Persuasions #15, 1993 *Pages 139-147*

"My sore throats, you know, are always worse than anybody's": Mary Musgrove and Jane Austen's Art of Whining

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First, let me say that I'm delighted to see so much interest in Mary Musgrove and in whining. Mary is one of my favorite comic characters, because there is so much of her in all of us, I think, though we may disguise it more decently than she does, and whining is one of my favorite topics – also (with some qualification here) one of my favorite activities. What I love about Mary are her relentless, endlessly inventive whines; you will see that by my taxonomy, she manages to emit both the most primitive and the most sophisticated sorts of whines. And what I love about Jane Austen's presentation of Mary is first that, though most of us hate nothing more than being in company with a relentless whiner, Austen manages to keep Mary's demanding misery and miserable demands comic. Even more, though, I admire Austen's ability to infuse so much meaning into this comic character – as I hope to suggest later.[1]

But let's start with the comedy of Mary's whines – a rich subject. The first of two major functions of a whine is to communicate or vent unhappiness, I'd say, and Mary does that often enough – but even her most open or primitive whines, such as her frequent laments at being left alone, I will argue, are usually embedded in much more complex exchanges. They serve other functions, in other words, which can be loosely described as manipulative – if you will accept that blaming involves an attempt to manipulate others' emotions. Consider the first words that Mary utters in the novel, also the first she says to Anne, who has come to help and cheer her up at Uppercross. Mary almost immediately mentions that she has "not seen a creature the whole morning," a fairly open whine. But listen to what comes before it:

> "So, you are come at last. I began to think I should never see you. I am so ill I can hardly speak. I have not seen a creature the whole morning." (37)[2]

There's a crescendo of complaint here. No welcome, no "thank you for coming, Anne," no "it is a pleasure to see you." Certainly not. Austen's art of representing Mary's whines involves turning even Mary's greeting to her sister into an accusation: "So you are come AT LAST." Anne is immediately arraigned for not having come earlier.

This capacity to infuse blame into nearly every utterance is part of what distinguishes Mary's whining, to my ear, at least, from the simpler whines of characters like Mrs. Bennet, whose laments over the entail of Longbourn do not usually attack anyone but Mr. Collins. Mary, by contrast, is always eager to get the knife in. Notice her technique in the next sentence, which continues to accuse Anne: "I began to think I should NEVER see you." The knife comes in with "never." As all family members can witness, the word "never," like "always," is incendiary – "you *never* take the garbage out so I *always* have to do it; you *always* get first pick, I *never* do." "Always" and "never" raise the emotional temperature of any dialogue; they aggravate any accusation, as Mary senses very well. In this first scene with Anne, occupying just three pages in Chapman's edition (37-40), Mary uses "never" five times and "always" thrice, each time reproachfully: to say that she thought she'd never see Anne, that her husband has never come back, that the Miss Musgroves never put themselves out of their way to see her, that she never wants them anyway, and that Anne has never asked her a word about "our dinner at the Pooles yesterday" (39). She also asserts that she always makes the best account of her health, that you always know before hand what dinner will be at the Pooles (clearly a profound criticism of their menu), and that Mr. Musgrove always sits forward, so Mary has to crowd into the back seat with Henrietta and Louisa – which unhappy arrangement she thinks might have caused her illness. "Always" is so useful that it appears in my title whine – her sore throats are ALWAYS worse than anybody's. But I'll have more to say about this wonderful sentence later.

We have now finally arrived at the third sentence of Mary's first speech to Anne, when she first directly mentions her illness. "I am so ill I can hardly speak" – "hardly" being also a fine adjunct to a whine, particularly here when she is speaking about hardly being able to speak. Then Mary comes to her favorite lament, "I have not seen a creature the whole morning," one that is so central to her misery that she repeats it three more times in less than a page: "I assure you, I have not seen a soul this whole long morning" and " I have not seen one of them [the Musgroves] today," and "though I told him [Mr. Musgrove] how ill I was, not one of them have been near me" (37, 38). She even laments that Lady Russell did not come in to visit: "I do not think she has been in this house three times this summer" (37). These repetitious wails of seeing no one, when she is finally seeing Anne, are not just contradictory, as when Mary says she is hardly able to speak: they typify the treatment of Anne by the rest of her family, Sir Walter and Elizabeth: Anne is "nobody with either father or sister" (5).

