251). Pinch notes that

the novel’s narrator as well as its characters often appeals to another ghostly but ever-present character in Highbury named ‘every body’ . . . .

‘Every body’ in *Emma* is a fascinating, elastic character whose inclusiveness or exclusiveness shifts and wanes according to the logic we can call suburban. Sometimes ‘every body’ is clearly just the Highburians . . . but sometimes ‘every body’ in *Emma* gestures towards a broader consensus, a truth universally acknowledged. (xv)

Terms like “everybody” are used frequently in this text, and the casual, unexplained nature of such instances is evidence of the connection that exists between Highbury’s inhabitants. For example, when Emma’s sister Isabella is visiting the Woodhouse family with her husband and Mrs. Churchill comes up in conversation, Isabella does not hesitate to assure her father of her understanding; after all, “‘every body knows Mrs. Churchill’” (*Emma* 97). Even those who might not be included in the immediate area somehow receive news about the people and happenings of Highbury, and Isabella is no
exception. She seems just as familiar with the subject of Mrs. Churchill as if she still shared a house with Emma and Mr. Woodhouse and was privy to their daily conversations about this woman.

‘Every body’ also appears in the text as a way to gesture toward commonly held views and standards within the community, which are unquestioned and simply assumed to be so. While speaking with Emma about Frank Churchill and his supposed impending arrival in Highbury, Mr. Knightley expresses his belief that “‘They know, as well as he does, as well as all the world must know, that he ought to pay this visit to his father; . . . Respect for right conduct is felt by every body’” (116). When he continues, confessing that “‘[Frank’s] letters disgust me,’” Emma assures him that “‘Your feelings are singular. They seem to satisfy every body else’” (117). This passage portrays first Frank, then Mr. Knightley as an individual in opposition to an unnamed, ubiquitous force; we are to understand that the former is loved, yet slightly chastised for the delayed fulfillment of his promise to visit, while the latter is somehow wrong for disapproving of the letters that ‘every body’ else seems to enjoy so much. The “broader consensus” or “truth universally acknowledged” that Pinch mentions is also evident here, as “respect for right conduct” is apparently felt not just by Highbury citizens but by the larger category of polite society. Another popular subject of Highbury gossip, Jane Fairfax, evokes additional references to the general populace represented by ‘every body.’ Emma’s inquiring about Miss Fairfax’s upcoming visit prompts Miss Bates to gush that “‘every body is so surprized; and every body says the same obliging things. I am sure she will be as happy to see her friends at Highbury, as they can be to see her’” (124). Again, several presumptions about
the population are being made here; it is assumed that all of Highbury knows Jane Fairfax, has heard that she will arrive in one week, and looks forward to the visit. Miss Bates would likely consider it improbable and even ridiculous that anyone who matters at all to her would be unaware of these things.

Austen never specifies exactly who she means by ‘every body,’ and neither do any of the characters who use this term or a similar one when referring to well-known neighborhood gossip or shared knowledge. This lack of clarity serves to reinforce the degree to which the idea of ‘every body’ is ingrained in the collective mind of the community, as the townspeople’s familiarity with and understanding of it necessitates no real explanation beyond the offhand reference. Several critics further highlight the inescapability of the communal gossip culture in Highbury; Finch and Bowen call *Emma* “emphatically a novel that gossips” (3), Pinch goes on to suggest that “Highbury works as a community through talk” (xvi), and John Wiltshire posits that “by having William Larkins, Robert Martin, Mrs. Goddard, and many others . . . partially within our field of vision [referenced through various gossip but never formally introduced by Austen as characters], the novel persuades us of their richly extended existence beyond it” (68). By alluding to people outside of the immediate circle of characters we know more intimately, Austen not only hints at the existence of a reality that she has left unexplored, but also makes it clear that her central characters hold a shared knowledge of this reality. Our understanding of these specific references is less important than our recognition of what they signify, that is, the larger circle of close-knit Highbury society whose presence is implied without being explicitly introduced or described.
As several critics have also observed, Highbury’s self-contained nature adds to the effect of the gossip phenomenon in this text. Wiltshire, for one, calls *Emma* a novel in which circumscribed settings, limited spaces, and confinement (comforting and enabling, but at the same time imprisoning and suffocating) are crucially important. Highbury, the country village almost the size of a town, in which the novel is set, is conceptually, if not geographically, isolated from the rest of the world. (67)

This sense of isolation compounds the likelihood that a strong network of shared knowledge will naturally develop. The community has a very small-town feel, and we realize from the way characters talk that everyone seems to know everyone else and that all are aware of their fellow townspeople’s—and those fellow townspeople’s relatives’, as evidenced by the cases of Frank Churchill and Jane Fairfax—private business. Wiltshire continues, emphasizing the integration of gossip in daily life: “the novel generates, especially in volume II, a sense of busy interplay between characters and between social classes, a network of visiting, gossip, charitable acts, and neighbourly concern” (68).

