

CHAPTER SIX

Austen's Foundations of Game Theory

AUSTEN CAREFULLY establishes game theory's core concepts: choice (a person takes an action because she chooses to do so), preferences (a person chooses the action with the highest payoff), and strategic thinking (before taking an action, a person thinks about how others will act). A person's preferences are best revealed by her choices, and strategic thinking has several names, including "penetration." Austen illustrates (the lack of) strategic thinking through her strategic sophomores, characters who think they are skilled but are not. Her strategically skilled characters know how to detect a person's preferences by observing their eyes. In this and the next six chapters, I take Austen's six novels together as one body of work.

CHOICE

For Austen, choice is a central concern, even obsession. The single most important choice is a woman's choice of whether and whom to marry, and Austen's heroines adamantly defend this choice against any presumption otherwise. After Edward Ferrars is disowned by his family for his secret engagement with Lucy Steele, John Dashwood tells his sister Elinor Dashwood that the Ferrars family now plans for the wealthy Miss Morton to marry Edward's brother Robert instead. Elinor could not care less about Miss Morton, but defends the principle: "The lady, I suppose, has no choice in the affair" (SS, p. 336). Edmund Bertram tells Fanny Price that Henry Crawford's sisters are surprised by her refusal of Henry's proposal, but Fanny submits, "Let him have all the perfections in the world, I think it ought not to be set down as certain, that a man must be acceptable to every woman he may happen to like himself" (MP, p. 408). As mentioned in chapter 1, after Harriet Smith refuses Mr. Robert Martin's proposal, Emma Woodhouse responds to Mr. Knightley's indignation by saying, "[I]t is always incomprehensible to a man that a woman should ever refuse an offer of marriage. A man always imagines a woman to be ready for anybody who asks her" (E, p. 64). When Lady Catherine commands Elizabeth Bennet to promise never to become engaged to Mr. Darcy, Elizabeth defends her right to choose: "I am only resolved to act in that manner, which will, in

my own opinion, constitute my happiness, without reference to *you*, or to any person so wholly unconnected with me” (PP, p. 396). According to Johnson (1988, p. 84), “among Austen’s contemporaries perhaps only declared radicals would have a sympathetic character defiantly” make such an undiluted statement. In contrast, the unheroic, self-centered Mary Musgrove, Anne Elliot’s sister, would side with Lady Catherine, stating, “I do not think any young woman has a right to make a choice that may be disagreeable and inconvenient to the *principal* part of her family” (P, p. 82).

Thoughtful men are aware that women can make choices. Edmund Bertram asks Mrs. Norris to stop pressuring Fanny to act in the play and let Fanny “choose for herself as well as the rest of us” (MP, p. 172). Frank Churchill states, “It is always the lady’s right to decide on the degree of acquaintance” (E, p. 216). Idiotic men are not aware, as Johnson (1988, p. 36) observes: “Many Austenian men . . . cannot take ‘no’ for an answer.” John Thorpe does not know that dancing with a woman requires asking her; he goes up to Catherine Morland and declares, “Well, Miss Morland, I suppose you and I are to stand up and jig it together again” (NA, p. 54).

Being able to make a choice is almost always a good thing for Austen; it is “a great deal better to chuse than to be chosen” (E, p. 15). There is power in being able to make a choice. Elizabeth Bennet remarks that Mr. Darcy has “great pleasure in the power of choice. I do not know any body who seems more to enjoy the power of doing what he likes than Mr. Darcy” (PP, p. 205). Similarly, Emma believes that she and her father should not attend the party hosted by the socially inferior Cole family, but when an invitation does not arrive, she feels “that she should like to have had the power of refusal” (E, p. 224). Discussing Mr. Rushworth’s plan to relandscape his estate, the thoughtful Edmund Bertram says that he would want to make his own choices and not hire a specialist improver: “[H]ad I a place to new fashion, I should not put myself into the hands of an improver. I would rather have an inferior degree of beauty, of my own choice, and acquired progressively. I would rather abide by my own blunders than by his” (MP, pp. 66–67). In contrast, the shallow Mary Crawford would “be most thankful to any Mr. Repton who would undertake it, and give me as much beauty as he could for my money; and I should never look at it, till it was complete.” Fanny, not yet decisive, is content to just watch: “It would be delightful to *me* to see the progress of it all” (MP, p. 67).

The one time that being able to make a choice seems to be a bad thing is when Fanny must choose what to wear to the ball. Fanny treasures her amber cross ornament, a gift from her brother William, but needs something to wear it with. Fanny must choose either the gold chain

given by Edmund or the gold necklace given by Mary Crawford. Fanny far prefers Edmund's chain, but Edmund asks Fanny to wear Mary's necklace because of his own interest in Mary. But "upon trial the one given her by Miss Crawford would by no means go through the ring of the cross. She had, to oblige Edmund, resolved to wear it—but it was too large for the purpose. His therefore must be worn; and having, with delightful feelings, joined the chain and the cross, those memorials of the two most beloved of her heart . . . she was able, without an effort, to resolve on wearing Miss Crawford's necklace too" (MP, pp. 314–15). Since the necklace from Mary is too large to go through the ring of the cross, Fanny has no choice and therefore can blamelessly wear Edmund's chain, which is what she wants. But once that point is settled, she then exercises her power of choice by deciding to wear Mary's necklace as well. Even when it seems better not to have to make a choice, Austen shows that another choice can make things better still.

