

The Coterie Speech of Jane Welsh Carlyle

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JANE WELSH CARLYLE WOVE HER LIFE INTO LETTERS—MANY thousands of them. Their “wit and graphic power” place them among the best literary letters in the nineteenth century.¹ Central in their composition are hundreds of allusive phrases, identified by underlinings or single quotation marks or set apart by dashes. Their allusions are accessible only to those in the know—the coterie of family, servants, and friends who were both their source and their audience. After Jane’s death in 1866, Thomas Carlyle annotated many of her coterie phrases, hoping to let future readers “into the secret.” But his gloss leaves many other phrases “dark and void of meaning” (*Reminiscences* 72). Neither coterie phrases nor annotations have been collected separately, nor do print collections provide notes. *The Carlyle Letters Online* usefully indexes “coterie speech,” but each reference requires a separate search.

In 1965, under the direction of Charles Richard Sanders, first editor of *The Collected Letters of Thomas and Jane Welsh Carlyle*, I compiled a 65-page glossary of Jane’s coterie speech. It integrates Thomas Carlyle’s annotations with additional coterie phrases in letters not then in his possession, their sources if known, and for each, dates of first and subsequent uses. Presently, the glossary exists only in unpublished manuscript. Until a current version becomes available, this essay will provide selected examples of the coterie language of Jane Carlyle’s letters and represent the conceptual scheme of the glossary in the light of current scholarship. In order to understand the function of coterie speech in Jane’s letters, this essay must first place her private language in its larger linguistic

and cultural context. In this framework, the essay explores the sources behind selected examples in her relationships and illustrates ways that she adapts them for her own private purposes. When viewed over many years, letters to the same or to different correspondents establish both consistency and flexibility in the way Jane uses her private speech. And even when a single example must suffice to show her skill, it does. This survey of Jane's private coterie speech in the more public context of the Carlyles' family and friends demonstrates the skill with which she transforms an assemblage of voices into the witty and graphic art that has made her letters a literary treasure.

Coterie-speech in the Nineteenth Century

Jane Carlyle's was one of many private languages—also known as *coterie sprache*, coterie speech, coterie language, and family dialect or language—that flourished in nineteenth-century Britain. Recent scholars, most notably Christopher Stray, but also Karl Beckson, Mary K. Bercauw Edwards, and others, have documented coterie speech in the conversation of families, in the slang of schoolboys, and in the parlance of sailors, prisoners, and the poor. Family languages, the focus of this essay, served as delicious private linguistic play among girls in upper-class nurseries; for public school boys, as an initiatory and bonding force; among married couples, an enrichment of intimacy; and among families and friends, a reinforcement of cohesion and social distinctiveness. These private languages were primarily oral and ephemeral, rarely lasting beyond a generation or two. Traces remain in letters, glossaries and dictionaries, and memoirs. Two of the Mitford sisters, Jessica and Unity, for example, communicated in their own language, “Boudlidige,” and used it into adulthood. Jessica and her younger sister Deborah invented “Honnish,” alluded to in Jessica's memoir *Hons and Rebels* (1960). “Glynnese” was founded by sisters Catherine and Mary Glynne. After they married William Gladstone and George Gordon (Lord Lyttelton), respectively, in a double wedding in 1839, its use continued throughout their widespread clan. It was collected (and parodied) by Lord Lyttelton in “Contributions towards a

Glossary of Glynne Language, by A Student.” Boys from families like these were sent to boarding schools at age seven or eight, where they, according to Christopher Stray, “entered self-contained and often isolated environments” that favored the development of special languages (“Mrs. Gladstone’s Drawers” 9). At Winchester College, schoolboys constructed the slangs that became “Notions” and “Mushri-English.” New boys were quizzed on words’ coded meanings, so that both languages survived (atypically) through multiple generations. Among a handful of childless couples known to have created coterie languages, the Carlyles are most fully documented.²

What accounts for the widespread use of coterie languages in nineteenth-century Britain? Stray points to complex interactions of culture, ideas, and language. Culturally, the blurring of social distinctions associated with the rise of the middle class and the accompanying pressures toward standardization fostered anxieties about status and role. To those who felt threatened by social anonymity, a coterie language offered membership in a distinctive and exclusive group. Ideologically, support came from long-standing traditions of “Britishness” that placed a high value on individuality, even eccentricity. These traditions were reinforced by a powerful belief in British freedom as preferable to the centralized regimentation of France and Prussia. At the same time, the writings of men such as Julius Hare promoted the continental “conception of language as a moral barometer of national life.”³ Linguistically—and importantly for Jane’s coterie language—the wide range of regional dialects and class differences in English speech underpinned traditional resistance to standardization.