In these four short sentences and the brief exchange with Anne that follows, Mary Musgrove covers the primitive and manipulative possibilities of whining with amazing efficiency. She vents her misery at being left alone with the repetitiveness characteristic of an inveterate whiner, and she openly and tacitly blames Anne and others for not paying attention to her. She adopts a striking variety of roles: when she speaks of always making the best of her health, she is the martyr; and when she refuses all comfort from Anne, she is Job, uniquely cursed with inadequate consolation that naturally she must reject. When Anne suggests that Mary has had her children with her, she retorts that their noise was unbearable and they didn't mind her; when Anne predicts that the Miss Musgroves will visit soon, Mary doesn't want them because they "talk and laugh a great deal too much for" her (38). And of course Mary makes no response whatsoever to Anne's concerns. When Anne excuses herself from coming earlier because she "had so much to do," Mary's response is wonderfully narcissistic: "Dear me! What can *you* possibly have to do" (38). After Anne explains that she has been packing and taking leave and cataloguing and ordering the garden, Mary's entire response is " 'Oh! well;' – and after a moment's pause," comes the reproach about Anne never having asked about her dinner at the Pooles (39).

My own favorite instance of Mary's art of whining, however, is comprised in her letter to Anne at Bath; it is from there that I have taken the splendid line that I've adopted for my title. In a letter, after all, Mary has more scope for whines – there need be no interruption, and there is none. Every sentence in the letter manages to be a lament and an accusation at once, that is, manages both the primitive venting and the more sophisticated blaming. Let us hear about her sore throat in context; it appears as her first postscript, which some say contains the real message of every letter:

> "I am sorry to say that I am very far from well; and Jemima has just told me that the butcher says there is a bad sore-throat very much about. I dare say I shall catch it; and my sore-throats, you know, are always worse than anybody's." (164)

There she is before us again, Job, uniquely, narcissistically cursed with the worst sore throats in the universe, and she manages to evoke all these past afflictions in one sentence. But it's particularly inventive of her in the very same sentence to whine in the future tense also – about a sore throat she hasn't yet got. The phrase "you know" is also artful: it manages to call upon Anne as a witness to her suffering and at the same time to accuse her of insensitivity. Similarly, in the first sentence of the letter, like her first words to Anne at Uppercross, she is both accusing and aggrieved: "I make no apology for my silence, because I know how little people think of letters in such a place as Bath. You must be a great deal too happy to care for Uppercross, which, as you well know, affords little to write about" (162). No indeed, no conventional apologies for not writing from our Mary! Every sentence in the letter cries out for analysis and appreciation, but just let me single out a few of my favorites, ones that will illustrate some of the features of Austen's artful representation of Mary's whines.

After lamenting the dullness of Uppercross, pointing out that *she* never had such long school holidays as the Musgrove children, and blaming Mrs. Harville for parting with her own children for so long, Mary announces: "What dreadful weather we have had! It may not be felt in Bath with your nice pavements … " (163). (It is amusing to remember how differently Austen herself treats a similar observation about bad weather in her own letters: "What dreadful Hot weather we have! It keeps one in a continual state of Inelegance."[3]) Back to Mary, who wields a knife, as usual – *you* have nice pavements, *you* are happy in Bath, better off than I am. Mary, we know, always fears that everyone else is better off – that she herself is not getting her due. On the hill above Winthrop, Mary enjoys herself until Louisa and Captain Wentworth are out of sight; then she is sure that Louisa has a better seat somewhere else and

goes in search of it and of the two people who might be having a good time without her. As Mary says later in the letter, in reference to Anne's making Mr. Elliot's acquaintance: "I wish I could be acquainted with him too; but I have my usual luck, I am always [always, again!] out of the way when any thing desirable is going on; always the last of my family to be noticed" (163). In lines like these, Mary almost anticipates Eeyore in *Winnie-the-Pooh*, who also has the attitude that others are out to get him, and who also turns every statement into an accusation. For instance, when Pooh offers to find Eeyore's tail, his response is "You're a real friend …. Not like Some."[4] Unlike Mary, Eeyore usually blames Others, not whomever he is addressing, but like her he has an abiding sense of ill-usage: he points out that everyone is eating "All except me … As Usual."[5]