Correspondingly, for Austen, people who cannot make choices deserve ridicule or worse. On a shopping trip, Marianne Dashwood can barely tolerate "the tediousness of Mrs. Palmer, whose eye was caught by every thing pretty, expensive, or new; who was wild to buy all, could determine on none, and dawdled away her time in rapture and indecision" (SS, pp. 187–88). Shopping with Emma, "Harriet, tempted by every thing and swayed by half a word, was always very long at a purchase" (E, p. 252); when Harriet cannot decide where her purchases should be delivered to, Emma impatiently directs, "That you do not give another half-second to the subject" and makes Harriet's decision for her (E, p. 254). More seriously, Mr. Weston's first wife, Miss Churchill, marries him in spite of her family's wishes, but she cannot completely give up the luxury of her parents' home at Enscombe, and thus "[t]hey lived beyond their income . . . [S]he did not cease to love her husband, but she wanted at once to be the wife of Captain Weston, and Miss Churchill of Enscombe" (E, p. 14). Miss Churchill cannot choose and dies in three years. For that matter, the ruinous affair between Maria Bertram and Henry Crawford results from their inability to make choices. Maria is unable to choose between married life and being pursued by Henry, and Henry is unable to choose between pursuing Fanny and overcoming Maria's coldness: "he could not bear to be thrown off by the woman whose smiles had been so wholly at his command. . . . [H]e went off with her at last, because he could not help it, regretting Fanny, even at the moment" (MP, pp. 541–42).

For Austen, choices bind. You can't have it both ways. Once you make a choice, you cannot pretend you did not make it. After visiting her friend Charlotte Lucas at her new married home with the vacant Mr. Collins, Elizabeth Bennet laments, "Poor Charlotte!—it was melancholy to leave

her to such society!—But she had chosen it with her eyes open” (PP, p. 239). When Willoughby visits Marianne to seek forgiveness, even after having married Miss Grey for money, Elinor observes, “You are very wrong, Mr. Willoughby, very blamable . . . you ought not to speak in this way, either of Mrs. Willoughby or my sister. You had made your own choice. It was not forced on you” (SS, p. 373).

An inability to make choices can stem from a lack of resolution, which Austen consistently decries. When Emma and Mr. Knightley discuss why it has taken months for Frank Churchill to visit his father’s new wife, Emma thinks that “his uncle and aunt will not spare him” and that Mr. Knightley does not understand “the difficulties of dependence” (E, pp. 156, 157). But Mr. Knightley firmly replies, “There is one thing, Emma, which a man can always do, if he chuses, and that is, his duty; not by manoeuvring and finessing, but by vigour and resolution” (E, p. 157). When Mr. Darcy chides his friend Mr. Bingley for yielding too quickly to the suggestions of others, Elizabeth at first defends Mr. Bingley: “You appear to me, Mr. Darcy, to allow nothing for the influence of friendship and affection” (PP, p. 54). However, when Mr. Bingley suspends without explanation his courtship of her sister Jane, Elizabeth correctly suspects Mr. Darcy’s and Caroline Bingley’s interference and reverses her position: “she could not think without anger, hardly without contempt, on that easiness of temper, that want of proper resolution, which now made him the slave of his designing friends” (PP, p. 151).

Austen hates encumbered choices. When Mrs. Norris asks Tom Bertram to help make a rubber for playing cards along with Dr. Grant and Mrs. Rushworth, Tom escapes by leading Fanny to dance. Tom complains to Fanny, “And to ask me in such a way too! without ceremony, before them all, so as to leave me no possibility of refusing! *That* is what I dislike most particularly. It raises my spleen more than any thing, to have the pretence of being asked” (MP, p. 141). Tom obliviously makes his point to Fanny, whose entire life is an encumbered choice. As Edwards (1965, p. 56) observes, “Robbing people of their choice lies at the heart of virtually every significant incident” in *Mansfield Park*. After it is discovered that Jane Fairfax regularly fetches her family’s letters from the post office in the early morning even in the rain (to keep others from knowing about letters sent to her by Frank Churchill), Mrs. Elton tells Jane that she will ask the servant who fetches her own letters to fetch Jane’s as well. Mrs. Elton odiously gives Jane no choice in the matter: “My dear Jane, say no more about it. The thing is determined. . . . [C]onsider that point as settled” (E, pp. 319–20). Finally, the entire plot of *Persuasion* is how Anne Elliot overcomes her original encumbered choice of refusing Captain Wentworth. Once Anne and Captain Wentworth finally understand their feelings for each other,

they are “more exquisitely happy, perhaps, in their re-union, than when it had been first projected; more tender, more tried, more fixed in a knowledge of each other’s character, truth, and attachment; more equal to act, more justified in acting” (P, p. 261). Now that Anne is older, no longer encumbered, “more equal to act,” her choosing to marry Captain Wentworth does not merely correct her eight-year-old mistake; being empowered and unencumbered improves both choice and result.

Austen explains that to make a choice thoughtfully, you must understand the counterfactual of what would have happened had you chosen otherwise (in economics, this is the concept of “opportunity cost”). Mary Crawford argues that Edmund’s chosen profession, the clergy, encourages indolence, not ambition. Edmund and Fanny disagree, but Mary cites as evidence her own brother-in-law Dr. Grant: “[T]hough he . . . often preaches good sermons, and is very respectable, *I* see him to be an indolent, selfish bon vivant, who must have his palate consulted in every thing, who will not stir a finger for the convenience of any one” (MP, p. 130). Edmund concedes (“Fanny, it goes against us. We cannot attempt to defend Dr. Grant”), but Fanny argues that in another profession Dr. Grant would have been even worse: “[W]hatever there may be to wish otherwise in Dr. Grant, would have been in a greater danger of becoming worse in a more active and worldly profession. . . . I have no doubt that he oftener endeavours to restrain himself than he would if he had been any thing but a clergyman” (MP, p. 131). Mary Crawford and Edmund might seem more strategically experienced than Fanny, but only Fanny understands that the relevant counterfactual is Dr. Grant having some other profession, not having no profession at all. When Edmund tells Fanny that he is concerned about Mary Crawford’s character and is not sure whether to propose, perhaps Fanny would like to suggest that the relevant choice is not between Mary and not marrying at all, but between Mary and another young woman, such as herself. Similarly, when Emma wonders why the sophisticated Jane Fairfax spends so much time with the odious Mrs. Elton, Mrs. Weston offers, “We cannot suppose that she has any great enjoyment at the Vicarage, my dear Emma—but it is better than being always at home. Her aunt is a good creature, but, as a constant companion, must be very tiresome. We must consider what Miss Fairfax quits, before we condemn her taste for what she goes to” (E, p. 308).