The Language of Relationship

Jane Carlyle’s coterie language shares much with other family dialects in the Victorian era. Like them, it is marked by linguistic variety, witty word play, oral sources, social exclusiveness, bonding power, and stubborn idiosyncrasy, and it owes the survival of its allusive meanings to annotation by a family member. However, where other languages, including Boudlidige or Glynnesse, were formed of invented speech—what Stray calls

“the mechanical insertions and reduplications which turned ordinary language into something unintelligible to outsiders” (“Mrs Gladstone’s Drawers” 8)—Jane’s coterie vocabulary mimics the speech of others. She picked up, as Thomas Carlyle wrote, “every diamond-spark, out of the common floor dust” (*Reminiscences* 72). Peter Jackson, in a recent review of Kenneth J. Fielding and David R. Sorensen’s *Jane Carlyle: Newly Selected Letters*, notes that the “colloquy of voices” that fill her letters summon up “the past and the distant, the written and the oral, to be heard on equal terms in the present” (164–65).

Letters, Jane thought, were best when they imitated the drama, the intimacy, and the rapid shifts of conversational tone—though they could never quite substitute for actual talk’s immediacy. In a passage filled with the stops and starts of speech, she elaborates to her Liverpool cousin Jeannie “Babbie” Welsh:

Oh my own Babbie! An hours talk with you were “welcome as flowers in May”—or what were a more delicious novelty surely—tho’ no one says it—as flowers in *December!*—Why the devil then do I not write more diligently if I feel such need of talking—to write is to speak after a sort—Ay—but “with the reciprocity all on *one* side” and that makes such an irksome difference!—and another difference is that one cannot in writing eke out ones words with tones of the voice—looks—gestures—an occasional *groan*—an occasional kiss! and speech reduced to bare words is so inadequate for certain “*beings*”—like me!—Besides *talking* comes natural to every woman—*writing* is an *acquirement*—and between the exercise of ones natural and one’s acquired faculties there is no comparison in point of ease! (*CLO*:JWC to JW, 12 November 1843; *CL* 17: 171).

As in conversation, so in letters. In both, Jane juxtaposed regional Scots dialect, one-of-a-kind phrases of highly-educated speakers, and the slightly “off” sayings of foreign speakers striving to speak idiomatic upper-class standard English. The examples that follow illustrate the range both of her language sources in her relationships and her use of them in her letters.

“dwindled into unintelligible whinner”

The wry humor and language of Scottish folk culture seasoned Jane’s letters to Thomas. That certain Scots phrases evoked family members he loved may have been a source of intimacy between them; at the very least, they spoke to their shared delight in language. From Thomas’s father James came the anecdote of a precentor at the family kirk who “lost his tune, desperately tried several others,” and failing, “died away into an unintelligible whinner” (TC’s note). Over the span of a dozen years, Jane used the tagline “dwindled into unintelligible whinner” in differing contexts. In the 1831 letter Thomas had annotated, after a slew of visitors departed, she writes to her husband: “Yesterday the colony dwindled into an unintelligible whinner. There was just Jennie, old Mary, and I left but there was one gun amongst us besides gig whips—and I am quite delivered now from the foolish tremors I used to have about thieves” (*CLO*: JWC to TC, 11 August 1831; *CL* 5: 320). Over a decade later, during one of many projects of household refurbishing at No. 5 Cheyne Row, she painted herself the detached observer in a scene of uproar:

I take time by the pig-tail and write at night—*after* post-hours—during the day there is such an infernal noise of *pumice-stone*—diversified with snatches of “wild strains”—the youth who is scraping the walls, (—as if it were a hundred knife-grinders melted into one)—consoling himself under the hideous task by striking up every two minutes “*the Red-cross Knights—*” or *Evelyn’s Bower*” or some such plaintive melody, which after a brief attempt to render itself predominant “dies away into an unintelligible whimper.” (*CLO*: JWC to TC, 7 July 1843; *CL* 16: 240–41).

On a later occasion, she runs into their friend, the usually amiable Sir Arthur Helps, “in the Kings Road,” where she finds him uncharacteristically silent and withdrawn and “dwindling away into an unintelligible whinner.’ . . . He walked back part of the way with me—decidedly too solemn—for his size!” (*CLO*: JWC to TC, 25 September 1845; *CL* 19: 215–16). The coterie phrase embeds memories of shared laughter in her letters at the same time as it acknowledges Carlyle’s deep attachment to his father.

“the cow considered wi hersel”

Both Carlyles resonated to an “Old Scotch rhyme, reckoned ‘pawky’ [shrewd] clever and symbolical, in this house” (TC’s note, *CLO*: TC to JAC, 15 August 1834; *CL* 7: 269n), “The Tune the Old Cow Died of”:

There was a piper had a cow,
And he had nought to give her;
He took his pipes, and play’d a spring,
And *bade the Cow consider!*

The cow considered wi’ hersel’
That mirth [sportful music] wad ne’er fill her:
“Gie me a pickle pease-strae,
and sell your wind for siller.”

“Consider” was the operative word for Jane. Although occasions and outcomes of “considering” vary widely in her letters, all of them build upon the core allusion to Scots culture. After three nights of insomnia, she writes to Thomas in 1838, having been forced to ponder a new approach to the problem: “If I had a cow, I should have bade it ‘*consider*,’ having none it was necessary to ‘consider’ *myself*.” She then tells him she has secured a sleeping draught from the doctor, put it beside her pillow, and, finally, had a good night’s sleep (*CLO*: JWC to TC, 30 August 1838; *CL* 10: 157). Over half a century later, she used the allusion as a graceful excuse for possible delay. On 14 August 1862, during a trip through Scotland, she writes to Thomas’s sister Jean: “In a few days, as I have said, I will ‘consider’ (like the Piper’s cow), and then tell you whether you will next see me on the way home—” (MS: NLS 607.591D; *NLM* 2: 254).