To return to what really irks Mary about the bad weather at Uppercross: the lanes are wet and she has "not had a creature call on me since the second week in January, except Charles Hayter, who has been calling much oftener than was welcome" (163). We have to admire the way that Mary gets two of her habitual whines in here, one about not having enough company, and the other about having Henrietta's choice of a husband be "disagreeable and inconvenient to the *principal* part of her family, and … giving bad connections to those who have not been used to them" (76). Finally, having whined openly and tacitly about not being in Bath, Mary angles openly for an invitation: "What an immense time Mrs. Clay has been staying with Elizabeth! Does she never mean to go away?" (163). Mary is troubled here by no consideration about a possible "bad connection" between her father and Mrs. Clay; she continues, "But perhaps if she were to leave the room vacant we might not be invited. Let me know what you think of this" (163). And having blamed Mrs. Harville for leaving her own children at Uppercross for weeks, Mary adds, "I do not expect my children to be asked, you know. I can leave them at the Great House very well, for a month or six weeks" (163). Then a few whines at the Navy – Admiral and Mrs. Croft have been guilty of "gross inattention" as neighbors – and Mary is Anne's affectionately, followed by her postscript on sore throats and then her retraction regarding the Crofts, who have after all offered to convey anything Mary wishes to Bath, in "a very kind, friendly note indeed, addressed to me, just as it ought" (163, 164). And of course this letter informs Anne of Benwick's engagement to Louisa.[6]

What is interesting about Mary as a whiner is that she has so complete a sense of both deprivation and entitlement: she continually fears being ill-used, thinks she is, whines about it, thinks herself ill over it – as when in the first scene with Anne she blames her alleged illness on having to sit backward in the Musgroves' carriage the night before. She feels entitled to sit in the best seat, of course. I have passed comparatively lightly over Mary's hypochondria, but it's worth mentioning how it differs from that of Mr. Woodhouse or Isabella Knightley, for instance. They focus on their health rather than whine about it. Admittedly, their focus is manipulative, particularly in Mr. Woodhouse's case. He is completely absorbed in the activity of holding on to his habits, including his habits of ill-health; his great fear is of any change that might threaten those habits (as Miss Taylor's marriage does), and his fears often work to get others to do what he wants. But he also is capable of worrying over others whose habits differ from his; he is capable of pitying others, not just of self-pity, albeit in his case it's not always easy to distinguish the two. "Poor Miss Taylor" is a way of saying "poor me," after all.

Mary, however, never gets beyond self-pity. Remember her "What could *you* possibly have to do" to Anne. There is in fact no whiner in Austen's novels to compare with Mary. Mrs. Norris isn't a whiner, not even when she has "much exertion and many sacrifices to glance at in the form of hurried walks and sudden removals from her own fire-side" (*MP* 188), for she is not whining but having much "to insinuate in her own praise" to Sir Thomas. Mrs. Norris is in fact a boaster, like Mrs. Elton, whom one can hear droning on, but not whining. Mrs. Allen of *Northanger Abbey* might at first seem to be a candidate, with her repeated wishes that she knew someone in Bath so that Catherine might have a partner. But in fact, these remarks are delivered "with perfect serenity" (22), so that although they have the repetitiousness of whines, they haven't the proper tone – the characteristic moan. The only real whiner, again, is Mrs. Bennet, but her laments over the entail of Longbourn do in fact register a serious grievance, and her concern over the fate of her daughters when their father dies compares favorably with Mr. Bennet's indifference. Her methods are vulgar, and they don't work, but at least she tries.

Mary Musgrove's character was created for *Persuasion*, I think, because the novel is to some extent about ways that people cope with the sense of ill-usage as well as with loss and grief. The phrase "ill used" with or without the hyphen appears eight times in *Persuasion* according to the De Rose and McGuire *Concordance*, more than half the times that it appears in all Austen's works. *Pride and Prejudice* uses it twice, *Mansfield Park* once, and the minor