A large part of the “busy interplay” that Wiltshire describes in this novel is letters. While ostensibly private in nature, written correspondence in *Emma* is openly passed around and discussed, arguably moreso than is such communication in *Miss Betsy Thoughtless*, *Evelina*, and even *Pride and Prejudice*, and it not only provides a subject for gossip but also at times even comprises a type of gossip in itself. Frank’s letters to Mr. and Mrs. Weston, for example, are widely known of and gossiped about in Highbury.
For a few days every morning visit in Highbury included some mention of the handsome letter Mrs. Weston had received. “I suppose you have heard of the handsome letter Mr. Frank Churchill had written to Mrs. Weston? I understand it was a very handsome letter, indeed. Mr. Woodhouse told me of it. Mr. Woodhouse saw the letter, and he says he never saw such a handsome letter in his life.” (Emma 15)

Austen does not attribute these statements to anyone in particular, but allows them to stand alone as a representation of the general murmur passing through town about Frank’s supposed impending visit. That there is no known speaker contributes to the idea of gossip’s pervasiveness and anonymity in this text; after all, the specific person is not as important here as the process by which news of the letter and its contents spreads throughout Highbury. Further, it is clear that those who are represented by this example conversation have not actually read the letter for themselves, but have merely “heard” of the letter and therefore “understand” certain things about it. The repetition of the “handsome” descriptor highlights the aspects of gossip and hearsay at play here—since most people are unfamiliar with the specific details of what Frank wrote, they are forced simply to repeat verbatim what they have heard from others, who may or may not have heard the letter described a certain way by a creditable source. Even Mr. Woodhouse, however, when sharing news of one of Frank’s letters, which he supposedly read, lapses into uncertainty and vague language. He reports that “it was an exceeding good, pretty letter, and gave Mr. and Mrs. Weston a great deal of pleasure. I remember it was written from Weymouth, and dated Sept. 28th—and began, “My dear Madam,” but I forget how
it went on; and it was signed “F.C. Weston Churchill.”—I remember that perfectly’” (77).

Written correspondence is read, shared, and discussed in similar ways throughout the text. Letters from Jane Fairfax receive the same treatment, as is evident from Emma’s rant about her:

“One is sick of the very name of Jane Fairfax. Every letter from her is read forty times over; her compliments to all friends go round and round again; and if she does but send her aunt the pattern of a stomacher, or knit a pair of garters for her grandmother, one hears of nothing else for a month. I wish Jane Fairfax very well; but she tires me to death.” (70)

Although we might generally consider written communication more private than its spoken counterpart, owing to its tendency to be directed toward a specific person, the boundaries between the two media become extremely blurred in *Emma*. Gordon, in her article about gossip and families in Austen, explores the connection between texts (letters) and gossip in these works and claims that each medium can and does indeed mimic the other.

In Jane Austen gossip is the mode by which letters are made to speak, but the dialogic encounter between gossip and letter is complicated by the way in which each assumes characteristics of the other. Letters are given an increased vehicularity by gossip, and conversely gossip can be targeted to a specific audience. (64)

In *Emma* letters aid the travel of news that oral gossip facilitates; a note written to one or two people is quickly shown to others, sometimes by the author’s own intent, and its
contents—or at least their essence—further spread by word of mouth. Here, written and spoken methods of communication work together to establish an even more efficient network of gossip connecting the inhabitants of Highbury and its surrounding areas.

Against the backdrop of gossip’s constant buzz in this community, certain notable gossiping individuals do emerge, one of the most obvious being Miss Bates. Hong identifies *Emma* to be “one of Jane Austen’s most detail-oriented novels” and Miss Bates to be “its most detail-oriented character” (237). Indeed, Miss Bates is immediately established as someone who is especially well-informed about everyone and everything, but as Hong argues, she tends to gossip to the point where other characters get lost in the minutiae of her long rants. “Miss Bates is so immersed in the details of daily life, and, more importantly, the narrating of them, that she confounds attempts by Emma and readers alike to make sense of her words” (237). Emma, herself very much involved in Highbury’s culture of gossip as I will argue later, vents her frustration at Miss Bates for the dullness of her frequent, almost nonsensical babbling in the novel’s Box Hill scene that has become so infamous among Austen critics. When Emma and Frank propose a way for the party to entertain each other, with “‘either one thing very clever, be it prose or verse, original or repeated—or two things moderately clever—or three things very dull indeed,’” Miss Bates exclaims, “‘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?’” (*Emma* 291). The assumption, as Miss Bates “[looks] around with the most good-humoured dependence on every body’s assent” is that the party will humor her and politely nod or laugh along, but Emma, exasperated, snaps, “‘Ah! ma’am, but there may be a difficulty. Pardon me—but
you will be limited in number—only three at once” (291). Emma is not exactly condemning all gossip in this moment, as she herself is just as deeply interwoven with the community’s information network as Miss Bates, but is looking down on a specific type of gossip—the idle chatter of Miss Bates, which she deems meaningless and, it seems, beneath her. Still, Hong is careful to show that “the fact that Emma’s public condemnation of Miss Bates’ details leads to her subsequent self-recognition renders these insignificant details simultaneously important to the heroine’s development” (237). Thus we find that all gossip can be powerful in affecting the behavior of its subjects and participants, even if it is given unequal weight or viewed differently by those who take part in it on each of its various levels.