In her journal, after an 1856 performance of Handel’s *Messiah* at Exeter House, Jane ruminates about the contradiction implicit in performers singing of the Messiah in formal dress. She concludes that she shares the cow’s cynical and practical opinion of music:

Singing about *him* [the Messiah] with *shakes* and white gloves and all that sort of thing, quite shocked my religious feelings—tho’ I *have* no religion. Geraldine *did* a good deal of *emotional weeping* at my side; and it was all I could do to keep myself from shaking her and

saying, “come out of *that!*” For my share, I was more in sympathy with the piper’s cow: “The cow considered wi’ hersel’ / that music ne’er would fill her; / Gie me a lock of wheat strae, /and sell ye’r wind for siller!” (CLO: JWC’s Journal, 16 May 1856; CL 30: 242)

Perhaps most delightfully, she could “consider” in comic mode. On an evening some years earlier, “to consider” had to do with the loss of a moment of quiet when she needed it: “I had been too busy all day to *listen*—the candles were lit, and I had set myself with my feet on the fender to enjoy the happiness of being *let alone*, and to—bid myself ‘consider.’” Just then the washerman’s dog began to bark next door. Roused to action, Jane pens a note for Helen the maid to take to the washerman, begging, threatening, imploring him to hang the dog. She ends “by proposing that in case he could not take an immediate final resolution; he should in the interim ‘make the dog dead-drunk with a bottle of Whiskey which I sent for the purpose!’” The washerman untied the miserable dog and gratefully consumed the whiskey. Jane goes on to report triumphantly that the night was silent before Helen returned (CLO: JWC to TC, 1 October 1845; CL 20: 6–7).

On another occasion, “considering” led through bleak uncertainty to the possibility of existential knowledge: “To be sure it is hard on flesh and blood, when one ‘has nothing to keep one at home,’ to sit down in honest life-weariness and look out into unmitigated *Zero*; but perhaps it ‘would be a great advantage’ just to ‘go ahead’ in that—the barefaced indigence of such a state might drive one—like the Piper’s Cow—to ‘*consider*,’ and who knows but, in considering long enough, one might discover what one ‘has wanted’ and what one ‘wants’—an essential preliminary to *getting it!*” (CLO: JWC to TC, 17 January 1848; CL 22: 216–17). “Consider” in her hand moves from light self-mockery to cynicism to polished comic narrative to something more reflective.

The folk verse emphasizes the Scots practical preference for cash income (“a lock of wheat strae”) over the aesthetic (the ‘wind’ of bagpipes). For Jane, a ruminative state in diverse situations emerges wonderfully in the cow’s ‘voice,’ bidding itself ‘consider,’ conveying excuses for delays or possible missed connections, her critical judgment of the *Messiah*, her playful

amusement at her ingenious solution for a sleepless night, her need for quiet time when the washerman's dog's howls jangle the night, and the inward journey of her wearied spirit. The cow's voice joins the array of voices that provide social and cultural reference in Jane's letters.

“with the best intentions always unfortunate”

The placid temperament of Thomas's younger brother John Aitken Carlyle gave the elder brother solace, but Jane found it grating. John thought her neurotic; she found him lazy and irresolute. His blandness and repetition of trite phrases were easy subjects for her banter—and ready sources of coterie speech. Jane seized on John's repeated description of William Fraser, editor of the *Foreign Quarterly Review*, whom he described as “with the best intentions always unfortunate.” She detailed a Fraser episode to her cousin Babbie: “Now and for a long while back he has been worse than unfortunate with good intentions—having performed one atrocity after another” (*CLO*: JWC to JW, 26 February 1844; *CL* 17: 282). On a visit to the rectory at Troston, she sent an arch invitation to Babbie via Thomas:

“Regy [Reginald Buller, rector] would be delighted to have a young lady!”—more delighted, I imagine, than the young Lady would be to have Regy!—although he *does* improve on acquaintance—laziness, and what his Mother calls “muddling habits,” are the worst things one can charge him with—one of the people who with the best intentions are always unfortunate—but he *is* very sweet tempered, and kindly; deserves really the only epithet that remained for him seeing there was already “the clever Buller” and “the handsome Buller” [brothers Charles and Arthur]—viz: “the good Buller.” (*CLO*: JWC to TC, 20 August 1842; *CL* 15: 35–36)