Understanding the proper counterfactual, imagining all aspects of what would have happened had you chosen differently, is not always easy. When Anne meets Captain Wentworth’s friends Captains Harville and Benwick, whose friendship is “so unlike the usual style of give-and-take invitations, and dinners of formality and display,” Anne is forced to observe her counterfactual life had she not refused Captain Wentworth’s

original proposal: “‘These would have been all my friends,’ was her thought; and she had to struggle against a great tendency to lowness” (P, p. 105). Anne does know that some counterfactuals are not worth thinking about, namely those that have already been made impossible by events. During the concert in Bath, Mr. Elliot persists in his attentions toward Anne, making Captain Wentworth leave in a fit of jealousy. Anne feels goodwill toward Mr. Elliot, enough to raise the question of how Anne might think of him had there been no Captain Wentworth. But Anne knows that this counterfactual is irrelevant: “How she might have felt, had there been no Captain Wentworth in the case, was not worth enquiry; for there was a Captain Wentworth: and be the conclusion of the present suspense good or bad, her affection would be his for ever” (P, p. 208).

PREFERENCES

Game theory’s assumption of numerical payoffs is essentially an assumption of commensurability, that complex mixtures of feelings can be reduced to a single sentiment. Austen acknowledges that this assumption can be problematic: for example, when Captain Wentworth arranges for Admiral and Mrs. Croft to take Anne Elliot home in their carriage, “it was a proof of his own warm and amiable heart, which she could not contemplate without emotions so compounded of pleasure and pain, that she knew not which prevailed” (P, p. 98). Regan (1997, p. 134) asks, “how can we compare, say a friendship and research on beetles? Such different things may both be valuable, but how can we possibly say one is more valuable than the other?”

But Austen consistently argues for commensurability. Austen almost always allows a mixture of feelings to resolve into a single feeling, usually just through the passage of time. At Fanny’s first ball, Henry Crawford quickly engages Fanny for the first two dances, and “[h]er happiness on this occasion was very much *à la mortal*, finely chequered. To be secure of a partner at first, was a most essential good . . . but at the same time there was a pointedness in his manner of asking her, which she did not like, and she saw his eye glancing for a moment at her necklace—with a smile—she thought there was a smile—which made her blush and feel wretched” (MP, pp. 318–19). Fanny experiences both appreciation and revulsion, and “had no composure till he turned away to some one else. Then she could gradually rise up to the genuine satisfaction of having a partner, a voluntary partner” (MP, p. 319). Once Fanny is able to compose herself, she can reduce the two competing feelings into a single genuine satisfaction. After Henry Crawford tells Fanny that he

secured her brother William's promotion and then proposes, Fanny is "in the utmost confusion of contrary feeling. She was feeling, thinking, trembling... agitated, happy, miserable, infinitely obliged, absolutely angry" (MP, pp. 349–50). But at the end of the day, the confusion is resolved because the pleasure lasts while the pain decays: "Fanny thought she had never known a day of greater agitation, both of pain and pleasure; but happily the pleasure was not of a sort to die with the day—for every day would restore the knowledge of William's advancement, whereas the pain she hoped would return no more" (MP, p. 356). When Edward Ferrars receives Lucy Steele's letter saying that she has married his brother, thereby releasing him from their engagement, he is "half stupified between the wonder, the horror, and the joy of such a deliverance" (SS, p. 413). Edward tells Elinor that "this is the only letter I ever received from her, of which the substance made me any amends for the defect of the style" (SS, p. 414). Even though Edward does not reduce his wonder, horror, and joy into a single satisfaction, he finds that disparate aspects, style and substance, can compensate for each other.

Austen actually delights in how one feeling can be compensated for by another feeling of a completely different kind. After Marianne is dumped by Willoughby, Mrs. Jennings tries to cheer her up, and Elinor "could have been entertained by Mrs. Jennings's endeavours to cure a disappointment in love, by a variety of sweetmeats and olives, and a good fire" (SS, p. 220). One might think that the trivial pleasures of food and physical warmth could not possibly compensate for a broken heart, but Mrs. Jennings has a point. Catherine Morland is disappointed that the Tilneys do not show up for their planned walk, even after the rain stops, and thus decides to go on a carriage ride with John Thorpe, Isabella, and her brother. "Catherine's feelings... were in a very unsettled state; divided between regret for the loss of one great pleasure, and the hope of soon enjoying another, almost its equal in degree, however unlike in kind. . . . To feel herself slighted by them was very painful. On the other hand, the delight of exploring an edifice like Udolpho, as her fancy represented Blaize Castle to be, was such a counterpoise of good as might console her for almost any thing" (NA, p. 85). Catherine experiences a mixture of two feelings quite unlike in kind, but one compensates more than fully for the other. Lady Russell dislikes visiting Sir Walter Elliot at his rental house in Bath because she dislikes Mrs. Clay, the guest of Sir Walter and his daughter Elizabeth. But Mr. Elliot, Sir Walter's presumptive heir, also often visits; Lady Russell begins to like him and think him a match for Anne, and "[h]er satisfaction in Mr. Elliot outweighed all the plague of Mrs. Clay" (P, p. 159). Sitting in her former schoolroom, Fanny recalls "the pains of tyranny, of ridicule, and neglect" but also the consoling kindnesses of Edmund, her aunt Lady Bertram,

and her teacher Miss Lee, and “the whole was now so blended together, so harmonized by distance, that every former affliction had its charm” (MP, p. 178). Elizabeth Bennet relies upon commensurability: when Lady Catherine threatens that Mr. Darcy’s family will despise her if she marries him, Elizabeth responds, “the wife of Mr. Darcy must have such extraordinary sources of happiness necessarily attached to her situation, that she could, upon the whole, have no cause to repine” (PP, p. 394).

