

'Wit' and 'Impertinence': The Elision of
Class Difference in *Pride and Prejudice*

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Traditionally, criticism of Jane Austen has tended to celebrate her 'harmonious unity ... of the internal and external approaches to character' and 'her sense of social order, which is not achieved at the expense of the individuality and autonomy of the characters'.¹ Ian Watt, in these words, attempts to summarize the historic nature of her achievement in resolving the problems of the eighteenth-century novel bequeathed by Fielding and Richardson. If this harmony is threatened by moral or social problems such as pride or prejudice, want of sense or excess of sensibility, then Jane Austen is supposed to plot to overcome these obstacles. Major characters, such as Elizabeth and Darcy of *Pride and Prejudice*, are considered to come to an understanding of themselves in such a way as to 'arrive at self-knowledge'² and produce the expected harmonious result, which, in the words of Douglas Bush, is 'the appointed end of comedy, marriage'. Yasmine Gooneratne expresses it thus: 'Elizabeth makes mistakes and corrects them as part of the emotional education that prepares Jane Austen's heroines for adult responsibilities.'³ Such criticism highlights the moral and intellectual superstructure of the book. It tends to assume, in the words of Giulia Giuffré, that 'Jane Austen was able to combine the stuff of the novel, everyday life, with the matter of the sermon ... But with such skill that any seams remain invisible'.⁴ Yet the invisibility of these 'seams' is nearly always asserted rather than proved. Giuffré, like most other critics, concentrates on the 'moral patterns' and ignores such 'stuff of ... everyday life' as the novel's socio-economic background. Robert Heilman, in fact,

1 Ian Watt, *The Rise of the Novel* (Penguin, 1963), p.338.

2 Douglas Bush, *Jane Austen* (Macmillan: London, 1975), pp.91, 101.

3 Yasmine Gooneratne, *Jane Austen* (Cambridge University Press, 1970), p.101.

4 Giulia Giuffré, 'The Ethical Mode of *Pride and Prejudice*', *Sydney Studies in English*, 6 (1980-81), p.17.

states that Jane Austen 'eliminates the class issue by having virtues and vices easily surmount all social barriers'.⁵

Yet perhaps the combination of 'the matter of the sermon' and 'the stuff of the novel' is not so seamless. In emphasizing the moral perspective, Heilman and others are merely echoing Elizabeth's own consciously held point of view. Early in the book, for example, Charlotte gives Elizabeth a lecture on how Jane ought to behave to secure the hand of Bingley. She declares 'a woman had better show more affection than she feels'. Elizabeth at once rejects such self-interested, designing behaviour:

'Your plan is a good one ... where nothing is in question but the desire of being well married; and if I were determined to get a rich husband, or any husband, I dare say I should adopt it. But these are not Jane's feelings.'⁶

Elizabeth goes on to emphasize how Jane must 'understand his character' before she thinks of marrying. Thus, from the start, Elizabeth sets an emotional and intellectual perspective defiantly against the material. In many ways, the narrative structure seems to support the idealistic viewpoint. For example, towards the end, as Elizabeth's father seeks to reassure himself that Elizabeth is not marrying Darcy for his money, she replies, after due consideration, that she is marrying him for 'all his good qualities' (p.385), and she easily satisfies Jane with her 'solemn assurances of attachment'. Again, the overt satire of the book supports the idealistic reading. The very opening sentence seems to mock the social realists. We are informed: 'It is a truth universally acknowledged, that a single man in possession of a good fortune, must be in want of a wife' (p.51). This ironic sentence, together with Mr Bennet's ironies in the opening chapter, is directed against the vulgar Mrs Bennets and Lady Lucases of this world and their materialistic perspective.

5 Robert B. Heilman, '*E pluribus unum: parts and whole in *Pride and Prejudice**' in *Jane Austen: Bicentenary Essays*, ed. J. Halperin (Cambridge University Press, 1975), p.127.

6 Jane Austen, *Pride and Prejudice* (Penguin, 1972), p.69. All subsequent reference to this edition are incorporated in the text.

Yet in the end, the plot proves them justified in the sense that the single young men of good fortune *are* found to be in want of a wife, and, as a sort of double irony, it is the idealists, Elizabeth and Jane, who are the beneficiaries. We must remember, too, that Elizabeth's idealistic assertions to Charlotte are also the beginning of one of her errors of judgement. At the end of their conversation, Elizabeth predicts that Charlotte would never behave in the way she has been advocating, and it is her first great moral shock when Charlotte does so. This 'mistake' is usually taken as evidence of Elizabeth's proud and immature perception, yet it would also seem reasonable to suspect that at least some of the irony of *Pride and Prejudice* is directed against Elizabeth's idealistic motives, or at least, her own conviction of their ideal nature. In a recent essay, G. A. Wilkes discusses Jane Austen's use of the unconscious motive to ironically reveal her heroine's mistakes and misinterpretations in *Emma*. His conclusion, I think, can usefully be applied to Elizabeth:

Jane Austen's awareness of the unconscious motives of her characters does not lead her towards a Freudian abyss. Her main concern is with the ironical light it casts on their conduct.⁷

In the case of *Pride and Prejudice* the 'ironical light' is generated by an awareness of a disjunction between Elizabeth's idealistic perspective and the realities of her actual social situation at the end. There may in fact be an ironic seam instituted between the book's 'moral pattern' and its stuff of everyday life. But this ironic awareness does not lead Jane Austen to a Marxist abyss. There is no hint of social reform. Its main effect is to leave unresolved the intellectual and moral superstructure that Elizabeth erects to justify herself in the face of the actuality of her social advancement.

This can be observed if we trace Elizabeth's moral progress in terms of her supposed cardinal vice, pride.

