



P E N G U I N



C L A S S I C S

JANE AUSTEN

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PRIDE AND PREJUDICE

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JANE AUSTEN was born on 16 December 1775 at Steventon, near Basingstoke, the seventh child of the rector of the parish. She lived with her family at Steventon until they moved to Bath when her father retired in 1801. After his death in 1805, she moved around with her mother; in 1809, they settled in Chawton, near Alton, Hampshire. Here she remained, except for a few visits to London, until in May 1817 she moved to Winchester to be near her doctor. There she died on 18 July 1817.

Jane Austen was extremely modest about her own genius, describing her work to her nephew, Edward, as 'the little bit (two inches wide) of Ivory, on which I work with so fine a Brush, as produces little effect after much labour'. As a girl she wrote stories, including burlesques of popular romances. Her works were published only after much revision, four novels being published in her lifetime. These are *Sense and Sensibility* (1811), *Pride and Prejudice* (1813), *Mansfield Park* (1814) and *Emma* (1815). Two other novels, *Northanger Abbey* and *Persuasion*, were published posthumously in 1817 with a biographical notice by her brother, Henry Austen, the first formal announcement of her authorship. *Persuasion* was written in a race against failing health in 1815-16. She also left two earlier compositions, a short epistolary novel, *Lady Susan*, and an unfinished novel, *The Watsons*. At the time of her death, she was working on a new novel, *Sanditon*, a fragmentary draft of which survives.

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JANE AUSTEN  
Pride and Prejudice

*Edited with an Introduction and Notes by*  
VIVIEN JONES



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## Introduction

*New readers are advised that this Introduction makes the detail of the plot explicit.*

In each of her six novels Austen provides her heroine with a good marriage, but that of Elizabeth Bennet in *Pride and Prejudice* is the most dazzling of all. Of all Austen's love stories, it is *Pride and Prejudice* which most comfortably fits the patterns of popular romantic fiction, which is perhaps one reason why Austen herself famously described the novel as 'rather too light & bright & sparkling'.<sup>1</sup> *Pride and Prejudice* is centrally concerned with personal happiness and the grounds on which it might be achieved, and Elizabeth's marriage to Darcy – tall, handsome, and rich – is the stuff of wish-fulfilment.

When Darcy is first seen by Meryton society, at the assembly in the third chapter, he 'soon drew the attention of the room by his fine, tall person, handsome features, noble mien'. Physically, at least, he epitomizes the romantic hero, the ideal object of desire in popular romance fantasy. What's more, he is reported as having 'ten thousand a year', which makes him the object of rather more mercenary desires among those for whom, in the novel's famous opening words, 'It is a truth universally acknowledged, that a single man in possession of a good fortune, must be in want of a wife' (I, i). But the fortune-hunters – and Elizabeth – are put off when Darcy is 'discovered to be proud, to be above his company, and above being pleased' (I, iii). The inhabitants of Meryton might lose interest, but for the experienced romance reader the story really gets under way with this early confrontation between Darcy's snobbish indifference and Elizabeth's angry pride. Darcy's arrogance only serves to enhance his desirability and confirm his status as hero: as every reader of romantic fiction knows, the heroine will learn to

reinterpret the hero's bad manners, his 'shocking rudeness' (I, iii), as a seductive sign of his repressed passion for her. She has the power to transform apparent hostility into lasting commitment and a happy-ever-after marriage.

In *Pride and Prejudice*, this process of transformation and seduction is very complex and very subtle. It involves Elizabeth and Darcy in far-reaching reassessments of themselves, and of their social pride and prejudices. Their prospects for happiness are rigorously tested by constant comparison with the situations and expectations of other characters. In this Introduction I shall be focusing primarily on Austen's immediate social, political and fictional context, and exploring the meanings that Austen's use of romance might have had for a contemporary audience. But to point out basic structural similarities between Austen's novel and a Mills and Boon or Harlequin romance is not to reduce Austen's achievement. Rather, it helps account for the continuing popularity of Austen's fiction and of *Pride and Prejudice* in particular. The romantic fantasy which so effectively shapes Austen's early-nineteenth-century novel is still a powerful cultural myth for readers in the late twentieth century. We still respond with pleasure to the rags-to-riches love story, to the happy ending which combines sexual and emotional attraction with ten thousand a year and the prospect of becoming mistress of Pemberley, a resolution which makes romantic love both the guarantee and the excuse for economic and social success. Romance makes connections across history: it helps us identify and understand the continuities – and the differences – between the novel's significance at the time it was written and published and the appeal it still has for modern readers.