A few times Austen uses explicitly quantitative analogies for happiness or sadness. When Henry Tilney leaves Northanger Abbey a few days early to prepare to receive Catherine and his sister and father at his own house at Woodston, he equates happiness with money that circulates in financial markets, remarking that “our pleasures in this world are always to be paid for, and that we often purchase them at a great disadvantage, giving ready-moned actual happiness for a draft on the future, that may not be honoured. . . . Because I am to hope for the satisfaction of seeing you at Woodston on Wednesday, which bad weather, or twenty other causes, may prevent, I must go away directly, two days before I intended it” (NA, p. 217). After Lydia Bennet runs off with Wickham unmarried, Elizabeth Bennet is certain that Mr. Darcy will therefore have nothing to do with her family; thus “had she known nothing of Darcy, she could have borne the dread of Lydia’s infamy somewhat better. It would have spared her, she thought, one sleepless night out of two” (PP, p. 329). Dread can be measured in number of sleepless nights.

Given commensurability, a feeling’s strength can be measured by how much of another feeling it takes to compensate for it. In economics, this is the concept of “compensating differential” (Rosen 1986); for example, Cornell graduating seniors require on average \$13,037 more in yearly salary to work for Exxon as opposed to the Peace Corps (Frank 2004, p. 88). Mr. Darcy has underwritten Lydia’s marriage and thus saved the Bennet family’s reputation, but only Elizabeth is aware of her family’s debt to him. When Mr. Bingley and Mr. Darcy unexpectedly visit, Mrs. Bennet snubs Mr. Darcy and showers attention on Mr. Bingley, even though Mr. Bingley has disregarded the family for months. “Elizabeth’s misery increased, at such unnecessary, such officious attention! . . . At that instant she felt, that years of happiness could not make Jane or herself amends, for moments of such painful confusion.” Elizabeth wishes never to see the two men again, saying to herself, “Their society can afford no pleasure, that will atone for such wretchedness as this!” But when Elizabeth sees Mr. Bingley’s attraction to Jane, “the misery, for which years of happiness were to offer no compensation, received soon afterwards material relief, from observing how much the beauty of her sister re-kindled the admiration of her former lover” (PP, p. 373). Austen might be making

fun of how the emotional strain of this moment is enough to make even Elizabeth's feelings fluctuate from one extreme to the other, but another interpretation is that Austen acknowledges the possibility of incommensurability only to firmly rule in favor of commensurability. A lover's admiration, if it leads to marriage, could very well result in years of happiness to a bride's sister, even under the soberest calculation.

Similarly, when Edmund Bertram and Mary Crawford leave Fanny by herself in the Sotherton grounds, her "best consolation was in being assured that Edmund had wished for her very much . . . but this was not quite sufficient to do away with the pain of having been left a whole hour, when he had talked of only a few minutes" (MP, p. 120). Finally, after Maria Bertram's affair and subsequent divorce, Maria goes off to live with Mrs. Norris in a remote location, and "Mrs. Norris's removal from Mansfield was the great supplementary comfort of Sir Thomas's life. . . . To be relieved from her . . . was so great a felicity that . . . there might have been danger of his learning almost to approve the evil which produced such a good" (MP, pp. 538–39). For Sir Thomas, the pleasure of a life without Mrs. Norris is large enough to nearly counterpoise the collapse of his family's reputation.

REVEALED PREFERENCES

The strength of competing feelings is best revealed by a person's choice; this is the idea of "revealed preference" in economics (see for example Varian 2006). After Jane Bennet receives a letter from Mr. Bingley's sister Caroline saying that her brother will most likely marry Mr. Darcy's sister Georgiana, Jane asks Elizabeth, "[C]an I be happy, even supposing the best, in accepting a man whose sisters and friends are all wishing him to marry elsewhere?" Elizabeth replies, "You must decide for yourself . . . and if upon mature deliberation, you find that the misery of disobliging his two sisters is more than equivalent to the happiness of being his wife, I advise you by all means to refuse him" (PP, p. 134). Similarly, Elizabeth can estimate the strength of Mr. Darcy's feelings given his decision to propose: "so much in love as to wish to marry her in spite of all the objections which had made him prevent his friend's marrying her sister . . . was almost incredible! it was gratifying to have inspired unconsciously so strong an affection" (PP, p. 216). Even if an affection is inspired unconsciously, a person's decision reveals its strength.

If there is any doubt about a person's preferences, his choices provide proof. Frank Churchill tells Emma that Jane Fairfax must be an excellent pianist because Mr. Dixon, even while in love with another woman,

“would yet never ask that other woman to sit down to the instrument, if the lady in question [Jane] could sit down instead. . . . That, I thought, in a man of known musical talent, was some proof” (E, p. 217). When Marianne agrees to go along with Mrs. Jennings to London, on the chance that she might see Willoughby there, Elinor observes, “That Marianne, fastidious as she was, thoroughly acquainted with Mrs. Jennings’ manners, and invariably disgusted by them. . . . should disregard whatever must be most wounding to her irritable feelings, in her pursuit of one object, was such a proof, so strong, so full of the importance of that object to her” (SS, p. 176).