Ostensibly, Elizabeth seems to believe by the end of the book that both she and Darcy have come to understand each other's

7 G. A. Wilkes, 'Unconscious Motives in Jane Austen's *Emma*', *Sydney Studies in English*, 13 (1987-8).

character fully. Each is supposed, to a large degree, to have overcome his or her pride, snobbishness and prejudice and come to appreciate the other's true virtues: Darcy's amiability (in Elizabeth's case) and Elizabeth's superior intelligence (in Darcy's case). In the closing chapters, each seeks to outdo the other in repentance. It is during one such typical exchange that Elizabeth repents of the source of her former pride: her 'liveliness of mind' or 'wit'. In the mood of reconciliation it becomes 'impertinence':

'Now be sincere; did you admire me for my impertinence?'

'For the liveliness of your mind, I did.'

'You may as well call it impertinence at once. It was very little less. The fact is, that you were sick of civility, of deference, of officious attention. You were disgusted with the women who were always speaking and looking, and thinking of *your* approbation alone, I roused, and interested you, because I was so unlike *them*. Had you not been really amiable you would have hated me for it.' (p.388)

There are several ways of reacting to this passage. Firstly, one could read it at face value, and take it as a genuine attempt by Elizabeth to repent of her former proud and 'impertinent' self. It seems justified to the extent that we remember she was less than civil to Darcy both at the Netherfield Ball and during his first proposal. Darcy is able to forgive this incivility because, as he says, it was 'formed on mistaken premises' (p. 376). Thus Elizabeth's apologies and Darcy's acceptance of them may seem reasonable. If one thinks a little more deeply, however, it is more than a little curious that Elizabeth thinks that it was *precisely* because of these proud incivilities that Darcy has fallen for her in the first place. Indeed, it would seem that she is *still* proud of her 'impertinences', asserting them to be superior in Darcy's eyes to the 'officious attentions' of others. In other words, she seems proud of the very lack of decorum that ostensibly she repents of.

One might argue, however, that by humbly admitting her 'impertinence' to her future husband, Elizabeth is not really instituting a moral analysis, but rather, is adopting a new social role: that of the dutiful Pamela-esque wife. She is demonstrating the thing that she was not prepared to admit before: her future

husband's superiority. After all, has not her father stated: 'you could neither be happy nor respectable, unless you truly esteemed your husband; unless you looked up to him as a superior' (p.385). Her real repentance, then, could be seen in her determination to act with a civility embodying due humility. If this is the case, however, she is precisely imitating all those servile women that the rest of her speech condemns. Indeed, she could be seen to be following the despised Charlotte's recipe for snaffling up a good marriage prospect by showing 'more affection than she feels' (p.68). Here, perhaps, Elizabeth is showing more contrition than she feels, since her words imply a greater pride in her 'wit' than shame at her 'impertinence'. If one followed this line of argument, one would almost feel justified in accusing Elizabeth of deliberate moral deceit verging on hypocrisy.

One could perhaps avoid this unpleasant conclusion if one chose to read the above passage in terms of the deliberate ironical undermining of Elizabeth's point of view. One could argue that in her sincere efforts to make up to and be amiable to Darcy, she does not quite realize the pride still inherent in her speech. Just as she perceives that Darcy had 'yet to learn to be laught at' (p.380), so, one might say, there are still a few illusions for Elizabeth to overcome.

In a modern novel, such a purely ironical approach has become commonplace: just as Stephen Dedalus has more to learn at the conclusion of *A Portrait of the Artist as a Young Man*, so Elizabeth could have more to learn as the Mistress of Pemberley. But it is by no means clear that *Pride and Prejudice* is such a novel, and the issue of pride is discussed so overtly throughout the book that most critics have felt it to be working toward some definition of a 'proper pride'. Once again, however, ironic contradictions emerge.

Initially the sin of pride enters the book through the snobbishness of Darcy. At the first Meryton assembly, Darcy exclaims after overtly looking at Elizabeth, and in Elizabeth's hearing, that apart from Bingley's sisters, 'there is not another woman in the room, whom it would not be a punishment for me to stand up with' (p.59). It is this slur that stimulates Elizabeth's resentment.

After the ball, Elizabeth, Charlotte and Mary discuss the slur. Charlotte defends Darcy's pride thus:

'His pride does not offend *me* so much as pride often does, because there is an excuse for it. One cannot wonder that so very a fine young man, with family, fortune, everything in his favour, should think highly of himself. If I may so express it, he has a *right* to be proud.' (pp.66-7)

The justification behind Charlotte's opinion lies in her perception that at least Darcy is not a humbug (as Mr Collins proves to be), pretending to be what he is not. Elizabeth agrees with this perception, but argues that she too has a right to be proud: 'That is very true ... and I could easily forgive *his* pride, if he had not mortified *mine*.' While Elizabeth speaks jokingly here, she also speaks the truth. Darcy *has* mortified Elizabeth's pride, and it is this mortification that gives birth to her prejudice. Elizabeth's sister Mary is then given a speech that attempts to clarify a concept of a proper pride. As if reciting a sermon, she claims 'Pride relates more to our opinion of ourselves, vanity to what we would have others think of us.' In Mary's terms, one could reasonably argue, it is Elizabeth's vanity rather than her proper pride in herself that has been mortified by Darcy's snobbishness. From this perspective, one could view Elizabeth's and Darcy's education as learning to overcome tendencies toward the false pride of vanity and snobbishness, and learning to recognize the true worth and dignity of the other. Darcy himself later distinguishes between pride and vanity: 'Yes vanity is a weakness indeed. But pride – where there is a real superiority of mind, pride will always be under good regulation' (p.102). Elizabeth smiles ironically at this speech, but it is a smile she seems to retract by the end when she affirms to her father that Darcy has 'no improper pride' (p.385). The implication, then, might be that by the end, Darcy and Elizabeth have attained a 'real superiority of mind' that controls their pride. Yet, as our analysis of Elizabeth's perception of 'impertinence' shows, such superiority of mind may be more imaginary than real.