works (*Lady Susan*, *The Watsons*, and *Sanditon*) four times – and that's it.[7] Though half of the eight instances of ill-usage in *Persuasion* refer to Mary's sense of it, as we might expect, the other four occasions suggest how pervasive the notion is in the novel. We are told that Elizabeth Elliot "felt herself ill-used and unfortunate" by having to retrench their expenditure, "as did her father" (10); that Captain Wentworth "felt himself ill-used" by Anne's breaking their engagement (28); and that Anne hopes that Captain Wentworth's letter to the Admiral announcing Louisa's engagement "does not breathe the spirit of an ill-used man," and then hopes that Wentworth's "manner of writing" does not convey that "he thinks himself ill-used by his friend" (172, 173). Interestingly, the Admiral assures her in response to her first query that "there is not an oath or a murmur from beginning to end …. No, no; Frederick is not a man to whine and complain; he has too much spirit for that" (172). The Admiral's use of the word "whine" represents Austen's sole use of this word in any form in all her novels. "To whine" was gendered female by Samuel Johnson in his famous *Dictionary* as "To lament in low murmurs; to make a plaintive noise; to moan meanly and effeminately." In her single use of the word, Austen inverts Johnson and makes whining male, using it in reference to male behavior; though the Admiral doesn't say that Captain Wentworth whines, the phrase "a man to whine or complain" intimates very clearly that other men do.[8]

In a novel that juxtaposes Anne's lasting grief at losing Captain Wentworth with the more malleable and fanciful grieving of Captain Benwick for Fanny Harville or Mrs. Musgrove for her son Richard, we are inclined to expect that a sense of ill-usage, too, will ordinarily prove false. Certainly Elizabeth and Sir Walter have no right to feel ill-used by the amount of his debts; Captain Wentworth feels not ill-used but profoundly relieved by Benwick's engagement to Louisa; and Wentworth is not fully entitled to feel ill-used by Anne's breaking their engagement, as he himself recognizes at the end, telling Anne that "I shut my eyes, and would not understand you, or do you justice" (247). But what about Mary's thinking herself ill-used? The narrator produces the first two instances, telling us first that, "inheriting a considerable share of the Elliot self-importance, [she] was very prone to add to every other distress that of fancying herself neglected and ill-used" (37). Later, the narrator informs us that, during the walk back from Winthrop, "Mary began to complain of" Charles's dropping her arm to cut nettles, "and lament her being ill-used, according to custom, in being in the hedge-side, while Anne was never incommoded on the other" (90). The other two instances are filtered through Anne's consciousness. At Lyme, Anne recognizes that Mary "would have felt quite ill-used by Anne's having actually run against" Mr. Elliot "in the passage" (107), and later at the White Hart, Anne has to find Mary's keys and sort her trinkets, while "trying to convince her that she was not ill used by any body; which Mary, well amused as she generally was in her station at a window overlooking the entrance to the pump-room, could not but have her moments of imagining" (221).

What I want to consider is whether Mary's sense of ill-usage is to be dismissed as completely as Sir Walter's and Elizabeth's. That is, is there any legitimacy at all in Mary's inveterate whines? In short, why is Mary a whiner – a person who expresses continual frustration, who makes it known that she never gets enough? Isn't it partly right, after all? Her four initial whines to Anne about being left alone convey to us that people try to avoid her as much as they possibly can: her husband goes out, Mr. Musgrove passes by without coming in and either doesn't tell his daughters that Mary feels ill, or does tell them, which induces them to stay away, and Lady Russell doesn't come in. Mary is of course largely responsible for these desertions, none of them absolute – the Musgroves see each other daily in any case – but what makes her act so as to provoke avoidance?

Mary was evidently a neglected child. Elizabeth was her father's favorite, and we can infer that Anne was her mother's as she is now Lady Russell's. Even if Lady Elliot conscientiously attempted to give each daughter equal love and attention, as presumably she did, Mary was youngest when she died, just eight or nine; Anne was about thirteen and Elizabeth about fifteen. Mary is less attractive than either of her sisters, and less secure. She feels competitive with her sisters – witness her fear that Captain Wentworth might be made a baronet at the end. Even in her marriage she was a second choice, and perhaps knows it, as certainly the Musgroves do: Louisa tells Captain Wentworth that Charles asked Anne to marry him before asking Mary. Anne was "about two and twenty" (28) when Charles proposed to her, which makes Mary, according to the Baronetage, either seventeen or eighteen, perhaps away at school, perhaps not. She married Charles shortly after she turned nineteen. It is hard to avoid inferring that Charles married her on the rebound from Anne. She may have sought him; we are told that he is "really a very affectionate brother" (110), so that he would be likely to respond to affection. Curiously, their wedding day was December 16, 1810 – Jane Austen's thirty-fifth birthday! (I've always wondered what private joke Austen was enjoying by using

that date. A friend has speculated that perhaps she was congratulating herself on having reached thirty-five without marrying, and I think she is probably right.[9])