Preferences can be revealed even by a hypothetical choice. After Catherine realizes that John Thorpe manipulated her into abandoning her plan to walk with Eleanor and Henry Tilney and instead ride with him to Blaize Castle, “rather than be thought ill of by the Tilneys, she would willingly have given up all the happiness which its walls could supply” (NA, p. 86). Even after his brother Robert is bestowed the estate that Edward Ferrars would have received, happy Edward is “free from every wish of an exchange” (SS, p. 428). Anne admires the Musgrove sisters’ happiness, but “would not have given up her own more elegant and cultivated mind for all their enjoyments” (P, p. 43). When Edmund Bertram bids a final goodbye to Mary Crawford, the depth of Fanny’s satisfaction is such that “there are few who might not have been glad to exchange their greatest gaiety for it” (MP, p. 533). When Emma wonders if she is in love with Frank Churchill, she first examines her feelings: “This sensation of listlessness, weariness, stupidity, this disinclination to sit down and employ myself, this feeling of every thing’s being dull and insipid about the house!—I must be in love; I should be the oddest creature in the world if I were not—for a few weeks at least” (E, p. 283). But what is quite conclusive is what she would choose in different scenarios: “forming a thousand amusing schemes for the progress and close of their attachment, fancying interesting dialogues, and inventing elegant letters; the conclusion of every imaginary declaration on his side was that she *refused him*” (E, p. 284).

A common objection to the payoff maximization model is that two alternatives can be different in so many ways that they cannot be directly compared. Anderson (1997, p. 99) asks, “Is Henry Moore’s sculpture, *Recumbent Figure*, as intrinsically good a work of art as Chinua Achebe’s novel, *Things Fall Apart*? What could be the point of answering such a question?” But Austen likes direct comparisons. Mary Crawford had liked Tom Bertram, but once he returns to Mansfield after an absence, listening to him talk is enough “to give her the fullest conviction, by the power of actual comparison, of her preferring his younger brother” (MP, p. 134). After Emma is engaged with Mr. Knightley, she

converses with Frank Churchill, and “falling naturally into a comparison of the two men, she felt, that pleased as she had been to see Frank Churchill . . . she had never been more sensible of Mr. Knightley’s high superiority of character” (E, p. 524). Edward Ferrars foolishly engaged himself to Lucy Steele because “Lucy appeared everything that was amiable and obliging. . . . I had seen so little of other women, that I could make no comparisons, and see no defects” (SS, p. 411). Sometimes only through comparisons can an alternative be truly appreciated.

NAMES FOR STRATEGIC THINKING

Austen uses specific terms to refer to strategic thinking, including “penetration,” “foresight,” and “sagacity.” For example, Mr. Bennet tells Elizabeth, “Young ladies have great penetration in such matters as these; but I think I may defy even *your* sagacity, to discover the name of your admirer” (PP, p. 401). When Marianne wants to stay home instead of joining the family to visit Lady Middleton, Mrs. Dashwood concludes that she must be planning to receive a visit from Willoughby. “On their return from the park they found Willoughby’s curricule and servant in waiting at the cottage, and Mrs. Dashwood was convinced that her conjecture had been just. So far it was all as she had foreseen” (SS, p. 87). Along with “foresight,” the term “penetration” analogizes strategic thinking as vision. Isabella Thorpe tells Catherine that she must have already known that James would propose: “Yes, my dear Catherine, it is so indeed; your penetration has not deceived you.—Oh! that arch eye of yours!—It sees through every thing” (NA, p. 119). Similarly, an obsolete meaning of “sagacity” is a keen sense of smell.

After Mr. Elton’s surprise proposal in the carriage, Emma recalls that “[t]o Mr. John Knightley was she indebted for her first idea on the subject, for the first start of its possibility. There was no denying that those brothers had penetration” (E, p. 146). Mr. John Knightley, “with some slyness,” had warned a skeptical Emma, “[H]e seems to have a great deal of good-will towards *you*. . . . You had better look about you, and ascertain what you do, and what you mean to do” (E, p. 120). Mr. John Knightley rides in the same carriage together with Emma and Mr. Elton on the way to Randalls, but on the ride back home, “forgetting that he did not belong to their party, stepped in after his wife” in her carriage, leaving the two of them alone together (E, p. 139). Perhaps Mr. John Knightley “forgets” purposefully, anticipating that Mr. Elton’s actions would validate his warning to Emma. A person with penetration discerns another’s preferences and can also strategically make those preferences reveal themselves.

There are more than fifty strategic plans specifically named as “schemes” in Austen’s six novels; Edwards (1965, p. 55) writes that “meddling” is the theme of Austen’s novels and “indeed, it is the theme of most classic fiction and many of our difficulties with life.” For example, after Elizabeth declines Mr. Collins’s proposal, Elizabeth thanks Charlotte Lucas for talking with him, but “Charlotte’s kindness extended farther than Elizabeth had any conception of;—its object was nothing less, than to secure her from any return of Mr. Collins’s addresses, by engaging them towards herself. Such was Miss Lucas’s scheme” (PP, p. 136). Occasionally “scheme” is used less specifically to mean a social engagement; for example, when Lydia is in London with Wickham, she says, “I did not once put my foot out of doors, though I was there a fortnight. Not one party, or scheme, or any thing” (PP, p. 352). But of course social engagements often have strategic intentions; after Marianne and Willoughby first meet, “the schemes of amusement at home and abroad, which Sir John had been previously forming, were put into execution. The private balls at the park then began. . . . In every meeting of the kind Willoughby was included (SS, p. 63). After their engagement, Mr. Collins and Charlotte spend a week “in professions of love and schemes of felicity” (PP, p. 158), and indeed, a strategic plan is similar to a dream, a scenario in which everyone’s actions fall exactly into place.