If the distinction between a proper pride and vanity is maintained to be the moral centre of *Pride and Prejudice*, then Mary would seem to have the key to it. But Mary is an unreliable

witness. She scarcely has another sensible word to say in the book. Yet one could say that having such a 'moral' coming out of the mouth of Mary implies a degree of intended covert irony on Jane Austen's part as to the practical value of such lessons, arguing, in turn, a degree of playfulness in Jane Austen's handling of morality as an issue: explicitly, when it comes from the mouths of pedants and humbugs such as Mary and Mr Collins; implicitly, in the minds of such superior beings as Elizabeth and Darcy.

The distinction between a proper pride and vanity is a hard one to sustain. Is Elizabeth responding with a proper pride, for example, in her angry rejection of Darcy's first condescending proposal? One would believe so, given his arrogance in expecting to be accepted no matter how he insulted Elizabeth and her family. Yet it is precisely this anger she later apologizes for. She describes her speech to him as 'abusing you abominably to your face' (p.376). This change in direction of her feelings is justified in terms of the 'gratitude' she now feels toward Darcy: 'Gratitude, not merely for having once loved her, but for loving her still well enough, to forgive all the petulance and acrimony of her manner in rejecting him' (p.285).

'Gratitude', however, does not always seem far from gratification. For all her anger and righteous indignation following the first proposal, Elizabeth is aware that 'It was gratifying to have inspired unconsciously so strong an affection' (p.225). Elizabeth is to be morally praised, of course, for not at once giving in to this feeling of gratification. Yet it reveals that she is far from insensible to the flattery implied by the attentions of one above her in social class. Just as one can distinguish between proper pride and vanity, so one can distinguish between gratitude and gratification. But again, the distinction is a hard one to sustain, and, indeed, the modulation from 'gratification' to 'gratitude' is ultimately used to obscure the class difference between Elizabeth and Darcy.

This is revealed if we analyse Karl Kroeber's attempts to identify 'gratitude' as the moral basis of Elizabeth's and Darcy's marriage. He says "gratitude" and associated terms constitute the texture of a verbal interplay in Darcy's and Elizabeth's

evolving relations throughout the book.⁸ Kroeber discusses Darcy's gratitude to Elizabeth for having made him aware of his selfishness in 'practice though not in principle'. Kroeber says Darcy 'must learn that the possessions of the owner of Pemberley are insufficient to overcome the repulsiveness of a Mr. Darcy too confident of their potency'. Interestingly, Kroeber asserts that it is the moral responsibility of Darcy's aristocratic heritage that attracts Elizabeth – not merely his money. Here, then, is a telling instance of how moral considerations can be used to conceal difficult class issues.

I would agree that this is the moral lesson that Elizabeth is *supposed* to have taught Darcy, and also, it is one of the ways in which Elizabeth idealizes her rise in social status. When they express their 'gratitude' to each other for learning such lessons it would seem indeed as if morality had conquered class difference. Yet, from the beginning, 'gratitude' is seen as being tinged with hints of vanity and gratification. The novel's great social realist, Charlotte, early demonstrates how the difference between them can be confused: 'There is so much of gratitude or vanity in almost every attachment' (p.68). Charlotte, however, is presented as a flawed character, so that if there were no other evidence available, one could take her identification of gratitude and vanity as evidence of her false perspective. Yet there is other evidence of Elizabeth feeling gratification at Darcy's attentions. At the Netherfield Ball, for example, she is amazed at 'the dignity to which she was arrived in being allowed to stand opposite to Mr. Darcy' (p.133), and during Mr Darcy's first proposal, we are told she 'could not be insensible to the compliment of such a man's affections' (p.221). These quotations show Elizabeth's burgeoning awareness of the consequences of Darcy's social position. What is meant to distinguish Elizabeth from the other characters, as we have seen, is that it is not until she can morally justify 'gratification' by 'gratitude' that she admits to desiring Darcy. It is to help her make this transition that he embarks on of his course of good works in helping Lydia. We thus see from

8 Karl Kroeber, '*Pride and Prejudice: Fiction's Lasting Novelty*', in *Jane Austen: Bicentenary Essays*, ed. J. Halperin (Cambridge University Press, 1975), p.149.

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another angle how a moral issue is used to conceal a class issue. The irony is, of course, it is only through the exercise of the power inherent in his social caste that Darcy can reveal his morality. I shall return to this crucial question shortly.

Kroeber has a very valid point when he notes that moral issues, such as the concept of gratitude, constitute the currency of Elizabeth's and Darcy's 'verbal interplay' and 'interpersonal transactions'.⁹ He does not, however, go on to show how the main effect of this moral currency is to deflect attention from substantial social issues. At the time of Darcy's first proposal, for example, by deploring Darcy for his 'abominable pride' rather than his 'sense of her inferiority' or his sense of his attachment to her 'being a degradation' (p.221), Elizabeth transforms what could develop as a criticism of Darcy's social class into a flaw in the individual. Yet it is clearly not his pride as such that angers her (there are many proud characters, like Mr Collins, who inspire laughter rather than anger), but the fact that he does not treat her as an equal, and condescends. In setting her sense of individual worth against Darcy's ingrained sense of social reality, it becomes evident that it is the class difference that divides them. It is only when Darcy finally comes to admit the invalidity of the class system in the face of Elizabeth's sense of her individual superiority that hostilities cease. The way this happens, however, is not by Elizabeth claiming victory or reforming the class system, but by the class system parrying the threat that Elizabeth poses by enfolding her to its superior, upper-class, Pemberley bosom. It is from this perspective that Elizabeth must retract her former 'impertinence': partly because it is a sign of former actual class differences; and partly in order to affirm her newly-arrived-at social status. The former must be repudiated because it would be a reminder of Elizabeth's actual material gains, which would contradict Elizabeth's idealistic perspective; the latter must be affirmed in order to insinuate that no *actual* social change had taken place, and that the manners of the upper class were absolute and universal moral imperatives. They could be used, as the example of Darcy's first proposal, and his subsequent letter,