The use of “every body” in the Box Hill scene is especially important, as it sets Emma up as an individual apart from the collective body that this pronoun represents; by refusing to give the assent that Miss Bates expects from “every body” and instead responding with criticism, Emma separates herself from the group, implying that she is somehow above it and inviting our examination of her relationship to the larger information-sharing network of Highbury. Like Betsy Thoughtless and Evelina Anville, Emma finds herself on one hand separated from this network, but on the other deeply affected by its presence. Her relationship to gossip is markedly different from that of the heroines I have discussed in previous chapters, however, because unlike them, she does not try to avoid being talked about; she in fact desires and welcomes it. Emma relishes being well-known and basks in the attention that she is given by other Highburians. Whereas Betsy and Evelina have to deal with comments from the public that range in
their degree of negativity, Emma seems to enjoy a very positive reputation in the eyes of her community, as their darling. We learn early in the narrative that “Mr. Knightley, in fact, was one of the few people who could see faults in Emma Woodhouse, and the only one who ever told her of them” (Emma 9-10). Even if, as Rachel Oberman states, “the careful reader infers that the community overrates the untried, indulged Emma” and “her comfortable existence rests not on her intrinsic worth but on her pampered position” (8), the truth is that with almost nothing negative being said about her, Emma has no reason to fear, avoid, or become defensive in the face of the gossip network as Betsy and Evelina do.

Emma’s confidence in and enjoyment of the community spotlight largely stem from her relationship with her father, who is, in some regard, absent. Gordon identifies dysfunctional or incomplete families as at least a partial cause for the narrative entrance of both gossip figures, such as Miss Bates (58), and gossip as a practice, suggesting that “in a domain of very weak father figures, gossip alone has the authority of a given, at times, almost an assumed universal” (60). Such could be argued in Emma’s case, as Austen writes that Emma “dearly loved her father, but he was no companion for her. He could not meet her in conversation, rational or playful” (Emma 6). Mr. Woodhouse, “having been a valetudinarian all his life, without activity of mind or body” is physically present, but offers little in the way of intellectual stimulation, paternal guidance, or entertainment for his daughter (6). Gordon also claims that Austen achieves “the violent death of the mother . . . in the plots of Emma, Persuasion, and Mansfield Park, where deceased or incredibly soporific matriarchs allow abundant space for the intrusion of the
ever-busy gossip figure as a virtual second mother” (83). Even though Mrs. Woodhouse’s “place had been supplied by an excellent woman as governess, who had fallen little short of a mother in affection,” this maternal figure, Miss Taylor, is removed from Emma’s life when she marries and moves away, putting Emma “in great danger of suffering from intellectual solitude” (Emma 6). Besides the physical absences of her deceased mother and now married governess, and the emotional and intellectual shortcomings of her ineffectual father, Emma also misses her sister, who “though comparatively but little removed by matrimony, being settled in London, only sixteen miles off, was much beyond her daily reach” (6-7). Emma therefore finds herself somewhat isolated, and voluntarily develops a deeper interest and involvement in matters of the community in order to compensate for her lack of intellectual stimulation at home. By gossiping, staying informed about Highbury goings-on, and meddling in the business of others via matchmaking, she keeps herself entertained and gains a sense of being needed.