The particular appeal of *Pride and Prejudice* is also due, of course, to its articulate and independent-minded heroine – 'as delightful a creature as ever appeared in print', as Austen herself described her.<sup>2</sup> An early reviewer noted approvingly that 'Elizabeth's sense and conduct are of a superior order to those of the common heroines of novels.'<sup>3</sup> The qualities which distinguished Elizabeth from the 'common heroines' familiar to contemporary audiences continue to endear her to modern readers. Though she plays her part in a version of the familiar romantic plot,

Elizabeth Bennet embodies a very different kind of femininity from that of the typically passive, vulnerable and child-like romantic heroine; her wit and outspokenness make her the most immediately attractive of all Austen's female protagonists. Less naïve than Catherine Morland, livelier than Elinor Dashwood or Fanny Price, not such a snob as Emma Woodhouse and younger and more confident than Anne Elliot, Elizabeth Bennet seems to connect most directly with the active, visible, independent identity of modern femininity.

Importantly, it is the fatal attraction of Elizabeth's critical intelligence – 'the liveliness of [her] mind', and not just her 'fine eyes' (III, xviii; I, vi) – which proves even Darcy to be 'in want of a wife'. From that first meeting, Elizabeth's and Darcy's fraught fascination with each other generates a tantalizing sexual energy, an energy which, like Charlotte Brontë's Jane Eyre and Rochester later in the century, finds expression in a series of highly articulate confrontations. Elizabeth and Darcy engage in verbal struggles to assert their own definitions of people, principles – and each other. Elizabeth's satirical sense of humour and sharp intelligence are stimulated and matched by Darcy's judgemental reserve, his apparent refusal to compromise; his social and moral confidence are challenged by her uncompromising criticism. But by the time Elizabeth admits her love to herself, confrontation has been transformed into an ideal complementarity:

She began now to comprehend that he was exactly the man, who, in disposition and talents, would most suit her. His understanding and temper, though unlike her own, would have answered all her wishes. It was an union that must have been to the advantage of both; by her ease and liveliness, his mind might have been softened, his manners improved, and from his judgment, information, and knowledge of the world, she must have received benefit of greater importance. (III, viii)

As good readers of romantic fiction, we know long before Elizabeth does that union with Darcy would answer 'all her wishes'; as modern readers committed to Elizabeth's independence of



mind, we may feel slightly disturbed by the inequality ('benefit of greater importance') at the heart of that imagined union. But the narrative momentum of romance demands a happy ending and, supported by the subtlety of Austen's characterization, makes it very difficult to resist Elizabeth's longing description of 'connubial felicity' (III, viii). Her description stands as the novel's central definition of its ideal state of 'rational happiness' (III, vii): that is, marriage envisaged as a balance of moral and personal qualities, as a fulfilling process of mutual improvement. Austen's skilful use of romance to shape her detailed analyses of social manners is powerfully persuasive: their capacity for 'rational happiness' makes it seem both inevitable and desirable that her exceptional heroine should find fulfilment through a spectacular marriage to her most eligible hero.