I have been arguing that whining is a form of communication – either for self-expression, venting one's own emotions, or for power, to manipulate others' emotions and behavior. But it is of course also a way to protest against the way one's life is ordered, as Mrs. Bennet does. Mary's attempts to assert her class – to precede her mother-in-law out of local dining rooms, to boast about the Elliot consequence – is certainly self-aggrandizing but it also reflects insecurity and unhappiness, as all Mary's whines do. Does the novel ask us to view her suffering as wholly illegitimate?

Claudia Johnson's forthcoming book on Mary Wollstonecraft, Ann Radcliffe, Frances Burney, and Jane Austen, *Equivocal Beings*, points out that the legitimacy of suffering is a gendered issue in the 1790s.[10] The gendering of suffering, the question of who suffers longer over loss, men or women, is certainly at issue in the famous conversation between Anne and Captain Harville. Johnson's compelling analyses of *The Mysteries of Udolpho* and *Camilla* argue that only men in those novels seem to have the right to suffer and lament; women are constantly enjoined and exhorted to repress and deny their suffering. In *Persuasion*, Anne Elliot clearly suffers from burying her unhappiness; she has had no outlet at all for her pain at losing Wentworth – she and Lady Russell never discuss Anne's engagement or regrets. As a result, Anne is evidently depressed at the start of the novel, a state reflected in her "early loss of bloom and spirits" (28). That is, Anne suffers in her body and in her emotional life; in my view, Anne comes out of her depression by being forced by her visit to Mary into the pain of seeing Wentworth again, which paradoxically makes her come alive, recovering her youth and sexuality as she enjoys the temporary admiration of Captain Benwick and Mr. Elliot at Lyme.

Austen has, then, set up the most profound contrast between Anne and her sister Mary in their ways of expressing female suffering: Mary whines, venting her unhappiness, and Anne suppresses hers. Austen also sets up a profound contrast in the way characters respond to the sisters: Mary alienates people by whining, sometimes succeeding in driving them away; Anne is liked by the Musgroves for her self-effacement and willingness to interest herself in them. That is, Mary is punished for her mode of expressing unhappiness; Anne is rewarded for hers.

It is not possible to dismiss this contrast by saying that of course Anne is the heroine, "almost too good" for Austen herself (*Letters*, 487), and Mary is comic, so that their unhappiness must be treated antithetically. Captain Benwick's unhappiness, for example, is treated quite differently from theirs, and much more tenderly. Admittedly, his is *openly* mourning a lost love, unlike Anne, whose suffering is concealed. As a result, his behavior can be favorably interpreted in conventional romantic terms, as the Musgroves do at first. His "story" ensures first that the "sympathy and good-will excited toward Captain Benwick was very great" (97). Then once the Musgroves meet him, "he had a pleasing face and a melancholy air, just as he ought to have, and drew back from conversation" (97). By comparison, a parallel female sufferer, Anne's friend Mrs. Smith, who is mourning her husband, in addition to having lost health and affluence (154), is praised for not expressing her suffering. She is not even given full credit for stoicism, for Anne reflects "that this was not a case of fortitude or of resignation only …. here was that elasticity of mind, that disposition to be comforted, that power of turning readily from evil to good, and of finding employment which carried her out of herself, which was from Nature alone" (154).

Benwick's is the first unhappiness that people treat all sympathetically in *Persuasion* for Mrs. Musgrove's mourning of Richard is indulged, not sympathized with. The introduction of Benwick's unhappiness is followed by Louisa's accident, when male emotional responses are again treated more tenderly than female ones. Anne remains in control of herself, Henrietta faints, Mary screams and becomes hysterical; by contrast, Wentworth suffers first in an "agony of silence," then asks for help "in a tone of despair" (109, 110). Similarly, Charles Musgrove "really a very affectionate brother, hung over Louisa with sobs of grief" (110). The expression of male suffering is legitimate; female suffering apparently less so.[11] Even the victim, Louisa, is implicitly blamed in Anne's thoughts for the "very resolute character" that contributed to the accident (116).