The term “contrive” is used similarly although less often. For example, when Emma and Harriet walk by Mr. Elton’s vicarage and Harriet is curious to see it, Emma says, “I wish we could contrive it . . . but I cannot think of any tolerable pretence for going in” (E, p. 90). “Art” is another term for strategic manipulation, as in Marianne’s exclamation when learning that Willoughby is engaged to another: “And yet this woman—who knows what her art may have been—how long it may have been premeditated, and how deeply contrived by her!” (SS, p. 216). “Art” has connotations of persuasion, as when Lady Catherine warns Elizabeth to stay away from Mr. Darcy: “*your* arts and allurements may, in a moment of infatuation, have made him forget what he owes to himself and to all his family. You may have drawn him in” (PP, pp. 392–93). “Sly” has associations with concealment, as when Mrs. Gardiner writes to Elizabeth that Mr. Darcy secretly paid off Wickham to marry Lydia: “I thought him very sly;—he hardly ever mentioned your name. But slyness seems the fashion” (PP, p. 360).

“Cunning” has admittedly negative connotations; for example, after Mrs. Smith tells Anne about how Mr. Elliot has wormed his way into the family to prevent the marriage of Anne’s father Sir Walter with Mrs. Clay, Anne replies, “There is always something offensive in the

details of cunning" (P, p. 224). None of the other terms, however, necessarily indicates disapproval. For example, in order to propose to Charlotte, Mr. Collins sneaks out of the Bennet residence "with admirable slyness" (PP, p. 136). Suspecting General Tilney of having murdered or imprisoned his wife, Catherine, "blushing at the consummate art of her own question," asks Eleanor where Mrs. Tilney's picture is hung (NA, p. 185).

Sometimes, the term "calculate" is used for strategic thinking; for example, to recommend Willoughby, Sir John Middleton's parties "were exactly calculated to give increasing intimacy to his acquaintance with the Dashwoods" (SS, p. 63). "Calculation" of course has mathematical connotations. A common objection to game theory is that people surely do not calculate as they are assumed to do in mathematical models; for example, Elster (2007, p. 5) writes, "Do real people act on the calculations that make up many pages of mathematical appendixes in leading journals? I do not think so."

But in Austen's novels, people calculate all the time without the slightest intimation that calculation is difficult, "cold," or unnatural. Willoughby offers Marianne "a horse, one that he had bred himself on his estate in Somersetshire, and which was exactly calculated to carry a woman" (SS, p. 68). His rival Colonel Brandon can calculate, too: when Marianne falls ill, he offers to retrieve Mrs. Dashwood, and "with all the firmness of a collected mind, made every necessary arrangement with the utmost dispatch, and calculated with exactness the time in which she might look for his return" (SS, p. 352). Colonel Brandon's calculation, calm but not unemotional, provides warm assurance. Similarly, since Mr. Collins is heir to Mr. Bennet's property, after he is engaged to her daughter Charlotte, Lady Lucas "began directly to calculate, with more interest than the matter had ever excited before, how many years longer Mr. Bennet was likely to live" (PP, p. 137). The rapidity of her calculation is an expression of her joy. After Louisa's fall, Captain Wentworth realizes to his surprise that others consider him engaged to her, and retreats to his brother's house "lamenting the blindness of his own pride, and the blunders of his own calculations" (P, p. 264). Captain Wentworth blunders, but not because calculating is difficult or unnatural. Captain Harville asks Anne to feel what a man feels when he is apart from his family, "when, coming back after a twelvemonth's absence perhaps, and obliged to put into another port, he calculates how soon it be possible to get them there, pretending to deceive himself, and saying, 'They cannot be here till such a day,' but all the while hoping for them twelve hours sooner" (P, p. 255). Calculation is as human as managing one's own expectations but at the same time hoping against them.

By the way, Austen uses the term “rational,” but in the unspecialized sense of “reasonable” or “practical,” as when Mrs. Croft tells her brother Captain Wentworth that women can be perfectly comfortable on a man-of-war: “I hate to hear you talking so, like a fine gentleman, and as if women were all fine ladies, instead of rational creatures” (P, p. 75). After Elizabeth refuses Mr. Collins’s proposal, he tells her, “I shall chuse to attribute it to your wish of increasing my love by suspense” and Elizabeth replies, “Do not consider me now as an elegant female intending to plague you, but as a rational creature speaking the truth from her heart” (PP, p. 122). Here “rational” means unstrategic. Austen uses a variant of “strategic” only once. When Elizabeth hears that Mr. Darcy was somehow involved with Lydia’s marriage, she asks her aunt Mrs. Gardiner to explain: “[M]y dear aunt, if you do not tell me in an honourable manner, I shall certainly be reduced to tricks and stratagems to find it out” (PP, p. 354).

More pretentious terms for strategic thinking, such as “manoeuvre,” “taking in,” “catching,” and “setting one’s cap,” are used mainly by people who do not really know what they are doing. Mary Crawford says that marriage is “a manoeuvring business. I know so many who have married in the full expectation and confidence of some . . . good quality in the person, who have found themselves entirely deceived. . . . What is this, but a take in?” (MP, pp. 53–54). But Mary’s sister Mrs. Grant corrects her: “[I]f one scheme of happiness fails, human nature turns to another; if the first calculation is wrong, we make a second better; we find comfort somewhere” (MP, p. 54). Note that if one calculation fails, a couple is saved not by hope and faith but by a second calculation. When Sir John says that Willoughby is “very well worth catching,” Mrs. Dashwood replies, “I do not believe . . . that Mr. Willoughby will be incommoded by the attempts of either of *my* daughters towards what you call *catching him*. It is not an employment to which they have been brought up” (SS, pp. 52–53). After Marianne asks how Willoughby dances, Sir John continues, “You will be setting your cap at him now.” Marianne, now provoked, objects: “That is an expression, Sir John . . . which I particularly dislike. I abhor every common-place phrase by which wit is intended; and ‘setting one’s cap at a man,’ or ‘making a conquest,’ are the most odious of all.” Sir John “did not much understand this reproof” and cannot shut up, continuing, “Ay, you will make conquests enough, I dare say, one way or other. Poor Brandon! he is quite smitten already, and he is very well worth setting your cap at” (SS, pp. 53–54). Sir John thinks he knows the lingo of strategic thinking, but displays his imbecility in his nonresponse to Marianne’s direct objection. When Marianne asks Sir John what kind of man Willoughby is, Sir John cannot “describe to her the shades of his mind” (SS, p. 52).