I want to pursue this idea of *Pride and Prejudice* as a 'powerfully persuasive' text, and to develop my suggestion that it is Austen's deployment of the conventional, pleasurable romantic plot, and a rather less conventional heroine, which makes it so. At one level, we are simply being persuaded that two particular individuals are right for each other, that – against all the social odds – Fitzwilliam Darcy is 'exactly the man', the only man, who could have satisfied Elizabeth Bennet's emotional needs. The breathtaking arrogance of Darcy's first proposal is, after all, gratifying evidence that individual desire transcends economic and social differences: "'My feelings will not be repressed'" (II, xi). But personal happiness is inseparable from the world in which it must find expression: precisely because they transgress normal expectations of who can marry whom, Darcy's private 'feelings' have an unavoidably public significance. Darcy's romantic attachment involves a very clear rejection of the dynastic ambitions of his aunt, Lady Catherine de Bourgh, for example, with her plan that he should 'unite the two estates' by marrying his cousin (I, xvi). On the other hand, Elizabeth's and Darcy's unorthodox relationship is very explicitly distinguished from the shocking impropriety of Lydia's irresponsible attachment to Wickham. Indeed, the moment at which Elizabeth finally recognizes Darcy as the

answer to 'all her wishes' is also the moment at which fulfilment seems impossible, precisely because 'An union of a different tendency, and precluding the possibility of the other, was soon to be formed in their family' (III, viii). By this characteristic process of juxtaposition and contrast, Austen establishes Elizabeth's and Darcy's marriage as necessarily significant within the wider community. Our narrative and emotional commitment to their successful union becomes, imperceptibly, also a commitment to the values that union embodies.

Again, at one level, those values are concerned primarily with the ostensibly private world of morals and manners: in the comparison between Elizabeth and Lydia, with the point at which the right to autonomy becomes irresponsible self-indulgence; in the opposition to Lady Catherine, with the rival claims of personal choice and family aggrandisement as legitimate motives for marriage. But, precisely through that focus on individuals and communities, Austen's novels intervene in wider political debate. Written in a period of political crisis and social mobility, they are strategic critical analyses of the moral values and modes of behaviour through which a section of the ruling class was redefining itself. Very few readers and critics would now endorse the myopic view represented by George Steiner's comment: 'At the height of political and industrial revolution, in a decade of formidable philosophic activity, Miss Austen composes novels almost extra-territorial to history.'<sup>4</sup> It all depends, of course, on what you mean by 'history' and on where history is assumed to happen. Austen writes about '3 or 4 Families in a Country Village' – 'the very thing to work on', as she told her niece Anna<sup>5</sup> – and about the fates and choices of their marriageable daughters. She writes, therefore, about femininity and about class: about forms of identity and about marriage as a political institution which reproduces – symbolically as well as literally – the social order. An important feminist insight from the late sixties reminds us that 'the personal is political'; and the reverse is also true. 'Political and industrial revolution' are enacted or resisted at the level of private consciousness as well as public event; historical change takes place through subtle shifts in social interaction, not just through

wars and technology; much 'formidable philosophic activity' is concerned, like *Pride and Prejudice*, with the pursuit of happiness.

Access to the full political dimension of Austen's novels depends on an understanding of the ways in which apparently inconsequential or private details of behaviour or language evoke wider debates. So far, I have stressed the pleasures of recognition on which Austen's persuasive power depends: in terms of its romance plot, and the moral choices which that plot addresses, *Pride and Prejudice* feels familiar. But though the moral issues themselves may be easily recognizable, the public forms – the manners, the social assumptions, even the language – through which they manifest themselves for our judgement are often strange to a modern readership. Strangeness is itself another source of enjoyment, of course. Austen's novels give us the difference of history, one of the important pleasures of which – beyond that of a purely aesthetic enjoyment – is the opportunity to make comparisons with our current moment. Austen works out her romance plots in terms of the everyday, material details of realist fiction, and her novels offer access to a particular, irretrievable lifestyle. But their economical attention to the lived texture of a social environment is never simply documentary or merely decorative. It would be a mistake to adopt a commodified view of that world as comfortably stable, ordered and comprehensible. Austen's fictional technique depends crucially on the reader as an active interpreter, not just a passive consumer, of detail. Her texts work on the shared assumption that nuances of language, or dress, or behaviour can carry very particular implications: as comparatively straightforward signs of social status, for example; as clues to a character's moral attitude; or – more problematically for modern readers – as conscious references to the terms and issues which were being contested in contemporary cultural debates. Like its protagonists, *Pride and Prejudice* is vitally engaged in argument.