9 *Loc.cit.* p.150

beautifully demonstrate, to exclude upstart members of the lower class. Thus by redefining her anger as some sort of 'improper pride' and by calling Darcy's social snobbishness 'abominable pride', a moral atmosphere is created whereby sins can be absolved on the level of the individual without further references to class difference. This analysis demonstrates nicely how the moral currency of their 'interpersonal transactions' functions in fact to elide the class issue.

It is in this context that Elizabeth's misjudgement of Darcy's relationship to Wickham is crucial. It is used throughout the first half of the book to justify her 'impertinences' and give her the moral courage to say rude things to Darcy. If one followed the Wilkes line, it could reasonably be argued that this conscious indignation concealed Elizabeth's unconscious attraction to Darcy, and it is used as a form of self-advertisement through denial. It is this vigorous denial that sets her apart from the more openly husband-hunting, fortune-seeking members of her class. It encourages both her own perception of herself, and also Darcy's, of her being above class and financial issues. It allows her to drop her witty pheromones without seeming to do so. Yet at the same time her mistake over Wickham is an issue that can easily be cleared up, and once the truth is learned, she can view herself as learning to love Darcy for his *freshly* disclosed noble qualities, rather than those of a more material nature. Her moral perspective, in other words, naturalizes, legitimizes and intellectually conceals the banal facts of her socio-economic rise in status.

Yet Elizabeth's repressed awareness of these socio-economic ramifications is everywhere. As soon as she discovers, for example, that her moral indignation against Darcy on the grounds of his treatment of Wickham is unjustified, her mood modulates into regret for opportunities she seems to have just thrown away. Reflecting how 'materially' the 'improprieties of her connections have hurt hers and Jane's credit', she felt 'depressed beyond anything that she had ever known before' (p.237). Later, almost as if she feels guilty for being the beneficiary of Darcy's entitlements, she posits her intellectual superiority as an acceptable exchange value for his social and financial superiority.

This is hinted at towards the end, when she imagines how 'by her ease and liveliness, his mind might have been softened, his manners improved' while from 'his judgement, information, and knowledge of the world, she must have received benefit of greater importance' (p.325), and later, Elizabeth is presented as using her gifts to further Darcy's sister's education (p.395). What is unclear in this intellectual manoeuvring is how seriously the reader is meant to take this rationalizing. Does Jane Austen ironically smile on Elizabeth's neat equations? Or are they being offered as the genuine articles of exchange in a marriage of true minds?

The story-line of *Pride and Prejudice*, and the fact that the second example above is presented as a simple fact by the omniscient narrator, would seem to suggest the latter. It establishes a new moral and intellectual order around the vicinity of Pemberley. Elizabeth and Darcy are pictured as occupying happily ever after a sort of central sphere of sensitivity and judgement, while those with less of these essential qualities radiate out at a distance from Pemberley according to some sort of inverse square law of intellectual attraction: those with the least intelligence, or most vulgarity, occupy spheres at the greatest distance from Pemberley, and their visits are of the most limited duration. Consider, for example, how Mrs Philips' vulgarity is perceived as a 'tax on [Darcy's] forbearance' in the second last chapter of the book. Elizabeth longs to be away from such stupidity and 'she looked forward with delight to the time when they should be removed from society so little pleasing to either, to all the comfort and elegance of their family party at Pemberley' (p.392). Ostensibly, Elizabeth is escaping from a world of vulgarity and intellectual limitation; yet it is only the 'comfort and elegance' of her family party that she can think of. Here, we witness in a sentence how the distinction between intellectual and social snobbery is elided. 'Comfort and elegance' is set against 'vulgarity', and, indeed, seems almost like the prerequisite of intellectual superiority.

Perhaps one could say that Jane Austen postulates here a kind of intellectual utopia, where people appear to be sorted out according to moral and intellectual merit rather than financial and

social advantage. To the extent the vision is utopian, one could say that it represents an ideal world that Jane Austen knows cannot exist. Yet the large number of critics who have accepted *Pride and Prejudice's* utopian conclusion as if it were real, concentrating purely on the moral and intellectual lessons Elizabeth is supposed to have learned and praising Jane Austen for her technical achievement in making the difference between the 'moral' and the 'real' seem 'seamless', constitutes, to my mind, expert empirical evidence of Jane Austen's success in concealing Elizabeth's *actual* rise in social status. It means that, to a large extent, she has succeeded in naturalizing virtues such as 'proper pride', 'gratitude', and decorum to make them seem as if they are absolutes and have nothing to do with the class Elizabeth intends to marry into.

That these 'virtues' are class biased, however, there should be no doubt. In the society of *Pride and Prejudice* 'proper pride' seems to mean not to have pretensions above one's social status, like Mr Collins. 'Gratitude' means Elizabeth being grateful to Darcy for overlooking her 'impertinence', or her social *faux pas*, and for rescuing one of the more vulgar members of her family. Vulgarity means *openly* discussing social and financial status, either when you do not have any and would like some – like Mrs Bennet and Mrs Lucas – or when you do have some, and you want to keep it for your own class, like Lady Catherine.