Here the coterie-phrase adds punch—and modest mitigation—to Jane's sharp assessment. The phrase also helps to sum up her amused exasperation at the unexpectedly early arrival of a new maid: “Eliza, the young person who has been ‘doing for me,’ intended to have her kitchen seductively clean for the stranger, and had just tumbled everything up, and swashed the

floor with fresh water, when her successor came to hand, with plenty of nice trunks, and we had to shut her up in the spare room with some sewing (one of her accomplishments is ‘needle work’) until she could find a dry place below for the sole of her foot!— ‘With the best intentions etc’!” (*CLO*: JWC to TC, 30 August 1850; *CL* 25: 185). Further, the phrase serves to excuse Jane herself—and blame others—for a delayed parcel: “With the best intentions always unfortunate, I was putting together my packet yesterday, when Dr Weber came and stayed late enough to belate the whole affair” (*CLO*: JWC to TC, 14 August 1852; *CL* 27: 226). It veritably bubbles in her report to Thomas of hearing from a former lover: “A man who having wished to marry me at fifteen, and ‘with the best intentions proved unfortunate,’ . . . [‘]had loved me with the same worship-ful love—me the only human soul who ever possessed the key to his locked heart’! And they say *Man* is an inconstant animal!” (*CLO*: JWC to TC, 7 September 1852; *CL* 27: 272). And it lay at the heart of a rare theological reflection:

Thomas Erskine too wrote to me: that “he loved me as much and *wished* he could see me what God intended me for”— I answered his letter begging him to *tell* me “*what* God intended me for,”— since he knew and I didn’t! It would be a satisfaction even to *know* it. It is surely a kind of impiety to speak of God as if he too were “with the best intentions always unfortunate!”—either I *am* just what God intended me for, or God cant “carry out” his intentions, it would seem!—and in that case I for “one solitary individual” cant worship him the least in the world” (*CLO*: JWC to TC; 12 September 1852; *CL* 27: 282).

For the reader in the secret, Jane rings the changes on John’s oft-repeated phrase, transforming it from one of mild excuse to balanced phrases—“with the best intentions” and “always unfortunate”—that simultaneously concede and mock. With John’s words, she may turn mundane frustrations into domestic comedy or mask darker misgivings with a deceptively light touch.

“how expensive!”

Of the changing parade of maids who passed through the basement kitchen at No. 5 Cheyne Row, Helen Mitchell

of Kirkcaldy lasted longest, nearly twelve years. Jane valued her wit equally with her housekeeping abilities. Helen's native intelligence, scant education, and lack of urban sophistication lent her speech a directness of perception and freshness of language both comic and profound, the "strangest mixture [sic] of philosopher and perfect idiot that I have met with in my life," wrote her mistress. Helen observes, "Well, when one's doing this, one's doing nothing else anyhow!" And Jane adds, "as one ought to be always doing something this suggestion of hers has some consolation in it—" (*CLO*: JWC to Jean Carlyle Aitken, 11 October 1843; *CL* 17: 152).

To encourage the philosopher in the maid, Jane took her on an excursion to the National Gallery. There Helen paused before an ornately framed painting of the Virgin and Child, at last exclaiming of the frame, not the representation of the Virgin, "How expensive!" For Jane it became a witty retort about dress, prison practices, and theatrical productions. Visiting the Botanical Gardens with some Liverpool women, she found that "[t]he flowers were well enough, but few of them—the company shocking bad—really these Liverpool Ladies look two thirds of them *improper*—the democratic tendency of the age in dress has not penetrated hither I assure you—not a woman that Helen might not stand in admiration before and exclaim 'How expensive!'" (*CLO*: JWC to TC, 25 July 1845; *CL* 19: 109). On a tour of Pentonville Prison, Jane was appalled by the consideration accorded "white collar" prisoners. They wear "masks when in each others presence—that should they afterwards meet in society their feelings may be spared" and live in fine accommodations: "'Oh my!' (as old Helen used to say) 'How *expensive*!' Prisoners costing 50£ a year each!" (*CLO*: JWC to John Welsh, 7 January 1851). Where Jane transforms the conventional language of others through her own fresh wit, she treasures Helen's speech for an idiosyncrasy in little need of adaptation. (That the maid ultimately had to be dismissed for drunkenness does not diminish Jane's continuing esteem for her verbal gifts.) She found in Helen's sharp, direct language both the 'edge' that is key to her own expressive mode and the values of thrift and honesty that underpin the Carlyles' Scottishness.

The Carlyle Circle

Writers and thinkers, wits and public figures, émigrés and expatriates, minor aristocracy and hangers-on were drawn to the parlor at No. 5 Cheyne Row, attracted at first by Thomas's growing reputation and later by Jane. As one contemporary account puts it, "they came to sit at his feet and stayed to sit at hers" (Wylie 99). In that parlor discourse, Jane was alert to linguistic tics in the speech of others: John Carlyle's "poor fellow after all," with which he often softened his censures, as well as Edward Irving's "with his own hand" and "the Lord bless you" and Giuseppe Mazzini's "upon my honour." She wields these by-words with not a little mockery of tone. Linguistically, they served as "discourse fillers"—non-syntactic elements that recreate the speech rhythms of conversation—and through which she recreated the tentative and dramatic hesitations of conversation.