Mr Collins's speech and behaviour, for example, make his absurd conceit abundantly clear. We could hardly fail to sympathize with Elizabeth's acute sense of his awfulness as a pro-

spective husband, nor to register the difference between his calculated and entirely impersonal criteria for a good wife and Darcy's irrepressible response to Elizabeth's individuality. It may be less obvious, however, that when Mr Collins obtusely insists on praising Elizabeth's 'modesty' and 'economy' (I, xix), his terminology aligns him with advocates of a middle-class ideal of submissive, domestic womanhood, an ideal which was at the time an influential aspect of reactionary political discourse. Elizabeth's very different mode of femininity, the 'liveliness' of mind which attracts Darcy, thus becomes politically charged – and the contrasting masculine identities of Darcy and Mr Collins similarly take on political, as well as moral and social, resonances.

This contrast between Mr Collins's ideal woman and Elizabeth distances both Austen and her heroine from an extreme conservative view – as far as gender, at least, is concerned. Most commentators agree, however, that Austen's novels do advocate an essentially conservative position. Their focus on a section of the rural ruling class, their concern with harmony, decorum, marriage itself, speaks for the consolidation and renewal of an established social order rather than for revolution. But, as the example of Mr Collins suggests, having established this broadly conservative position, it's rather less easy to define Austen's precise identity within it. This is partly a function of form, of the difference between a straightforwardly polemical text and a work of fiction, in which dramatization produces multiple possibilities for interpretation. It's partly to do with the complex shifts within class hierarchies in the period – an issue I shall be returning to. And it's partly to do with Austen's status as a woman, which complicates the already difficult question of her class position. Women's class status is traditionally determined by their father or husband. They exist in a liminal state neither inside nor outside class hierarchies, and gender can cut across and conflict with class or party politics. The precise conjunction of gender and class in Austen has been a vexed question in Austen criticism for some years. Does she, as some critics have suggested, present a subversive, proto-feminist critique which conflicts with her class politics? Or is she demonstrably

anti-feminist, an anti-revolutionary defender of traditional femininity and family values? It's probably most useful, I want to argue, to think of her as post- rather than simply anti-revolutionary, as strategically assimilating rather than blindly opposing ideas for change. Still using romance as an important focus, I want to go on now to explore in more detail *Pride and Prejudice's* persuasive dramatization of this 'post-revolutionary' position.

*Pride and Prejudice* began life in the 1790s as *First Impressions*, completed between October 1796 and August 1797 and unsuccessfully submitted for publication in November 1797. It was first conceived, therefore, during the immediate aftermath of the French Revolution, when Britain was at war with France and the repressive Pitt government was (with limited success) seeking to eradicate revolutionary ideas and activity on this side of the English Channel. This was a period of intense ideological debate, in which the personal was very definitely political. Edmund Burke's anti-revolutionary *Reflections on the Revolution in France*, published in 1790, had eloquently defended feudal traditions of paternalism, property and aristocracy in terms which put sexual mores and the family at the centre of the political agenda. Burke famously lamented the passing of 'the age of chivalry', of 'generous loyalty to rank and sex', and argued that 'we begin our public affections in our families': 'To be attached to the subdivision, to love the little platoon we belong to in society, is the first principle (the germ as it were) of public affections.'<sup>6</sup>

He was attacked by, among many others, Mary Wollstonecraft, professional writer and member of radical intellectual circles in London, and well known today as one of the first modern English feminists. In *A Vindication of the Rights of Men* (1790), Wollstonecraft defended revolutionary ideals, and argued that a 'libertine imagination', a predatory masculinity which reduced women to sexual objects, lay at the heart of Burkean traditionalism. For Wollstonecraft, Burke's idea of the family enshrined sexual inequality. Two years later, in *Vindication of the Rights of Woman*, she developed that insight in a

more sustained application of revolutionary principles to sexual politics. *Rights of Woman* claims liberty, equality and citizenship for women, and offers a devastating critique of the process by which women come to identify themselves as exclusively sexual beings, incapable of rational thought or independent action:

In short, women in general, as well as the rich of both sexes, have acquired all the follies and vices of civilization, and missed the useful fruit . . . [Women's] senses are inflamed, and their understandings neglected, consequently they become the prey of their senses, delicately termed sensibility, and are blown about by every momentary gust of feeling. Civilized women are . . . weakened by false refinement . . . All their thoughts turn on things calculated to excite emotion and feeling, when they should reason . . .<sup>7</sup>

The kind of traditionalism represented by Burke was based on hierarchies of all kinds, including a sexual hierarchy within the family which took it for granted that the sexes are innately different. The egalitarian polemic of writers like Wollstonecraft did away with essential sexual difference by invoking a common human identity. Contemporary definitions of sexual difference tended to assign reason to men and feeling to women. In the passage just quoted, as throughout *Rights of Woman*, Wollstonecraft denies that opposition. She assumes that women's capacity for reason is equal to that of men, even if, through inadequate education, that capacity often remains undeveloped. For Wollstonecraft, it is culture, not nature, which dictates that women behave like merely passive creatures of feeling, just as it is culture, not nature, which has allowed a self-perpetuating ruling class to reach a similar state of decadent self-indulgence. The ideal which she offers as an alternative to both – and to Burke's defence of tradition – is that of the professional middle class, where education is a process of self- as well as public improvement:

In the middle rank of life . . . men, in their youth, are prepared for professions, and marriage is not considered as the grand feature of

their lives; whilst women, on the contrary, have no other scheme to sharpen their faculties. It is not business, extensive plans, or any of the excursive flights of ambition, that engross their attention; no, their thoughts are not employed in rearing noble structures.<sup>8</sup>

Women have only one route to self-improvement: 'To rise in the world, and have the liberty of running from pleasure to pleasure, they must marry advantageously, and to this object their time is sacrificed, and their persons often legally prostituted'.<sup>9</sup> Instead, Wollstonecraft envisages the possibility of women becoming more publicly active participants in a middle-class meritocracy.

The characterization of women as 'rational creatures',<sup>10</sup> the question of whether marriage is the only legitimate goal for a woman, the promotion of an active feminine identity and a professional ideal: these issues, raised by Wollstonecraft and others in the cause of revolutionary change, reverberate in political writing – and in fiction – throughout the 1790s and beyond. And they are clearly still very much current in *Pride and Prejudice*. In the 1790s radical women such as Mary Hays, Charlotte Smith and Wollstonecraft herself wrote experimental novels with active – even unchaste – heroines, novels which exposed the stifling limitations of the conventional happy-ever-after marriage; in response, anti-revolutionary novels by, for example, Jane West or Elizabeth Hamilton reasserted a virtuous, domestic feminine ideal, often through plots which demonstrate the catastrophic personal consequences of taking up radical ideas – or of giving in to 'first impressions'. Drafts of Austen's *First Impressions* have not survived, so we can't know precisely how her original novel might have fitted into this fictional 'war of ideas'. What is evident, however, is the broad resemblance between Austen's plot and the plots of some of the more conservative novels of the 1790s. In Austen's novel, Elizabeth has to learn to revise her first impressions, not just of Darcy but also of the unscrupulous Wickham; in conservative fiction, heroines similarly over-confident of their capacity to make independent decisions, and to act on them, learn the error of their self-

assertive ways – often (unlike Elizabeth) by suffering near or utter ruin.

More than ten years intervened between the writing of *First Impressions* and the publication of *Pride and Prejudice* in January 1813. Austen ‘lopt and cropt’ *First Impressions*<sup>11</sup> to produce the novel as we now know it, in a rather different political climate. In the later 1790s, with the failure of revolutionary ideals in France and repressive domestic policies at home, English radicals lost confidence and their voice became more muted; during the next decade, as the Napoleonic Wars went on, the sometimes hysterically reactionary atmosphere at the turn of the century also gradually gave way to a precarious conservative consensus, at least among the increasingly confident middle classes. Again, ideas about the role of women played a crucial part in these shifts of opinion. Conservatives and traditionalists could not ignore the new Wollstonecraftian femininity. It was violently discredited in some anti-revolutionary propaganda, usually by depicting Wollstonecraft and other radical women as prostitutes, ‘unsex’d females’ who advocated and practised ‘Gallic licentiousness’. But the idea that women might be active participants in culture also had a more complicated and pervasive effect: in a much modified form, active femininity was appropriated for the conservative cause of national family values, Burke’s ‘little platoon’.