As a result of her unique position in the community, that of being known for her matchmaker role (whether or not her matches are successful or her predictions correct) and admired by almost everyone, Emma has a much different relationship to the gossip network than the other heroines I have studied. Whereas Betsy Thoughtless approaches gossip defensively and defiantly, as she operates according to her own value system and does not care what people say, and Evelina reacts toward it with apprehension because of her unconfirmed parentage and the unsettled social status that results, Emma welcomes and even invites the public gaze. She loves being talked about and tends to get so

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wrapped up in imagining how her fellow Highburians see her that she fails to interpret
people and events accurately. After Emma’s governess, Miss Taylor, marries and Emma
claims that “I made the match, you know, four years ago,” her father replies, “I wish
you would not make matches and foretell things, for whatever you say always comes to
pass. Pray do not make any more matches” (10). Yet Emma ignores him and moves on
to her next project—Harriet Smith—who “would be loved as one to whom she could be
useful. For Mrs. Weston [née Taylor] there was nothing to be done; for Harriet
everything” (21). With Mrs. Weston successfully married, Emma’s attention turns to
finding Harriet an appropriate mate; she coaches her new friend to reject Mr. Robert
Martin’s proposal and fixates on setting Harriet up with Mr. Elton instead, focusing on
this match so intently that she completely misinterprets Mr. Elton’s affections. Because
she is so certain “it would be an excellent match; and only too palpably desirable, natural,
and probable” (28), she ends up “quite convinced of [his] being in the fairest way of
falling in love, if not in love already” with Harriet (33-34) and this presumption colors
her understanding of all the signs that should have pointed to herself as his love interest.
All of Emma’s work toward getting Harriet together with Mr. Elton ends with his
assertion that “I never thought of Miss Smith in the whole course of my existence—
never paid her any attentions, but as your friend” and her realization that “I have been
in a most complete error with respect to your views, till this moment” (104).

Similar cycles of misunderstanding and subsequent discovery of error happen
several times more in the narrative, a few of the most significant being Emma’s wrongly
imagining herself to be Frank Churchill’s intended partner, her incorrect hypothesis about
the source of Jane Fairfax’s piano, and her confusion surrounding Harriet’s interest in Mr. Knightley. On each of these occasions, Emma is certain that she knows what the situation “should” be, or at least what others want and expect it to be, and thus she blinds herself to the contrary evidence that is usually right in front of her. Concerning Frank, for example, “Emma divined what every body present must be thinking. She was his object, and every body must perceive it” (173). This observation, though presented in the voice of the narrator, clearly represents Emma’s own speculation and imagination; because she thinks they would make a handsome couple, and that everyone else would approve of the match, he must be in love with her, and vice versa. After all, “to complete every other recommendation, he had almost told her he loved her. . . . and this persuasion, joined to all the rest, made her think that she must be a little in love with him, in spite of every previous determination against it” (205). She only realizes her mistake when she hears from Mrs. Weston of his engagement to Jane Fairfax and receives from her a copy of his letter, in which he explains everything (342-348).

Throughout Emma, instead of fearing and attempting to avoid gossip, Austen’s heroine invites and relishes it, enjoying her moments in the public spotlight and feeling needed and important as a result. In Emma we do not see any of the anxiety or embarrassment that, for example, Evelina exhibits when confronted with the threat of public judgment that might result from her unknown social standing or her association with her unrefined Branghton relatives. Emma wants to be seen, and what is more, recognized as someone who is in the know and who plays an important role in Highbury society. Still, this desire is a double-edged sword; because of the local fame that she
intentionally cultivates, Emma’s errors are multiplied in visibility and, consequently, embarrassment when they do occur. Her mistaken hypothesis about the giver of Jane Fairfax’s piano, for example, might have gone unnoticed had she not shared it with Mr. Knightley, Frank Churchill, and all the other Highburians present at the gathering where this conversation takes place. Because Emma tends to form her ideas prematurely and without much factual basis, immediately disseminating them among large groups of people, the news of her error is then similarly widespread and her shame amplified accordingly. Her desire to be the subject of Highbury gossip is often fulfilled, then, but instead of highlighting her matchmaking or other alleged skills as she would prefer, the community generally ends up focusing its talk on her mistakes and misunderstandings.

In *Pride and Prejudice*, Elizabeth Bennet interacts with the same type of central, integrated, and seamless network of communication, albeit in a different way, which I will illuminate. The presence of this gossip community is evident immediately, as even the opening sentences of the novel gesture toward such a body of information:

> It is a truth universally acknowledged, that a single man in possession of a good fortune, must be in want of a wife.

However little known the feelings or views of such a man may be on his first entering a neighbourhood, this truth is so well fixed in the minds of the surrounding families, that he is considered as the rightful property of some one or other of their daughters. (*Pride 5*).
That this truth is “universally acknowledged” points to its subjective status, as it is not an immutable truth but an agreed-upon opinion, revealing the shared standards and deeply interwoven nature of the society in which it is considered “true.” Indeed, Gordon points out, gossip appears in this text “as a universal, part of a general will, rather than as the voice of a specifically entrusted agent” (87). Austen’s novels do contain some noteworthy, individual “agents” that have seen a good deal of critical attention, such as Emma’s Miss Bates, but their chatter is separated in her narratives from the humming undercurrent of community knowledge whose presence I am tracing here, as a continuation of the same phenomenon in Haywood’s and Burney’s respective novels. The important element to note here is the wording of “that first sonorous sentence,” which goes against the meaning we might initially draw from it, expressing not the wealthy single man’s want and subsequent search for a wife but “the gossip’s fantasy that women exchange or traffic in men, and not vice versa” (Brownstein 50). In other words, the statement’s objective truth is not what matters here, but the degree to which it has been agreed upon by the society Austen describes. The irony Brownstein highlights “suggests that the universal acceptance of this idea may make it operatively true – that what authorities say, and most people acknowledge, matters” (50).