"with his own hand," "the Lord bless you"

Irving, an early and close friend of Thomas's and briefly Jane Welsh's tutor and suitor, showed early promise as a preacher, attracting crowds of followers. The Carlyles observed warily as his religion took on an edge of fanaticism along with the pomposity that sometimes accompanies sudden fame. Jane wrote to Thomas's brother John that "Edward Irving's book out of the Spanish came last night and also a copy for his father with a great bundle of preliminary discourses 'to be distributed among his kindred and addressed to them WITH HIS OWN HAND'" (CLO: JWC to JAC, 13 September 1827; CL 4: 258–61). The clear insinuation of equality with the apostle Paul was not lost on her.⁴ In a letter to Thomas written two years into their marriage, she parodies Irving's pious, self-inflated phrases: "Darling—Dearest—Loveliest. 'The Lord bless you.' I think of you every hour every moment. . . . So I write this letter 'with my own hand' that you may not be *disappointed* from day to day—but prepare to welcome me in your choicest mood on Sunday. . . . Mrs. Crichton [of Dalton] was very pressing that you and I should spend some days with them just now—'when their house was full of company.' but I assured her it would

be losing labour to ask you. . . . ‘I am sure the kindness of those people!’ [‘]The Lord Bless them—.’” Yet in the next paragraph she writes in her own voice: “Oh if I were there I would put my arms so close about your neck and hush you into the softest sleep you have had since I went away” (*CLO*: JWC to TC, 30 December 1828; *CL* 4: 438), so that in retrospect, Irving’s cant phrases can be read as simultaneously mocking and asserting her own deeper feelings for her much loved husband.

“upon my honour”

Jane relished the creativity of the fractured English she heard from the émigrés and expatriates whom she welcomed to her parlor. She treated their language, such as “a mad” for madman, “cuff” for cough, “thanks God” for thank God, as a kind of dialect and a delightful parody of standard English. In her letters she imitates the hesitations of Mazzini, who after searching for the correct English word would follow his choice with an exclamation that became one of her favorites: “By all means send me the German Book— I was obliged to fall back on a stray volume of Shakespear during the night—and found it very—what shall I say? *dull* upon my honour! *Loves Labour lost* it was” (*CLO*: JWC to TC, 2 August 1857; *CL* 34: 6). For Jane, Thomas’s dear friend Harriet, Lady Ashburton, “is really—‘What shall I say?—*strange* upon my honour” (*CLO*: JWC to Jeannie Welsh, 15 October 1851; *CL* 26: 205–06). On a visit to her Liverpool relatives, Jane uses the phrase to tease Thomas in the context of two pressing domestic issues at Cheyne Row, a neighbor’s crowing rooster and bugs in the house: “‘*there cocks crow*; here also *crow cocks!*’ but I sleep *thro them* and the carts too—And—thanks God! there are no—‘what shall I say?— —bugs—upon my honour!’” (*CLO*: JWC to TC, 3 July 1853; *CL* 28: 183). After a difficult dinner, she confesses to Kate Sterling, “For me, I did as I always do, I committed myself to the impulse of the moment, whatever that might be; and my *first* impulses (Mazzini says[]) are always *good*—my second *less good*—indeed—what shall I say?—*bad*—upon my honour” (*CLO*: JWC to KS, 22 December 1851; *CL* 26: 278).⁵ To Thomas she speculates about the effects of suffering on

inherent character: “Natures strong and good to begin with, that is, the exceptional natures may be ‘made perfect thro’ suffering’—when one *can* digest it I dare say it ‘goes to fibre’ but where the moral digestion is unhappily weak; the more miserable one is the more one grows—‘what shall I say—*bad*—upon *my* honour’?” (*CLO*: JWC to TC, 30 August 1850; *CL* 25: 185).

“making wits”

“Making wits” was the coinage of a young German governess whom Jane befriended, Amalie Bölte. For Jane, the phrase characterized the superficial cleverness that passed for humor in the Ashburtons’ circle. From 1843 until Lady Ashburton’s death in 1857, Thomas’s frequent stays in their Addiscombe home were an often-noted source of tension. Jane’s own, less frequent visits had mixed results. During one visit she meets Aubrey de Vere and expresses the hope that the acquaintance might “develope itself into a real friendship” before she describes him: “very handsome—young—*religious*—to the extent even of eating fish on Fridays and fasting in Lent— A Poet—highly accomplished every way despising ‘*wits*’ (wonderfulest of all) and in short a rare mortal as men go.” (*CLO*: JWC to Jeannie Welsh, 28 September 1848; *CL* 23: 125–26). But “wits” made at her expense could be painful. During another visit to Addiscombe, this time alone, she was informed publicly of a change in Thomas’s plans to which she had not been privy: “The shouts of laughter, and cutting ‘wits’ with which my startled look and exclamation ‘Oh, gracious!’ were visited when the news was told me as we sat down to dinner were enough to terrify one from ‘*showing feeling*’ for twelvemonths to come.” Jane clearly preferred the genuine concern she experienced among humbler friends in Scotland, as she continued: “And what good can ‘ornament and grandeur,’ and ‘wits,’ and ‘the honour of the thing’ do to my health when ‘my heart’s in the Highlands, my heart is not here?’” (*CLO*: JWC to TC, 3 October 1850; *CL* 25: 247).