The work of the evangelical writer Hannah More typifies this process. In many ways, More is the ideological opposite of Wollstonecraft. More herself, as well as other contemporary commentators, certainly presented the two women as the acceptable and unacceptable faces of womanhood, and a brief comparison of More with Wollstonecraft provides a very useful context against which to tease out the subtleties of Austen’s treatment of femininity in *Pride and Prejudice*. In her *Strictures on the Modern System of Female Education* (1799) More vehemently reasserts ‘natural’ sexual difference, implicitly answering Wollstonecraft’s belief in a human identity common to both sexes: ‘Each sex has its proper excellencies, which would be lost were they melted down into the common character.’<sup>12</sup> On the



basis of that difference, More makes a rousing appeal to women on behalf of their war-torn nation:

I would call on [women] to come forward, and contribute their full and fair proportion towards the saving of their country. But I would call on them to come forward, without departing from the refinement of their character, without derogating from the dignity of their rank, without blemishing the delicacy of their sex.<sup>13</sup>

The impact of the new femininity on conservative thinking is evident in More's consciousness-raising call to women to 'come forward' into awareness of their central role in the nation's survival. But, in opposition to Wollstonecraft, More aligns herself with a version of Burkean traditionalism – as that phrase 'the dignity of their rank' suggests. Rather than Wollstonecraft's new and disruptive vision of a rational meritocracy, More appeals to women's anxieties about the possible consequences of breaking established codes of femininity. She describes a comfortably circumscribed form of involvement and defines female 'excellencies' in all-too-familiar terms. Her buzz-words are those of the conduct books, the popular manuals which instructed young women in appropriately decorous behaviour: works like James Fordyce's *Sermons to Young Women*, which Mr Collins tries to read to the Bennet sisters (I, xiv), and which Wollstonecraft attacked in *Rights of Woman* as likely to 'hunt every spark of nature out of [a girl's] composition'.<sup>14</sup> For More and the conduct writers, femininity consists in 'refinement', 'delicacy' – and propriety: 'Propriety is to a woman . . . the first, the second, the third requisite'.<sup>15</sup> In both More and conduct literature generally, such terms have a primarily moral meaning, but they are nevertheless terms which Wollstonecraft deeply mistrusted because they are complicit with more exclusively sexual definitions of women as decorative, vulnerable, in need of protection. In the first of the extracts I quoted above from *Rights of Woman*, for example, Wollstonecraft attacks the 'false refinement' which reduces women to creatures of sense rather than reason, and in her critique of Fordyce she contrasts 'female meekness and artificial grace' with the 'true grace [which] arises

from some kind of independence of mind'.<sup>16</sup> In contrast with Wollstonecraft's ideal of female autonomy, More's view of women's activity is seriously limited by the fear that they might blemish 'the delicacy of their sex'. Later in *Strictures*, for example, she offers a depressingly self-abnegating image of womanhood:

An early habitual restraint is peculiarly important to the future character and happiness of women. A judicious unrelaxing but steady and gentle curb on their tempers and passions can alone ensure their peace and establish their principles . . .