A major cause of gossip that many critics have explored in Austen’s narratives, which I would argue especially to be true in Pride and Prejudice, is middle- and upper-class boredom or idleness. As they neither have to nor are expected to work for a living, wealthy men and, more often, their wives, turn instead to social pursuits such as visits and casual banter with friends. Gordon confirms that
Austen’s environments are filled with detached women and bored men, and more than one critic has addressed himself to the treatment of boredom in a world where nothing is ever new, save for the rare new arrivals in a neighborhood, presumably escaping from boredom elsewhere.

(75)

Gossip as a solution to the dullness and monotony of life is not confined to Austen’s fictional worlds, of course, but is representative of a historical trend taking place at the time. In her exploration of idleness in this period, Sarah Jordan reports,

During the eighteenth century, women above the laboring classes were increasingly relieved — or divested — of work. As workplaces became separated from homes, as traditionally female paid occupations were usurped by men, as the amount of housework middling-rank women had to do decreased due to technological advances and more servants, ladies‘ leisure grew. (85)

This, of course, is a marked change from the development of gossip among the lower classes that I traced in the introduction, which happened as a way of passing along information and opinion at the marketplace or while doing mending, baking, or other menial daily labor. Then, women of this social standing gossiped as a way to relieve the tedium of work; in Austen, as in Haywood and Burney, wealthier women gossip to fill the void left in their days by the lack of work. Here gossip has almost become their work, and as such exists as a symbol of upper class female status. Women also resort to gossip as a sort of job in Austen, though, because their financial dependence on men and lack of
income-earning potential make it necessary. For example, Mrs. Bennet has made it her life goal to marry her daughters off to suitable husbands who will support them, since she and her husband cannot continue to do so. As “a woman of mean understanding, little information, and uncertain temper . . . the business of her life was to get her daughters married; its solace was visiting and news” (Pride 7).

In Pride and Prejudice, the concepts of marriage and gossip are closely intertwined and “everything tends towards the achievement of satisfactory marriages” (Tanner 369). To “get her daughters married,” Mrs. Bennet must rely very heavily on the information sharing network of Longbourn and its surrounding areas. The novel opens with a conversation between the Bennets that illustrates this point aptly, as Mrs. Bennet gushes to her husband:

“Why, my dear, you must know, Mrs. Long says that Netherfield is taken by a young man of large fortune from the north of England; that he came down on Monday in a chaise and four to see the place, and was so much delighted with it that he agreed with Mr. Morris immediately; that he is to take possession before Michaelmas, and some of his servants are to be in the house by the end of the week.” (Pride 5)

Almost every part of the news that Mrs. Bennet shares here is focused on aspects of this new arrival that would make him a desirable husband for one of the Bennet daughters; she mentions his “large fortune,” indicating that he is sufficiently wealthy to support a wife, and gestures toward his servants and chaise and four, both of which further imply a
certain social status that she deems satisfactory.\(^2\) Mr. Bennet’s reaction to the news confirms the family’s priorities and emphasizes his wife’s motivation for sharing it in the first place. His first question, which he asks only after inquiring about the gentleman’s name—“‘Bingley’”—is whether he is married or single, to which Mrs. Bennet returns, “‘Oh! single, my dear, to be sure! A single man of large fortune; four or five thousand a year. What a fine thing for our girls!’” (6). The link between the gossip network and the marriage market in this instance and throughout *Pride and Prejudice* is clear; both are established aspects of life in the society that Austen creates, and they operate in tandem, each simultaneously facilitating and feeding off of the other.