Yet in the right circumstance she could “make wits” with the best of them. After entertaining a number of callers on her own, she writes to Thomas in Ireland: “I talked a great

deal, having all the *responsibility* to myself, and ‘made so many wits’ for them; that Anthony [Sterling] bolted off at nine, and the others staid till eleven evidently quite charmed with me! so differently do ‘wits’ act upon different characters!” (CLO: JWC to TC, 5 July 1849; CL 24: 99). Years later she acknowledges to Thomas, her “best friend,” the important place that “making wits” held in her letters to others, expressing regret that she could not summon their lighthearted buoyancy in her letters to him: “It is certainly a questionable privilege one’s best friend enjoys; that of having all one’s darkness rayed out on him. If I were writing to—who shall I say?—*Mr Barlow*, now—I should fill my paper with ‘wits’ and elegant quotations, and diverting anecdotes; should write a letter that would procure me laudation sky-high, on my ‘charming unflagging spirits’!! and my ‘extraordinary freshness of mind and feelings’! but to *you* I cannot for my life be anything but a bore!” (CLO: JWC to TC, 23 July 1857; CL 32: 196).

“with the reciprocity all on one side”

Friendship—like letters—required give and take, and should not be on the “Irish principle” with the “reciprocity all on one side.” After hearing the phrase from the young Irish patriot Charles Gavan Duffy, she wrote to thank him “for the beautiful little volume you have sent me, ‘all to myself’! (as the children say) . . . it is no small immediate pleasure to me as a token of your remembrance; for when one has ‘sworn an everlasting friendship’ at first sight, one desires, very naturally, that it should not have been on your Irish principle” (CLO: JWC to CGD, 15 September 1845; CL 19: 196). Particularly with letters, “reciprocity was key.”⁶ Although Thomas at least minimally met the reciprocity standard, Jane sometimes wishes for more credit for her own efforts: “You are really a good correspondent—*considering*. Wherever I have been, praises have been showered on your ‘punctuality in writing’—your ‘attention to me,’ &c, &c. But it isn’t ‘with the reciprocity all on one side!’ tho’ nobody praises *my* punctuality in writing—*my* attention to you!” (CLO: JWC to TC, 30 August 1857; CL 33: 57). However, when the Irish principle went her way, she didn’t mind being the recipient of benefits that might accrue. To Thomas she brags

that she has gotten the landlord of No. 5 Cheyne Row to give her “a piece of paper in fact equivalent to a lease of the house for five years ‘with the reciprocity all on one side’—binding him and leaving us free—‘such a thing’ old Sterling said . . . ‘as no woman but myself would have had the impudence to ask,’ nor any *lawyer in his senses* the folly to grant” (*CLO*: JWC to TC, 7 July 1843; *CL* 16: 241). Jane relishes the phrase’s inherent slippage—its capacity to serve as a “principle” adaptable to the occasion. Further, for readers in the circle, it brims with its original implications of friendship.

“Virtue always its own reward, unless something
very particular occur to prevent it!”

In 1831 John Stuart Mill called at Cheyne Row, launching an initially promising friendship. He professed admiration for Thomas Carlyle’s “mystic” philosophy, gave him his own research materials on the French Revolution, and urged him to write its history. However, for complex reasons—philosophical, temperamental, and personal—the friendship had lapsed by 1837. Thereafter, although the two men exchanged occasional civil letters on matters of research, Thomas saw the breach as irreparable: “I on the whole I see little of [Mill]. . . . I love him much; as a friend *frozen within ice* for me!” (*CLO*: TC to John Sterling, 17 January 1837; *CL* 9: 118–19). Jane preserved the friendship in a single phrase, Mill’s expansion of the maxim “virtue is its own reward.” According to Thomas’s note to a letter from Jane, Mill had narrated the following tale to the Carlyles: “‘For virtue ever is its own reward.’ So had a young tragic poet written, but a critical friend objected, argued, &c.; upon which the poor poet undertook to make the line—‘For virtue’ &c., ‘unless something very particular occur to prevent it!’” (*CLO*: JWC to TC, 2 September 1850; *CL* 25: 187–88n). Jane quickly appropriated the reduced idealism of the added phrase, and of course the prospect of Mill hearing her use it to ironic effect when he came to call is a delightful one. For example, to excuse her delay in responding to a cousin, she writes: “Thus you see, my dear young lady, there is always ‘something very particular’ occurring ‘here down’ to prevent virtue (i.e. letter-writing) having its own reward” (*CLO*: JWC to Helen Welsh,

12 November 1844; *CL* 18: 266–69). In an earlier example, after Erasmus Darwin tells her that she looks “virtuous” at her sewing, Jane writes to Thomas: “But one gets horribly meager and *moony* on ‘virtue’s own reward’” (*CLO*: JWC to TC, 16 April 1841; *CL* 13: 103). In another instance, a polite note to a neighbor “brought Mr. Lambert upon me (‘virtue ever its own reward &c’), who staid for an hour talking you know how” (*CLO*: JWC to TC, 11 July 1843; *CL* 16: 262). But Jane also perceived virtue’s prevention in more serious situations. When, for example, the exiled Italian patriot Count Carlo Pepoli had generously taken an indigent countryman into his home; when the man died, he was accused of having stolen his paintings: “Pepoli is in depths of tribulation at present—thro ‘something very particular’ having occurred to prevent his Virtue (in the case of old Manfred) being ‘its own reward.’—(or is it not always thro the *virtue* on which one piques oneself that one gets over the fingers in this Life?)” (*CLO*: JWC to TC; 2 September 1850; *CL* 25: 188–89).