Girls should be led to distrust their own judgment; they should learn not to murmur at expostulation; they should be accustomed to expect and to endure opposition . . . It is of the last importance to their happiness, even in this life, that they should early acquire a submissive temper and a forbearing spirit.<sup>17</sup>

*Pride and Prejudice* could well be read as a critical exploration of More's contention that women's happiness is dependent on restraint and submission. I have already suggested that happiness is a central preoccupation in the novel; and the key terms from contemporary debates about women play constantly through Austen's careful discriminations between the degrees and kinds of happiness expected not just by Elizabeth but by a whole range of female characters. Reason, feeling, passion, propriety, decorum, modesty, delicacy, elegance, independence: as in the work of polemicists like Wollstonecraft and More, this embattled vocabulary is under scrutiny throughout *Pride and Prejudice*. How, then, might we place Elizabeth Bennet and the novel's other female characters against the versions of womanhood which it evokes?

Elizabeth is clearly much closer to Wollstonecraft's rational femininity and 'independence of mind' than to More's ideal of a 'submissive temper' and 'forbearing spirit'. She demonstrates precisely that independence, after all, in rejecting Mr Collins – along with his stereotyped definition of her as a creature of 'modesty' and 'economy'. At the end of their interview, as Mr Collins continues to insist that her refusal is due merely to conventional coquetry, Elizabeth makes a desperate plea to be

taken seriously as a woman of integrity: “Do not consider me now as an *elegant female* intending to plague you, but as a *rational creature* speaking the truth from her heart” (I, xix, my emphasis). The opposition between a false form of femininity and a strongly felt rational autonomy, like the phrase ‘rational creature’ itself, is straight out of Wollstonecraft.

Similarly, when Elizabeth dashes across the countryside to Netherfield to be with Jane in her illness, we admire her for her concerned spontaneity, and for her unconcern about ‘blemishing the delicacy of [her] sex’. Other characters are less impressed by such unladylike exertion, and the whole event – crucial in so many ways to the development of the novel – dramatizes an important debate about what is and is not ‘proper’ behaviour. Mary Bennet, for example, who talks like a conduct book rather than a human being, primly intones the maxim that “every impulse of feeling should be guided by reason” (I, vii); while Caroline Bingley rationalizes her jealousy by appealing to a more worldly, metropolitan view of propriety: “It [i.e. walking several miles alone and getting ‘above her ancles in dirt’] seems to me to shew an abominable sort of conceited independence, a most country town indifference to decorum” (I, viii). Elizabeth’s liveliness, her ‘*active* sensibility’ – to take a phrase from one of Wollstonecraft’s novels<sup>18</sup> – secures our sympathy even more firmly through juxtaposition with such self-interested versions of conduct-book standards.

But, though the characterization of Elizabeth suggests a tendency towards Wollstonecraft’s position rather than More’s, it would be unwise to identify Austen too neatly with Wollstonecraft’s gender radicalism. Austen’s (and her characters’) use of politicized terms is always strategic, contingent on particular circumstances, subject to adjustment in the wider context of their usage in the novel as a whole. In Elizabeth’s contrast between herself as a ‘rational creature’ and the image of the ‘elegant female’, for example, ‘elegant female’ is Mr Collins’s phrase, not her own. It suggests his conceited, but also class-based, ignorance of what real ‘elegance’ might be, rather than a fixed definition. A few chapters later, the authorial voice approvingly describes Mrs Gardiner – who is certainly rational

— as ‘elegant’ (II, ii). (And, later still, we are told that Pemberley, representative of its owner, has ‘more real elegance’ than Rosings (III, i).) The two categories are not actually incompatible in Austen’s post-revolutionary scheme of things: the more conventionally feminine, and upper-class, attribute of elegance can coexist with the more contentious claim to rationality.

The most important consequence of Elizabeth’s walk to Netherfield is its effect on Darcy. As Caroline Bingley recognizes only too well, Elizabeth’s ‘indifference to decorum’, her ‘impatient activity’, make her all the more attractive. When Elizabeth arrives, Darcy too is doubtful about the prudence of her solitary walk, but he is equally struck by ‘the brilliancy which exercise had given to her complexion’ (I, vii). Elizabeth’s stay at Netherfield gives Darcy plenty of opportunity to experience her intellectual as well as her physical attractions, and the visit is punctuated by their sexually charged sparring and by authorially directed glimpses into Darcy’s growing subjection: ‘Darcy had never been so bewitched by any woman as he was by [Elizabeth]’; ‘He began to feel the danger of paying Elizabeth too much attention’; ‘She attracted him more than he liked’ (I, x; xi; xii). Darcy’s ‘divided’ responses point up a conflict in which a spontaneous female individuality wins out over feminine propriety and social status. And it does so because it’s a source of sexual power. Where Wollstonecraft urged women to seek other objects, Austen returns the new femininity to the more familiar pleasures of romantic fiction. Those privileged moments of access to Darcy’s private feelings play strategically on romance expectations: reading from Elizabeth’s point of view, we take pleasure in her power, fully confident that Darcy’s pride will have to fall before the charms of a woman with ‘independence of mind’.