STRATEGIC SOPHOMORES

Indeed, poor strategic thinking is best illustrated not by the naive but by the sophomoric, people who think they know something but don't. Like Sir John, the easily duped John Dashwood fancies himself knowledgeable about the strategic ways of women, instructing his sister Elinor to capture Colonel Brandon: "[S]ome of those little attentions and encouragements which ladies can so easily give, will fix him, in spite of himself" (SS, p. 254). Similarly, Mr. Collins thinks himself expert when Elizabeth Bennet refuses his proposal: "I am not now to learn... that it is usual with young ladies to reject the addresses of the man whom they secretly mean to accept, when he first applies for their favour" (PP, p. 120).

Mrs. Jennings is Austen's archetypal sophomore, who "missed no opportunity of projecting weddings among all the young people of her acquaintance" (SS, p. 43). After Willoughby clandestinely takes Marianne to see Allenhurst Court, which he hopes to inherit, Mrs. Jennings proudly reports, "I have found you out in spite of all your tricks. I know where you spent the morning... I hope you like your house, Miss Marianne" (SS, p. 79). In London, Willoughby does not respond to Marianne's letters, and acts with brutal coldness to her at a party. A letter arrives from him, and Elinor "felt immediately such a sickness at heart as made her hardly able to hold up her head, and sat in such a general tremour as made her fear it impossible to escape Mrs. Jennings's notice." But Mrs. Jennings is comfortably unaware: "Of Elinor's distress, she was too busily employed in measuring lengths of worsted for her rug, to see any thing at all" (SS, p. 206). Later Mrs. Jennings says she could not have possibly known that Willoughby had written to tell Marianne that he is marrying Miss Grey: "But then you know, how should I guess such a thing? I made sure of its being nothing but a common love letter, and you know young people like to be laughed at about them" (SS, pp. 221–22). When Colonel Brandon visits, Mrs. Jennings whispers to Elinor, "The Colonel looks as grave as ever you see. He knows nothing of it; do tell him, my dear," but she is wrong as usual; Colonel Brandon has already heard that Willoughby will marry Miss Grey (SS, p. 225). Later Mrs. Jennings stealthily observes Colonel Brandon talking quietly with Elinor: "she could not keep herself from seeing that Elinor changed colour, attended with agitation, and was too intent on what he said, to pursue her employment... [H]e seemed to be apologizing for the badness of his house. This set the matter beyond a doubt" (SS, p. 318). But instead of offering marriage, Colonel Brandon is merely talking to Elinor about offering a living to Edward Ferrars. After Elinor explains, Mrs. Jennings's misunderstanding provides "considerable amusement for the moment, without any material loss of happiness to either, for

Mrs. Jennings only exchanged one form of delight for another, and still without forfeiting her expectation of the first” (SS, p. 331). Even proved wrong, Mrs. Jennings persists in supposing that Elinor and Colonel Brandon will marry.

Sophomores’ strategic plans backfire. Sir William Lucas, Charlotte Lucas’s father, “struck with the action of doing a very gallant thing,” tries to get Elizabeth and Mr. Darcy to dance together but fails (PP, p. 28). When they do dance together on a later occasion, Sir William thinks himself clever when he says to them, “I must hope to have this pleasure often repeated, especially when a certain desirable event, my dear Eliza, (glancing at her sister and Bingley,) shall take place” (PP, p. 104). Mr. Darcy reads Sir William’s glance, and realizing now that his friend Mr. Bingley is in real danger of marrying Jane, persuades Mr. Bingley against it, which in turn makes Elizabeth despise him. Sir William’s plan backfires, and indeed having a plan backfire demonstrates your strategic ineptitude better than having no plan at all. At Pemberley, in the presence of Mr. Darcy and his sister Georgiana, Caroline Bingley asks Elizabeth a question which alludes to Wickham, in order “to discompose Elizabeth, by bringing forward the idea of a man to whom she believed her partial, to make her betray a sensibility which might injure her in Darcy’s opinion.” But Caroline Bingley is unaware of Georgiana’s and Mr. Darcy’s painful association with Wickham, who had tried to elope with Georgiana when she was fifteen. Elizabeth, who knows this history, is able to respond calmly, and “the very circumstance which had been designed to turn his thoughts from Elizabeth, seemed to have fixed them on her more, and more cheerfully” (PP, p. 298).