The readiness of critics to believe in Austen's intellectual utopianism at very nearly face value is, in itself, of interest. It perhaps reveals the closeness of the traditional academic environment, or its image of itself, to the very values desired and imagined by Elizabeth. Yasmine Gooneratne, for example, points out a 'slip' where a crack in the natural facade of *Pride and Prejudice* is supposed to reveal the author's intentions. It occurs when Lydia tells Elizabeth about Darcy's involvement in bringing about her wedding. This 'slip', according to Gooneratne, 'betrays an element of contrivance. It is one of the very few points in *Pride and Prejudice* at which the underlying framework of the artist's plan has been insufficiently concealed'. Gooneratne sees this as a plot device to set in train 'the reflections that lead to

Elizabeth's acceptance of Darcy's second proposal'.¹⁰ It is supposed to make Darcy morally acceptable to Elizabeth because he overcomes his pride and snobbish prejudice by 'associating himself with Wickham and the less admirable member of her despised family' (i.e. Lydia).

I would not disagree that this is an accurate reflection of how Elizabeth interprets Darcy's action, nor that it seems a fairly transparent plot device to bring this result about. But one could also argue that Darcy's actions reveal, and are consciously designed by Darcy to demonstrate to Elizabeth, that he at last takes her at her own evaluation and that he is now prepared to do things for Elizabeth and her family *as if* they were his equals. He thus reclaims his initial offence against Elizabeth's pride.

While it is certainly admirable that Darcy should now seem more democratic in his dealing with the Bennets, one wonders how greatly he would have exerted himself in such a case if it were not for his interest in Elizabeth. Clearly, the fact that he attempts to keep his manoeuvrings secret is intended to speak for their disinterested nature. Yet one could also argue that his secret manoeuvrings speak more of an element of aristocratic paternalism, a tasteful demonstration of *noblesse oblige*, that is, an act of consummate class condescension passing itself off as a virtue. It has every appearance of an action cynically designed to do nothing but curry favour with Elizabeth, which, at the same time, is an overt demonstration of the power and privilege of Darcy's position.

Thus, in considering the 'slip', one feels Elizabeth is not quite suspicious enough of Darcy's motives in helping her sister – given her previous penchant for suspecting the worst of her social superiors. This is credible because we know that now Elizabeth desires to think well of Darcy, and it is in her interest to do so. Yet this has nothing to do with the intrinsic moral pattern of the book. Darcy even admits as much. When Elizabeth expresses her family's gratitude for his help with Lydia, Darcy replies: 'But your *family* owe me nothing. Much as I respect them, I believe, I thought only of *you*' (p.375). There is no reply

10 Gooneratne, *op. cit.*, pp.98-9.

to this; there can be none. Elizabeth 'was too much embarrassed to say a word'. On the surface, this embarrassment seems due to Elizabeth's modesty in the face of a declaration in her favour. Yet there are inherently embarrassing aspects of Darcy's statement. One may believe, for example, that Darcy thought only of Elizabeth, but how can one cope with the 'respect' he now asserts for her family?

This has been seen as an unbelievable change of character on Darcy's part. Yet if we regard it as we should, that is, as Darcy trying to be nice to Elizabeth and demonstrating the civility that his first proposal lacked, then this clumsy declaration is very much in character: he is still rather stiff in his form of utterance and he is still given to making the difficulties he feels in coping with the social barrier between himself and Elizabeth obvious.

No matter how one takes it, Darcy's admission is a moral embarrassment. If it is admitted that he speaks the truth about his interested motives, then Elizabeth has no extraordinary *moral* grounds for admiring him now more than before. Only the grounds of a very ordinary, material gratitude, along with the gratification of being treated as an equal. If, however, he is just speaking to please Elizabeth, as if to avoid those mistakes of his first proposal where, with greater honesty, he had confessed his scruples against her family, then all he has learnt in the intervening pages would seem to be a form of more civil hypocrisy which would involve treating Elizabeth with the respect she feels she deserves. Thus Elizabeth's embarrassed silence at Darcy's declaration is one of those profound lacunae that speak volumes. Darcy's little speech *must* be passed over as revealing too much of the material interests of both of them. Yet its very existence speaks for Jane Austen's awareness of those motives, and Elizabeth's silence speaks for her acknowledgement of them.

Indeed, this embarrassed silence is repeated in other places. It crops up in Elizabeth's unwillingness to analyse the past too deeply. She advises Darcy 'Think only of the past as its remembrance gives you pleasure' (p.377). Again, when Jane questions her on the discrepancies between her past opinions and

present feelings about Darcy, Elizabeth replies 'in such cases as these, a good memory is unpardonable' (p.381). It is as if from the perspective established by the end of the book that it *would* be a breach of decorum to voice such problematics openly. It is only vulgarians such as Lady Catherine who mention social differences; or mistaken young people, like Elizabeth and Darcy, whose initial prejudices against each other are fundamentally based on an awareness of social difference. In terms of the moral superstructure of the book, Elizabeth and Darcy are supposed to have overcome the false pride bred of such social difference by recognizing in each other individual merits that surmount social barriers. Yet as this analysis shows, social difference is not swept away so much as elided in embarrassed silence.

The conclusion of *Pride and Prejudice* is a precarious balancing act of romantic, moral and pragmatic issues surrounding the theme of 'marriage'. In this essay I have concentrated so far on exploring the contradictions we run into if we pursue the moral issues too closely. It may seem to constitute a breach of the book's own decorum to do so, yet such a pursuit is revealing of the many inherent contradictions in Jane Austen's marriage myth. It is also revealing of the myths promulgated by critics, such as Ian Watt, who spoke of Jane Austen's celebration of 'harmonious unity' and sense of 'social order, which is not achieved at the expense of individuality'. Clearly, such harmony is only possible if one agrees to pass over possible issues of social conflict in decorous silence. This, perhaps is the ultimate message of *Pride and Prejudice*.