In 1866, perhaps seeking to thaw the friendship, Jane wrote to Mill and informed him that Thomas had been elected Rector of Edinburgh University. She enclosed a copy of his Rectorial Address (Fielding and Sorensen 314).⁷ A letter addressed to Thomas arrived on 10 April, nine days after Thomas had delivered his Address, and while he was still in Scotland. Jane read it with disappointment. Mill’s is in fact a response to a query from Thomas, sent on 13 March; to Jane’s letter, Mill alludes only indirectly: “Please thank Mrs Carlyle for her remembrance of me. I have been sorry to hear a rather poor account of her health & to see by your Edinburgh address that your own is not quite satisfactory” (*Collected Letters* 16: 1137n). On 13 April, Jane sent Mill’s response to Thomas, writing it was “hardly more friendly than silence, but it is more polite— I wish I hadn’t sent him that kind message. Virtue (forgiveness of wrongs, ‘milk of human kindness,’ and all the sort of ‘damned thing’) being ‘ever its own reward,’—‘unless something particular occurs to prevent it,’—*which* is, almost invariably” (JWC to TC, April 13, 1866; Fielding and Sorensen 314). Earlier, Mill’s phrase had served her well to convey both her intense loyalty to friends and her sense of irony, sometimes at their expense. Her final bitterly ironic commentary on Mill himself evokes both past friendship and present loss.

“a good joy”

The Leigh Hunts, near neighbors in Chelsea, remained on good terms with the Carlyles despite vast philosophical and temperamental differences. As Thomas recalled in his journal, they had “four or five beautiful, strange, gypsy-looking children running about” (Froude, *First Forty* 2: 44) Jane had been struck on hearing one of them exclaim with pure ecstasy at the sight of flowers, it “*is a good joy!*” (*CLO*: JWC to TC, 9 September 1838; *CL* 10: 167). Her own “good joys” were intensely personal. As Jane later told her husband, she did “not pretend to get much ‘good joy’ from witnessing ‘the happiness of *others*,” she did admit being touched “to see the light and order which Elizabeth [Pepoli] has managed to bring out of the chaos given her to rule, and to hear her innocent genuine thankfulness for her small mercies!” (*CLO*: JWC to TC, 10 October 1845; *CL* 20: 21). Those rare occasions when she found nature serene, her friends attentive, and her health satisfactory were moments of “good joy.” Once during a trip to Liverpool, she accompanied her Welsh cousins and the Italian painter Spiridione Gambardella on a picnic. For a time it seemed as if the excursion would be a failure, but when at last they reached their destination, Jane clearly enjoyed herself: “[W]e . . . spread our provisions in a sand-valley all covered over with wild Thyme and white roses—and Gambardella sung us Italian songs—and we eat sandwiches and drank a good deal of wine—and *it was a good joy!*” (*CLO*: JWC to TC, 7 July 1844; *CL* 18: 112). On an 1849 visit to Joseph Neuberg (a Nottingham merchant and Thomas’s devoted assistant in the writing and translation of *Frederick the Great*) and his family in Leeds, Jane “let [herself] be carried to this place and the other and kept in a perpetual series of ‘good joys’” (*CLO*: JWC to Jeannie Welsh, 17 July 1849; *CL* 24: 131). Years later, after a season of wretched health, she visited friends in Portsmouth. There aboard a ship, *The Urgent*, which lay in the harbor, she paints a brief transfiguration: “‘The sky was so blue!’ and ‘the sea was so green! and I was *not* sick,’ and it was *a good joy!*” She continues with a characteristic deflation of the moment: “Only I got a touch or two of brown paint on the new gown!” (*CLO*: JWC to TC, 4 August 1858; *CL* 34: 97).

Unexpected kindness could also move her to happiness. Once, when she passed through Dumfries with no time for

visiting, her sister-in-law Jean Carlyle Aitken met her carriage with a tumbler of warm tea and biscuits and promised to write to Thomas that she'd been through safely. "It was the most practically kind thing I ever saw Jean do. . . . 'altogether' 'it was a good joy'" (JWC to TC, 12 August 1862; *NLM* 2: 250). There also had been more modest joys: "[T]o lie awake at nights, and to have lonely thoughts by night and by day is surely nothing new or strange for me, that I should think it worth recording at this date! And for the *work*, it will not be irksome, but 'a good joy'—such good joy as I am still susceptible of—when it gets into the stage of *restoring to order*" (JWC to TC, 4 August 1850; *CL* 25: 135). Even physical pain could be the source of joy. An injury to her arm in 1861 that caused her chronic pain for years after offers a prime example: "It wears me to fiddle-strings, and takes all 'good joy' out of my life; but it does not take the life itself out of me as the old nervous misery did. I always said, better any amount of acute pain than *that*; and I say so still, now when the acute pain is here." (JWC to TC, 8 June 1865; *NLM* 2: 325).