Austen always gives us more than we expect in her comedy. Although we may think we have encountered simple comedy in a character like Mary, a mere whiner, we always have something more, something deeper and more complex. Mary's character, I would suggest, following Claudia Johnson, forms part of a deliberate attempt by Austen to interrogate the way the expression of suffering seems to be admirable or legitimate in men, excessive or comical or otherwise illegitimate in women. Nonetheless, because whines are so irritating, because Mary doesn't really appear

to be ill, because the underlying reasons for her unhappiness are implied rather than stated, and because nothing nasty that she says or does really hurts Anne (which would make us take her more seriously), Mary's unhappy whines remain richly comical, despite the suggestions on Austen's part of a cultural critique of the conditions that make us laugh at Mary, not sympathize.

NOTES

[1] I would like to thank Ruth Portner, as usual, for help in developing ideas for this essay, and for her patience in listening to blocks of text over the telephone; and I am grateful to Virginia Hjelmaa for first calling my attention to the richness of Mary's character.

[2] All citations from Austen's novels are taken from the R. W. Chapman edition of *The Novels of Jane Austen*, 5 vols., 3rd ed. (rpt. 1965; London: Oxford Univ. Press, 1933) and will appear in parenthesis in the text.

[3] *Jane Austen's Letters to her Sister Cassandra and Others*, ed. R. W. Chapman, 2nd ed. (1952; rpt. London: Oxford Univ. Press, 1964), p. 18.

[4] A. A. Milne, *Winnie-the-Pooh* (rpt. 1961; New York: E. P. Dutton, 1926), p. 47. The perennial appeal of whining – in comedy – is suggested by this text.

[5] Milne, p. 121.

[6] Mary's summary is worth noting: "And this is the end, you see, of Captain Benwick's being supposed to be an admirer of yours. How Charles could take such a thing into his head was always incomprehensible to me. I hope he will be more agreeable now" (163). That Charles should notice admiration of Anne seems particularly disagreeable to Mary, a possible sign that she is aware of his former admiration of Anne.

[7] Peter L. De Rose and S. W. McGuire, *A Concordance to the Works of Jane Austen*, 3 vols. (New York and London; Garland Publishing, 1982). The instances from the other works are as follows: in *Pride and Prejudice*, Mrs. Bennet wants to "require Jane to confess that if [Bingley] did not come back, she should think herself very ill used" (129), and she reports to Mrs. Gardiner that "They had all been very ill-used" since her last visit, in that two marriages for her daughters had come to nothing (139). In *Mansfield Park*, Fanny feels that Mr. Rushworth "had been very ill-used" by the failure of Maria and Henry Crawford. and later Julia, to wait for him to fetch the key (101). Catherine Vernon reports that Lady Susan says of Reginald that "His disposition you know is warm, & he came to expostulate with me, his compassion all alive for this ill-used Girl [Frederica Vernon], this Heroine in distress! (*MW*, 290). Margaret Watson, fearing that she might have to share her bedroom with her sister Emma is "rather mortified to find she was not ill used" in *The Watsons* (*MW,* 351). In *Sanditon*, Charlotte Heywood imagines briefly that Clara Brereton "seemed placed with her [Lady Denham] on purpose to be ill-used" (391), and feels later that Clara and Sir Edward Denham are "really ill-used" in being seen by her to meet clandestinely (427). I have not included instances of "ill usage," though there are some.

[8] Admittedly, Johnson is probably, like the Admiral, thinking of a male's whining when he writes of mean and effeminate moaning: that is, he is referring to a lover's complaint for the loss or coldness of his mistress, a very common use for the term "whining." Still, what seems to Johnson to be "mean" about whining is that it is like something women do; even if he is thinking of male lovers in his definition, he genders their behavior as female or effeminate.

[9] A suggestion made by Virginia Hjelmaa.

[10] I am very grateful to Claudia L. Johnson for permitting me to see a good deal of this book in manuscript and for allowing me to refer to her argument here.

[11] We need not believe, of course, that Charles and Captain Wentworth actually suffer more than, say, Henrietta does.