Many critics also emphasize the harmony that is supposed to be achieved by Darcy's and Elizabeth's marriage. Robert Heilman states: 'We have spoken of the title themes – pride and prejudice – and of the marriage theme. They all come together in the crucial stages of the achievement of reciprocal understanding and confidence by Elizabeth and Darcy'.¹¹ It seems to me,

11 Robert B. Heilman, 'Parts and the whole in *Pride and Prejudice*', pp.136-7.

however, that the marriage theme is presented by Jane Austen far more problematically.

The other marriages in the book function as contrasts to Elizabeth's. They highlight the issues that hers, ostensibly, resolves.

Her sister Jane, for example, never has to make moral or intellectual decisions over whether or not to like Bingley. Jane waits like a passive flower for the Bingley bee to get round to pollinating her. There is not much else to it. There is the conventional courtship of a typical romance. Jane is the poor but pretty girl, who patiently awaits for obstacles to be overcome to get her rich, good-natured man. It has always been recognized that, by contrast, Elizabeth's relationship to Darcy is much more engaged, and made to seem so. Elizabeth's pride and intellectuality, that is, her active role in defining her relationship through her 'impertinence', make class differences stand out that cannot be easily resolved by the conventional romance ending. Compared to Darcy's and Elizabeth's willingness to make judgements and act on them, which means in fact making class differences visible, Bingley and Jane are acquiescent in their social fate. Jane's passivity also reveals the extent to which the conventional unassertive woman, even if she is attractive, is ultimately a victim of circumstance. Her personal virtues are not enough, in themselves, to exert a greater influence on Bingley than Darcy's social position. It seems to me no accident that she requires an act of grace on the part of Darcy to secure her happiness. Toward the end, Elizabeth is tempted to mock Darcy on the invaluable worth of his 'easily guided' friend. She does not do so. She remembers he had 'yet to learn to be laughed at' (p.380). This is another example of Elizabeth controlling her 'impertinence' and being civil. But it also speaks of her awareness of the actuality of Darcy's power. The ability to keep decorous silence with respect to too much truth is one of the things that Elizabeth has learned.

Lydia's relationship with Wickham constitutes another marital contrast. Primarily, it lacks good sense and is based on an empty-headed physical attraction and pure gratification. Lydia's foolishness, as it were, highlights Elizabeth's temptation to fall

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for Wickham's charms, while emphasizing her good sense in finally refusing to do so. Jane Austen does not harp on the conventional immorality of Lydia's choosing to live with Wickham outside marriage, but on her foolishness for choosing a partner purely on the basis of appearance, her thoughtlessness in disgracing herself and her family, and her vanity at revelling in 'being married', a fact which has nothing to do with her, and everything to do with outside influences on her husband. Lydia's foolishness notwithstanding, however, her predicament reveals the social pressure on women to be married *at any cost*.

That this is an important element in Jane Austen's social analysis there can be no doubt. It is made explicit in the third, and arguably the most important, marriage relationship against which Elizabeth's is measured: that of Charlotte and Mr Collins. Charlotte, of all the young ladies, seems to possess the intelligence and perception most similar to Elizabeth's. Elizabeth's blindness to and intolerance of Charlotte's pragmatism is one of the most telling indicators of Elizabeth's idealism. Yet it is Charlotte who feels most strongly the trap of poverty and spinsterhood to which she is likely to be condemned. Hers is a conventionally 'sensible' marriage, lacking completely in 'sensibility'. It is a marriage that repeats one aspect of the elder Bennets' marriage: a marriage of unequal minds without even their initial spark of physical attraction.

Charlotte's decision is purely mercenary. Jane Austen allows the following devastating glance at her motives:

Mr. Collins to be sure was neither sensible nor agreeable; his society was irksome, and his attachment to her must be mercenary. But still he would be her husband. – Without thinking highly of men or of matrimony, marriage had always been her object; it was the only honourable provision for well-educated young women of small fortune, and however uncertain of giving happiness, it must be their pleasantest preservative from want. (p.163)

One is tempted to read for 'the only honourable provision', 'the only honourable *profession*'. This economic spectre is one that haunts all the marriages in the book: indeed, it is behind the

ironic opening sentence: it is a 'single man who is *in possession of good fortune*' who 'must be in want of a wife'. But everywhere (or nearly everywhere) Jane Austen attempts to distance Elizabeth from such desperation. Upon finding out about Charlotte's engagement, Elizabeth is amazed that Charlotte

would have sacrificed every better feeling to worldly advantage. Charlotte the wife of Mr Collins, was a most humiliating picture! – And to the pang of a friend disgracing herself and sunk in her esteem, was added the distressing conviction that it was impossible for that friend to be tolerably happy in the lot she had chosen. (p.166)

In this passage, it is the '*humiliating picture*' that Charlotte presents that distresses Elizabeth most: that the friend she respects most, intellectually, would accept the very man she has just rejected purely for the sake of 'worldly advantage'. Although her concern is ultimately for Charlotte's happiness, it is as if its loss is principally bound up in the scandal of acting too plainly or honestly in accordance with principles. Indeed, the pang of 'disgrace' seems as profound as if it is the fate Elizabeth most feared for herself: to be, or to be perceived as being, a victim of social pressure and desirous of material gain.