Austen’s strategic sophomores take pride in the trivial. When Mrs. Allen says that Henry Tilney “is a very agreeable young man,” Mrs. Thorpe replies, “Indeed he is, Mrs. Allen . . . I must say it, though I *am* his mother, that there is not a more agreeable young man in the world.” Mrs. Allen is smart enough to figure it out, “for after only a moment’s consideration, she said, in a whisper to Catherine, ‘I dare say she thought I was speaking of her son’ ” (NA, p. 54). Mrs. Norris suspects that Dick Jackson, who brings some boards to his father as the servants’ meal is starting, has designs on a free meal, and takes pride in foiling him: “as I hate such encroaching people . . . I said to the boy directly—(a great lubberly fellow of ten years old you know, who ought to be ashamed of himself,) *I’ll* take the boards to your father, Dick; so get you home again as fast as you can’ ” (MP, p. 167). Mrs. Norris, a moocher herself, is proud of outwitting a ten-year-old child. Similarly, one of Charlotte Lucas’s younger brothers declares, “If I were as rich as Mr. Darcy . . . I would . . . drink a bottle of wine a day.” Mrs. Bennet answers, “[I]f I were to see you at it, I should take away your bottle directly” and “[t]he boy protested that she should not; she continued to declare that she would,

and the argument ended only with the visit" (PP, p. 22). Mrs. Bennet can only fight to a draw with a child. Before Jane Fairfax's engagement with Frank Churchill is made public, Mrs. Elton is very proud to be in on the secret; when Emma visits Jane, she sees Mrs. Elton "with a sort of anxious parade of mystery fold up a letter which she had apparently been reading aloud to Miss Fairfax. . . . 'I mentioned no *names*, you will observe.—Oh! no; cautious as a minister of state. I managed it extremely well.' . . . It was a palpable display, repeated on every possible occasion" (E, p. 495). Mrs. Elton is not more ridiculous than Emma herself, when, eager for validation and praise, she cannot help letting Frank Churchill in on her arch speculation that Mr. Dixon was Jane Fairfax's secret lover: "it had been so strong an idea, that it would escape her, and his submission to all that she told, was a compliment to her penetration" (E, p. 249). At least Emma upon marriage tries to graduate from the sophomoric, while Mrs. Elton remains.

EYES

"Penetration" and "foresight" involve vision, but eyes reveal as well as detect preferences, as discussed in chapter 2. Mrs. Jennings thinks that Colonel Brandon is interested in Elinor because of "his open pleasure in meeting her after an absence of only ten days, his readiness to converse with her, and his deference for her opinion" (SS, pp. 345–46). But Elinor "watched his eyes, while Mrs. Jennings thought only of his behaviour;—and while his looks of anxious solicitude on Marianne's feeling[s] . . . because unexpressed by words, entirely escaped the latter lady's observation;—*she* could discover in them the quick feelings, and needless alarm of a lover" (SS, p. 346). Eyes speak louder than behavior or words. At Fanny's first ball, Lady Bertram and Mrs. Norris ascribe her good looks to her dress, but Sir Thomas knows the true estimation of her beauty: "when they sat down to table the eyes of the two young men assured him" (MP, p. 316). Once Henry Crawford proposes, Edmund can see the reluctance in Fanny's eyes: "Fanny was worth it all . . . but he did not think he could have gone on himself with any woman breathing, without something more to warm his courage than his eyes could discern in hers" (MP, p. 388).

Mr. Knightley's suspicion that Frank Churchill admires Jane Fairfax and not Emma Woodhouse starts when "he had seen a look, more than a single look, at Miss Fairfax, which, from the admirer of Miss Woodhouse, seemed somewhat out of place" (E, p. 373). Mr. Knightley "suspected in Frank Churchill the determination of catching her eye" and later positions himself "to see as much as he could, with as little apparent observation" (E, pp. 376–77). Butte (2004, p. 120) notes that "[h]is

ability to track people's perceptions and their perceptions of how others perceive them is indeed the core of Knightley's wisdom." Mr. Knightley, the look-reading specialist, has *nunchi* (explained in chapter 2). In contrast, Sir William Lucas compliments Elizabeth and Mr. Darcy on their dancing, saying, "You will not thank me for detaining you from the bewitching converse of that young lady, whose bright eyes are also upbraiding me," but Elizabeth has yet to like Mr. Darcy and had agreed to dance quite reluctantly (PP, p. 104). Sir William Lucas does not have *nunchi*.

Looking at someone's eyes is powerfully informative, but Austen admits its limitations. The day after Anne talks with Captain Wentworth at the concert in Bath, her friend Mrs. Smith tells her, "You need not tell me that you had a pleasant evening. I see it in your eye. . . . Your countenance perfectly informs me that you were in company last night with the person, whom you think the most agreeable in the world." Anne blushes "in the astonishment and confusion excited by her friend's penetration, unable to imagine how any report of Captain Wentworth could have reached her" (P, p. 210). Mrs. Smith mistakenly thinks that Mr. Elliot is the most agreeable person; seeing Anne's eye, Mrs. Smith is completely correct about Anne's feelings, but wrong about their object. When Colonel Brandon visits Marianne while she is ill, Elinor "soon discovered in his melancholy eye and varying complexion as he looked at her sister, the probable recurrence of many past scenes of misery to his mind, brought back by that resemblance between Marianne and Eliza already acknowledged, and now strengthened by the hollow eye, the sickly skin, the posture of reclining weakness" (SS, p. 385). Eliza was an orphan and Colonel Brandon's first love when they were both children. Her guardian, Colonel Brandon's father, forced her to marry Colonel Brandon's brother, who did not love her, and after her divorce she fell into poverty and illness; Colonel Brandon had taken care of her in her last days of life. Colonel Brandon had told Elinor this story in order to better explain Willoughby's character: Willoughby had seduced Eliza's daughter, also named Eliza, and fathered a bastard child with her. Elinor reads Colonel Brandon's melancholy eye, but her deeper understanding of his mind is based on knowledge of his past experiences. In contrast, "Mrs. Dashwood, not less watchful of what passed than her daughter, but with a mind very differently influenced, and therefore watching to very different effect, saw nothing in the Colonel's behaviour but what arose from the most simple and self-evident sensations" (SS, pp. 385–86). Mrs. Dashwood can read eyes as well as Elinor can, but does not know the back story.