Largely because of gossip’s role in arranging desirable matches, and marriage’s tendency to color many gossip exchanges, Elizabeth Bennet responds to the community’s gossip network in ways similar to those I noted from Haywood’s and Burney’s respective heroines. She, like Betsy Thoughtless, possesses “an independence and liveliness of temperament which will not readily submit to any grouping found to be unacceptably restricting,” including marriage, since it “is part of the social grouping and . . . also a restriction” (Tanner 401). Further, as Tony Tanner posits,

> It is not surprising that a person who has achieved a certain amount of mental independence will wish to exercise as much free personal control over his or her own life as is possible. He, or she, will not readily submit to the situations and alliances which society seems to be urging them into

\(^2\) The Penguin Classic edition that I cite here contains a footnote which further comments on Bingley’s chaise and four, defining it as “a four-wheeled closed carriage usually drawn by two or four horses” that holds “three people who all faced in the direction of travel.” Significantly, we are told that “an income of at least £800, and preferably £1,000, a year was needed to keep a carriage. Here the carriage itself, but also the number of horses, are indicators of Bingley’s wealth” (*Pride* 416).
— hence Elizabeth’s incredulity when Charlotte [Lucas] unhesitatingly accepts the role of Mr. Collins’s wife, to Elizabeth an inconceivable capitulation to the solicitations of social convenience. (392)

Clearly, Elizabeth is her own person, in certain ways not caring what others think of her, and she often makes her own choices without regard for potential public commentary. She does not hesitate to do things that other characters might frown upon or be confused by, such as walk all the way to Netherfield Park to see her sister Jane, who has become ill and is recovering there under the Bingley family’s care. Even her parents’ protestations are ignored in this specific case, as Elizabeth answers her mother’s “you will not be fit to be seen when you get there” with a confident “I shall be very fit to see Jane—which is all I want” (Pride 32). She also overlooks the haughty attitude of Mr. Bingley’s sisters, who comment amongst themselves that her walking to their home seems “to shew an abominable sort of conceited independence, a most country town indifference to decorum” (36). Like Betsy Thoughtless, Elizabeth realizes that certain conventions and expectations are in place, but she also does not always hold herself to them, nor does she exhibit much concern with being conventionally lady-like. Tanner describes Elizabeth’s as a “lively mind” (373) and notes in her character a “combination of energy and intelligence” and a “gay resilience in a society tending always towards dull conformity” (370). Other characters notice and react to this characteristic of Elizabeth’s as well; Mrs. Bennet calls her “a very headstrong foolish girl” who “does not know her own interest” (Pride 108) and later in the narrative, as Brownstein highlights, “conventional himself, [Mr. Darcy] admires her for defying convention” (Brownstein 51).
Though she can dismiss what the community might say about her in some cases, Elizabeth engages more actively with the threat of potential gossip in others. We see one such example of her heightened awareness of appearance and increased concern for reputation during the ball at Netherfield, when her mother insists on loudly discussing Jane’s potential impending marriage to Mr. Bingley. Although seeing the two together causes in Elizabeth “a train of agreeable reflections,” she becomes frustrated by her mother’s gossiping about the subject with Lady Lucas.

Mrs. Bennet seemed incapable of fatigue while enumerating the advantages of the match. His being such a charming young man, and so rich, and living but three miles from them, were the first points of self-gratulation; and then it was such a comfort to think how fond the two sisters were of Jane, and to be certain that they must desire the connection as much as she could do. (Pride 97)

Suddenly Elizabeth is extremely concerned with how others, and specifically Mr. Darcy, perceive Mrs. Bennet’s chatter; this situation bears some resemblance to the ones in Evelina involving the heroine’s shame at being seen by Sir Clement Willoughby or Lord Orville when she is with her crass Branghton relatives. Like Evelina, Elizabeth does not want to be associated with such unrefined people, especially in front of someone she recognizes as an upper-class gentleman, and she therefore tries to stop Mrs. Bennet’s embarrassing behavior. “In vain did [she] endeavour to check the rapidity of her mother’s words, or persuade her to describe her felicity in a less audible whisper,” for “her mother only scolded her for being nonsensical” and “Elizabeth blushed and blushed
again with shame and vexation” (97). The open and unabashed way in which her mother discusses the financial aspect of the match between Jane and Bingley makes Elizabeth uncomfortable, and she does not want to seem unrefined by association with Mrs. Bennet; Mr. Darcy is wealthy, and she knows that her mother’s blatant focus on money makes her family seem tacky, even in the context of a culture obsessed with per-year incomes. Further, Austen writes that if Elizabeth’s view of marriage had “been all drawn from her own family, she could not have formed a very pleasing picture of conjugal felicity or domestic comfort” (228), so it is obvious that she values matrimony for different reasons than her mother does, believing that love, not solely wealth, should motivate a union. As Brownstein hypothesizes, “rejecting Mr. Collins in the first volume, Elizabeth seems to be in her father’s camp against her mother, the business of whose life is to get her daughters married: she seems, that is, to rebel against the lot of women and the courtship plot” (53). Indeed, the comments of her mother’s that irritate her so much focus on the marriage that Mrs. Bennet hopes will occur between Jane and Mr. Bingley. Elizabeth is therefore further exasperated by her mother’s gossip in this moment because she does not fully understand or agree with her eagerness to marry off all of her daughters.