For this reason, it is almost as if Elizabeth feels degraded by her connection with Charlotte. The idea of being humiliated by one's connections is clearly a form of snobbery that Elizabeth is very much prone to. At the Netherfield Ball Elizabeth had 'blushed and blushed again with shame and vexation' (p.141) as her mother counted Jane's expected marital chickens in front of Mr Darcy. Again we perceive Elizabeth's fear of being associated with the vulgarity of appearing to be concerned with worldly advantage. In his initial suit to Elizabeth, Darcy had singled out the actual social inferiority of the Bennets, asking Elizabeth if she could expect him to 'congratulate myself on the hope of relations, whose condition in life is so decidedly beneath my own?' (p.224). This material snobbery angers Elizabeth. But when, in his covering letter, he shifts the grounds of his attack to a more intellectual form of snobbery, his sense of social propriety, Elizabeth's response is quite different:

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The situation of your mother's family, though objectionable, was nothing in comparison of that total want of propriety so frequently, so almost uniformly betrayed by herself, by your three younger sisters, and occasionally even by your father.

(p.228)

Later, Elizabeth reflects: 'The justice of the charge struck her too forcibly for denial, and the circumstances to which he particularly alluded, as having passed at the Netherfield Ball, and as confirming all his first disapprobation, could not have made a stronger impression on his mind than on hers' (p.237). More than anything, perhaps, these passages reveal the basis of Darcy's and Elizabeth's marriage of true minds. It is exactly the members of the Bennet family listed above (with the exception of Kitty) who are condemned to a distance as far away from Pemberley as possible.

One of the crucial results of Darcy's first proposal is to make Elizabeth fully aware for the first time of the *power* that he wields. She becomes aware of how he is able to manipulate Bingley, a power which she had hitherto assigned to the cattiness of Bingley's sister. It is almost as if she has learnt to perceive that moral and intellectual questions are not always decided purely on their merits. Jane does not deserve punishment, but the class system has decided that her family and connections are not good enough for Bingley. There is a sense of powerlessness as Elizabeth reflects on the *material* consequences of her family's lack of propriety. A link is established in her mind between decorum and social consequence as she

considered that Jane's disappointment had in fact been the work of her nearest relations, and reflected how materially the credit of both must be hurt by such impropriety of conduct, she felt depressed beyond anything she had ever known before. (p.237)

It is at this point that the nexus between materiality and propriety is explicitly established, as is the power of the material world over the aloof witty-moral-intellectual world Elizabeth had hitherto imagined herself to be inhabiting, and which she seemed to imagine as proof against material and mercenary considerations. To me, this is the most dramatic point in the book: the point at which, conceivably, real tragedy for the heroine

threatens. It is the point at which she learns at first hand her intellectual pride cannot be as independent as she had thought. It is this perspective that recomprehends 'wit' as 'impertinence', that realizes how 'wit' may offend the decorum of the world which has the power, and to which Elizabeth would now like to be admitted. Elizabeth is no longer so proud that 'her manners were not those of the fashionable world' (p.70). 'Impropriety' and 'impertinence' are perceived as concepts which can be used to exclude undesirables. From this perspective speeches such as:

'And yet I meant to be uncommonly clever in taking so decided a dislike to him, without any reason. It is such a spur to one's genius, such an opening for wit to have a dislike of that kind.'
(p.252)

cannot be regarded either as pure humility or as pure humbug. The quotation is especially interesting in the way that it demonstrates, once again, how Elizabeth conceals social reality beneath a moral superstructure: she does so by repenting of too much. Elizabeth goes too far in asserting she had *no* reason to dislike Darcy. Both his initial behaviour and the massive condescension of his first proposal were certainly reason enough. Yet her former desire to seem 'uncommonly clever' can now be thought of as proud and lacking in propriety because she sees it as being based on ignorance and on her former blindness to the realities of her social position. Here we witness Elizabeth becoming more aware of the decorous bounds that Darcy's aristocratic consciousness has set. The process is complete when she remembers to hold her 'impertinent'/'witty' tongue over Darcy's relationship with Bingley because Darcy 'had yet to learn to be laught at' (p.380).

When Elizabeth finally accepts Darcy, Jane Austen attempts to defuse the contradictions between Elizabeth's old opinions and new situation by means of humour and irony. For example, when Elizabeth breaks the news of her engagement to Jane, Jane exclaims in amazement: 'Oh, Lizzy! it cannot be. I know how much you dislike him.' Elizabeth replies tartly, in an effort almost worthy of Oscar Wilde himself:

'You know nothing of the matter. *That* is all to be forgot. Perhaps I did not always love him so as I do now. But in such

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cases as these, a good memory is unpardonable. This is the last time I shall ever remember it myself.' (p.381)

Although Elizabeth is being deliberately ironical here, she is playfully revealing and concealing many truths. Irony is always two-edged. On one level, Elizabeth is revealing her 'mistakes' in a psychologically and realistically convincing way by admitting them; but then deflecting any serious analysis by her joking tone. Here, the joking naturalizes the situation for the reader. If the reader is worried about inconsistencies, it is comforting to know the heroine, too, is aware of this.

There is, however, a further embarrassment. If irony is used to conceal by revealing Elizabeth's contradictions, it is also used to disguise the *unreality* inherent in *Pride and Prejudice's* fairy-tale ending, a fact that both Elizabeth and Jane Austen also seem painfully aware of. Similar tactics are adopted, therefore, to get over the gap between reality and romance, as Elizabeth tries to make a joke out of her happy-ever-aftering. She tells Jane: 'It is settled between us already, that we are to be the happiest couple in the world' (p.382). But in seeming to point out by this self-consciousness its differences from the conventional romance, *Pride and Prejudice* also reveals its continuities. We seem to hear the voice of Jane Austen murmuring: 'Look, dear reader, I have given you my idea of this spirited girl – but rather than get her into the trouble that one may expect her to end up in, I will provide you with the conventional happy ending that we all desire.'