Despite the fretting pain from both physical and mental agonies from which she suffered near the end of her life, Jane was to have "a good joy" once more. When Thomas was informed of his election by students as Lord Rector of the University of Edinburgh, the honor occasioned deep trepidation in him on account of the expected speech; he had not given public lectures for years. Waiting at home in fragile health, Jane wrote in nervous sympathy: "What I have been suffering, vicariously, of late days is not to be told. If you had been to be hanged I don't see that I could have taken it more to heart" (JWC to TC, 2 April 1866; *LM* 3: 316). Good news finally arrived, first in a telegram from John Tyndall, at last, in a letter from Thomas himself. She replied immediately: "What pleases me most in this business—I mean the business of your success—is the hearty personal affection towards you that comes out on all hands These men at Forster's with their cheering—our own people—even old Silvester turning as white as a sheet, and his lips quivering when he tried to express his gladness over the telegraphy: all that is positively delightful, and makes the success "a good joy" to me. No appearance of envy or grudging in anybody; but one general, loving, heartfelt throwing up of caps with young and old, male and females!" Then comes the characteristic, undercutting

humor, contrasting that “good joy” with a more somber view: “If we could only sleep, dear, and what you call digest, wouldn’t it be nice?” (JWC to TC, 4 April 1866; *NLM* 3: 320).

With Jane Welsh Carlyle’s sudden death on 20 April 1866, her extensive private vocabulary fell into silence. It had nourished a complex intimacy of shared laughter with her husband Thomas and, to a lesser but important extent, with friends and family. Thomas was left to sort through her letters and to note down some of their secret meanings for future readers; others remained to be discovered. To those “in the secret,” Jane’s coterie-speech adds immediacy and allusive depth to her letters; it conveys her vitality and complex humanity. Her letters rise into the realm of literature—not because she married “a genius,” not because many of her friends were among the literati of the age, but because the language of her letters expresses her own immense vitality as she ceaselessly absorbed and transformed all she heard into the language of her life.

Chapel Hill, North Carolina

Notes

1. John Gross ranks only John Keats ahead of Jane Welsh Carlyle as a nineteenth-century letter writer (*Wall Street Journal*, 2 September 2006).

2. See Christopher Stray’s introductions.

3. Hare’s connections with Thomas Carlyle are complex, though they were not personal friends. Hare’s long-standing interest in German literature began in 1804–05 when as a boy of ten with his parents in Weimar, Germany, he met Goethe and Schiller. In addition, both Carlyles and Hare were close to John Sterling, as pointed out in *The Carlyle Encyclopedia*: “Carlyle’s 1851 biography of John Sterling was written in response to Julius Charles Hare’s memoir, which presented Sterling from an orthodox Church of England perspective that Carlyle considered reductive” (287–88, 448–50).

4. Paul often affirmed that his letters were written in “mine own hand”; see 1 Corinthians 16.21, Galatians 6.11, 2 Thessalonians 3.17, and Philemon 1.19.

5. The Sterling family were much intertwined with the Carlyles. They included not only the poet John Sterling, but his older brother Anthony and his wife Charlotte, and his daughter Kate. Edward Sterling, the father of John and Anthony, was an important figure in his own right. He was “an argumentative, boisterous newspaperman,” editor of the influential *Times*. The Carlyles called him “Stimabile,” after the Italian *Estimabile*, and “The Thunderer.” See *The Carlyle Encyclopedia* (448–50) and Fred Kaplan (228).

6. See above, JWC’s letter to Babbie Welsh, (*CLO*: JWC to JW, 12 November 1843; *CL* 17: 171).

7. The sequence of these letters is unclear, dates of their receipt difficult to establish, and some are missing: lost or in an archive. To the best of my knowledge, Jane dispatched “that kind message” to Mill just after Thomas left for Edinburgh, on 29 March 1866. Earlier—on 13 March—Thomas had written to Mill a brief formal query about the liberal German politician Wilhelm Löwe. It took Mill nearly a month to find the answer and to respond, since “from 1865 on, the demands of public life greatly increased the amount of Mill’s correspondence, to such an extent that he could not have carried it on without [the] help . . . provided by his step-daughter, Helen Taylor” (*Collected Works* 14: viii). The MS draft of Mill’s letter is at the National Library of Scotland, with a typed copy, headed by the following note, presumably by Alexander Carlyle: “The lost letter of Mill’s [*sic*] to Carlyle, which gave some offence to JWC. This copy is from Mill’s rough draft which was, and I suppose is, among Carlyle’s Letters to Mill, now in the Carlyle House in Chelsea [these letters are now in NLS Acc. 9086]” (*Collected Letters* 16: 1137n). Carlyle’s own later recollection is vague. He describes Jane’s comment as a “response about some trifle, after long delay,” although he recalls his own query about Löwe well enough. (*LM* 3: 331n). If as Jane seems to believe, Mill did receive her letter in a timely way—i.e. after receiving Thomas’s query of 13 March, but before the Inaugural Address on 2 April—then it is understandable that she took “offence” that Mill neither thanks her nor congratulates Thomas.

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