When this conversation finally ends, Elizabeth’s relief lasts only until her sister Mary begins to sing, her powers “by no means fitted for such a display” her voice “weak, and her manner affected” (Pride 98). Elizabeth is anxious throughout the performance, constantly stealing looks at Mr. Darcy and trying to intuit his reaction to her embarrassing family. She considers “that had her family made an agreement to expose themselves as
much as they could during the evening, it would have been impossible for them to play
their parts with more spirit” and continues to bemoan the impression they must have
given Mr. Darcy and the Bingley sisters despite her own desperate attempts to shut her
mother up and cut Mary’s performance short (99). Although Elizabeth knows that she is
one of the most rational Bennets, and thus attempts to create a separation between herself
and her obnoxious mother and sisters (Jane excluded), she also realizes that, try as she
might, she can escape neither her association with them nor the resulting judgments of
people like Darcy. Her increased awareness and concern for the impression given by her
family’s behavior here stand in noticeable contrast to her own carefree approach to “what
people might say,” perhaps because of her sense of control in the latter case—she can
decide how she carries herself from moment to moment, but she is unable to manage her
mother and sisters in the same way.

Despite her strong anxiety about being the subject of scrutiny because of her
family’s actions, Elizabeth is in no way immune to gossip’s seductive influence. She is at
times very much affected as a gullible participant in the rumor mill, and she allows gossip
to shape her choice of acquaintances as well as her sense of what is true and what is not.
Tending to accept what she hears at face value, Elizabeth often forgets to verify the
source of a piece of gossip or ask any questions about it, especially if the rumor confirms
what she has already made up her mind to believe. One of the best illustrations of this
aspect of Elizabeth’s personality is the scene in which Mr. Wickham tells her his version
of the story of his involvement with the Darcy family. She is immediately drawn in and
takes Wickham’s side, peppering her attentive listening with comments such as ““this is
quite shocking!—He deserves to be publicly disgraced’’ (78), even though Wickham has admitted from the beginning that “‘I have known him too long and too well to be a fair judge. It is impossible for me to be impartial’’” (76). As the case can often be with gossip, the truth is altered and added to by the person who passes it on, and in this instance, because Wickham’s account supports the hasty initial judgment of Mr. Darcy that Elizabeth has made and the subsequent distaste for him that she sustains, she allows herself to believe this inaccurate account. Confirming this interpretation, Tanner notes that Elizabeth “had formed a fixed ‘idea’ of the whole Darcy based on insufficient data, and in believing Wickham’s account of the man – a purely verbal fabrication – she is putting too much confidence in unverified and, as it turns out, completely false, evidence”3 (376). When Miss Bingley later assures her that “‘I do not know the particulars, but I know very well that Mr. Darcy is not in the least to blame’” and scoffs, “‘[Wickham’s] coming into the country at all, is a most insolent thing indeed’” (Pride 93), Elizabeth refuses to be swayed, which underlines the seemingly arbitrary way in which she chooses who and what to believe. Miss Bingley has just as much proof of what she says as Mr. Wickham does—that is, none—and yet Elizabeth immediately rejects the former while accepting the latter. The gossip that Elizabeth hears and absorbs from Wickham eventually aids in her self-discovery and helps her to realize her error in forming prejudices, which consequently lends to Wickham’s story a degree of significance despite its at least partially fictitious nature; but it is only much later, when she learns from Darcy’s letter “that her first impressions of Wickham, who flattered her,

3 Here Tanner continues, parenthetically, explaining that “The ability of language to make ‘Black appear White’ – and vice versa – was a crucial truth of which Jane Austen was particularly aware. In a society which relied so much on conversation it is a constant danger” (376-377).
and Darcy, who did not, were both mistaken” that Elizabeth recognizes her propensity to be swayed by false gossip and “begins to understand the extent to which her character and her actions are a function of her relation to her neighbors” (Brownstein 54).

Despite this early tendency of Elizabeth’s to believe gossip too easily, we see in her throughout the novel a spirit, almost a feistiness, that separates her from a community made up of people “as fixed and repetitive as the linked routines and established social rituals which dominate their lives” (Tanner 369). Although her relationship to gossip is characterized by indecision and ambivalence, this back-and-forth that we notice between her resistance toward and gullible participation in the rumor mill is, in a way, positive, as it represents her ability to grow and change. This puts her at a distinct advantage over someone like Mrs. Bennet, who, as Tanner claims, indeed allows monotonous rituals to take over her life. She may fall victim to a certain credulity from time to time, such as we see in her quickness to believe Mr. Wickham’s story about Darcy, but she does eventually learn to recognize her prejudice and be more exacting in her judgments. Throughout this learning process, Austen allows her to retain the independence and lively spark that so many critics highlight in her character, and we cannot ultimately fault Elizabeth for her vacillating behavior as it leads to her increased self-awareness and eventual happiness with Mr. Darcy.
CONCLUSION