This leads to the final discontinuity between her present and past self that Elizabeth must get over: the contradiction between her earlier daydreams of marriage based on intellectual exchange rather than the conventional property exchange, and the actuality of her marriage into money and position. It is at this point that the seam between the book's moral pattern and its 'stuff of everyday life'¹² is laid bare. It is revealed in Elizabeth's final burst of irony. Asked by Jane how long she has loved Darcy, Elizabeth replies:

'It has been coming on so gradually, that I hardly know when

12 Giulia Guiffré, 'The Ethical Mode of *Pride and Prejudice*', p. 17.

it began. But I believe I must date it from my first seeing his beautiful grounds at Pemberley.' (p.382)

Once again we observe irony attempting to conceal by revealing. Jane interprets this by understanding that Elizabeth is being ironical here and later, she receives the 'solemn assurances of attachment'.

But is the reader as easy to convince as Jane? We note Jane Austen does not present Elizabeth's 'solemn assurances' in direct speech, almost as if it would be too embarrassing to admit directly. This indirection is repeated in the irony of the direct speech that we are vouchsafed. This leads us to suspect again that, under the cloak of irony, Elizabeth is speaking a truth that it would be a breach of decorum to say directly. For it *is* at Pemberley, when she actually *sees* what might be hers, when she begins to feel that 'to be mistress of Pemberley might be something', that she consciously begins to soften toward Darcy. The moment comes after viewing the family portraits:

In the gallery there were many family portraits, but they could have little to fix the attention of a stranger. Elizabeth walked on in quest of the only face whose features would be known to her. At last it arrested her – and she beheld a striking resemblance of Mr Darcy, with such a smile over the face, as she remembered to have sometimes seen ... There was certainly at this moment, in Elizabeth's mind, a more gentle sensation towards the original, than she had ever felt in the height of their acquaintance. (pp.271-2)

Ostensibly, it is Darcy's smile that produces this 'more gentle sensation' in Elizabeth. But one wonders what is more 'arresting' about the 'resemblance' than the 'original'? Perhaps it is the context. As John Berger points out in his *Ways of Seeing*,¹³ the oil painting was one of the ways in which the predominant ruling class revealed its power and possessions. One could justifiably argue that this 'resemblance' of Darcy, in the context of Pemberley, brings home to Elizabeth the actual social power of his position. It brings to full consciousness those aspects of Darcy she first began to glimpse while dancing with

13 John Berger, *Ways of Seeing* (B.B.C./Penguin, 1972), Chapter 5.

him at the Netherfield Ball and in his accidental disclosure of power in the letter explaining his first proposal.

Typically, however, Elizabeth instantly provides a *moral* justification for this 'more gentle sensation'. The housekeeper, Mrs Reynolds, begins to praise Darcy:

The commendation bestowed on him by Mrs Reynolds was of no trifling nature. What praise is more valuable than the praise of an intelligent servant? (p.272)

What praise indeed? It is as if upon hearing the voice of one of Mr Darcy's possessions, Elizabeth is seized by the desire to become one herself. The proud independence that characterized Elizabeth in the first half of the book transforms itself, at this point, into the agreeable object that presents itself for Darcy's taking in the second half. It is here that Elizabeth fully realizes and acknowledges what had been evident to Charlotte Lucas from the beginning: Darcy's right to be proud. Here, then, the fundamental gap or seam in the fabric of *Pride and Prejudice* is laid bare, the gap that is expressed in Elizabeth's embarrassed silence at Darcy's declaration that prefaced his second proposal and in her ironical answers to Jane; it is the gap that yawns when she redefines her 'wit' as 'impertinence'. In all cases, it is a difference between the rebellious Elizabeth, adored by readers, who resisted appropriation, and the conquered Elizabeth, willing to be appropriated. This does not mean her former pride evaporates; it is saved in the conditions she demands for her surrender: it must be seen to be morally justified. Yet as her rebellion dissolves into moral justification, many readers have felt the second half of the book to be less interesting, less 'real', perhaps more of the matter of the sermon and less of the stuff of everyday life. Yet perhaps, one should say, in the second half of the book that the 'seam' between them becomes more visible, and if less perfect from a purely aesthetic point of view, it is more revealing from a social perspective that Jane Austen is rarely accredited with addressing.

The moral superstructure of *Pride and Prejudice*, therefore, should be seen as the condition of Elizabeth's proud surrender. It is not, as has been traditionally thought, purely a lesson on

morality. It is an attempt to naturalize Elizabeth's actual social advance and the burgeoning awareness of her intrinsic powerlessness as a 'Bennet' compared to her potential to order the world to her will as a 'Darcy of Pemberley'. This power she exerts, as we have seen, in the reordering of the cosmos so that her most vulgar relations are kept furthest away, while the favourites are permitted more frequent intrusions upon the sanctity of Pemberley. Is this then the 'sense of social order' and the 'harmonious unity' Watt speaks of? The power to cut one's self off from those bits of reality that make one blush?

A harmless enough daydream perhaps – if one ignores the pathetic picture of Mrs Bennet left at Longbourne with one daughter, and being 'quite unable to sit alone' (p.394). Her just deserts for being so keen to marry her daughters off? Perhaps. Yet if Jane Austen satirizes the vulgar manner of Mrs Bennet's pursuit of such men for her daughters, she also reveals the contradictions immanent in Elizabeth's less vulgar pursuit, and 'the sense of social order' seems to creak at the very seams of Elizabeth's awareness of these contradictions, while the 'harmonious unity' is held together by nothing more than the benevolence of Jane Austen, in her omnipotent role as the *deus ex machina*.