FINAL THOUGHTS, NOTES ON NARRATIVE STYLE, AND IDEAS FOR FURTHER STUDY

Throughout these individual investigations into the novels of Haywood, Burney, and Austen, I have attempted to draw attention toward the presence of a seamless gossip network that forms under the surface of each narrative, functioning at times as its own collective character. As such, I have argued that it interacts significantly with the heroine in each case, emphasizing through isolation and contrast various aspects of her self. Haywood, Burney, and Austen treat the relationship between gossip community and female protagonist in unique ways, ultimately highlighting different, yet equally important truths about the nature of an individual’s value system, true identity, need for attention, judgment of others, and so on. Despite the variation in approach, however, all of these authors successfully accentuate, through their depiction of this interaction, the deep influence and lasting effects that the gossip of a society can have on its subjects.

As countless research exists concerning the function of gossip in Austen’s novels, I have been careful here to differentiate the basic features of the gossip networks I identify from the individual gossip figures that have been so well examined elsewhere already. For example, Miss Bates’ chatter is significant, as Hong notes in her study of this character’s focus on detail, but ultimately I wanted to bring attention to how other members of this society, as well as the ones depicted in the other novels, get their news. What fascinates me most about the information-sharing mechanisms that I trace in these communities is their efficiency, how, for example, a marriage or similarly significant
event can take place and news of it spread to “every body” in practically no time, creating the illusion that community members somehow “just know” about all the latest happenings. Still, with this thesis I have only begun to explore the nature and function of the gossip network, and have done so in a very minor way. With sufficient time and space one could easily continue this specific mode of inquiry, whether more deeply, concentrating on a single author’s oeuvre (perhaps even a single work), or more broadly, extending the scope to include a wider range of novels from this or another time period.

As the books I chose were written and published over the span of literary history during which the novel as a form was still developing, together they have the unique characteristic of representing a range of narrative techniques that in themselves interact with the idea of gossip in productive ways. In *The History of Miss Betsy Thoughtless*, we see a traditional third person style, one that includes both narration and character dialogue. Haywood’s representation of the gossiping community in this text, then, is limited to the two major techniques I mentioned in the first chapter—characters can allude to gossip through phrases like “I was told” or “I heard accounts” or the narrator can inform us that gossip is occurring, that news “spread like wildfire.” In *Evelina*, too, Burney’s methods of portraying gossip are somewhat restricted, as the epistolary form of the novel lacks even third person narration; everything in this text is in a letter written by someone, and we always know who that someone is. With the development of Austen’s signature free indirect discourse, however, another element becomes available for illustrating the spread of gossip within the community. The narrator, at times taking on and communicating the opinions or mindsets of specific characters, is no longer as
predictable, and thoughts do not always have names attached. We cannot always discern whose perspective being represented, as Oberman notes that “in third-person narrated novels that dip in and out of the consciousness of multiple characters, there are usually moments when it is not easy to know for sure whether the voice we are hearing belongs to the narrator or to a character in the novel” (1). For this reason, the process of narration in this type of work can point to the existence of gossip by becoming almost gossip-like itself through a sense of anonymity. Just as a juicy bit of news is added to, morphed, and exaggerated as it is passed through a community of people, losing its original author in the process, so we sometimes get the sense in novels using free indirect discourse that certain parts of narration mirror untraceable hearsay. I especially noticed this happening in *Emma*, and in another time and place, it might be productive to look deeper into the effect that narrative style has on the portrayal and reflection of gossip in this work and others from Austen’s oeuvre.

When planning for this project, I initially wanted to focus on gossip from a gendered perspective, looking for evidence of differences in how the men and women of these texts participate in the network of news sharing. This lead to a discovery about double standards concerning male and female reputations within communities and conflicting levels of concern between the genders for the impression that their choices make. In turn, I became interested in how the consciousness of and consideration for one’s reputation can affect behavior, and wondered whether the influence of such a concern is usually positive or negative. Settling on the authors and novels to use for my project, even after choosing a tentative overarching theme to trace, proved difficult, as I
went back and forth for a while between first wanting to compare portrayals of gossip in
eighteenth-century novels by men versus those by women, and then wanting to track this
idea chronologically in works of female authors. In short, looking back down the trails of
thought that ended with the uncovering of almost invisible gossip networks within
communities, I see that there are many alternate “branches,” so to speak, that I could have
taken instead, any of which would provide interesting starting points for further study.
REFERENCES


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