For the romance to be fulfilled, that independence of mind also has to be adjusted, however: Elizabeth’s prejudice has to fall with Darcy’s pride. Like a good reader of More’s *Strictures*, it would seem, Elizabeth has to learn to ‘distrust [her] own judgment’, to recognize the error of her first impressions. After reading Darcy’s letter, Elizabeth fiercely castigates herself for wilfully misjudging both Darcy and Wickham:

'Had I been in love, I could not have been more wretchedly blind. But vanity, not love, has been my folly. – Pleased with the preference of one, and offended by the neglect of the other, on the very beginning of our acquaintance, I have courted prepossession and ignorance, and driven reason away, where either were concerned. Till this moment, I never knew myself.' (II, xiii)

And later, when she has to convince her father that Darcy is the man who will make her happy, Elizabeth earnestly wishes 'that her former opinions had been more *reasonable*, her expressions more *moderate*' (III, xvii, my emphasis). Elizabeth comes close here to a More-like regret at the lack of 'a steady and gentle curb on [her] tempers and passions', and the language of painful self-knowledge recalls those anti-revolutionary novels of female education, which dramatize the disciplinary advice of conduct literature. Had she been the heroine in a standard anti-revolutionary novel, Elizabeth's misjudgement of men would have been based on a foolish romantic attachment, and might well have caused her downfall. But in *Pride and Prejudice* it is Lydia, not the heroine, who enacts the conventional melodrama of mistaken and self-indulgent passion. If Elizabeth is in love, it is with her individuality, not the wrong man. She prides herself on being above the usual female obsession with men and marriage (just as, when the trip to the Lake District is planned, she distinguishes herself from 'the generality of travellers' (II, iv)). The shock of remorse includes the recognition that she has been as 'wretchedly blind' as the generality of heroines, and the punishment for courting 'prepossession and ignorance' is to fall in love, like them. In fact, Elizabeth is made to suffer what she at one point describes to Charlotte as "'the greatest misfortune of all! – To find a man agreeable whom one is determined to hate!'" (I, xviii).

The wit of Austen's romantic plot makes it very difficult to read *Pride and Prejudice* (*Sense and Sensibility* or *Mansfield Park* may be another matter) as a novel advocating punitive control – or even the resigned compromise that More articulates:

this world is not a stage for the display of superficial or even of shining

talents, but for the sober exercise of fortitude, temperance, meekness, diligence, and self-denial; . . . life is not a splendid romance . . . [but] a true history, many pages of which will be dull, obscure, and uninteresting.<sup>19</sup>

Such circumscribed expectations describe the attitude and experience of Charlotte Lucas, rather than Elizabeth Bennet, for whom life does turn out to be 'a splendid romance'. For Charlotte, marriage is women's 'pleasantest preservative from want', but it is 'uncertain of giving happiness' (I, xxii). Elizabeth, in contrast, strongly believes in marriage as a test of personal moral integrity and in individual happiness as a legitimate goal, and that idealism is one of her most attractive traits. She is shocked when Charlotte sacrifices 'every better feeling to worldly advantage' (I, xxii); and, against the advice of her milder and more conventionally passive sister Jane, she condemns the 'want of proper resolution' which almost leads Bingley to 'sacrifice his own happiness' (and Jane's) to the whim of others (II, i). Elizabeth's 'prepossession and ignorance' may need some corrective redirection, but her idealism and readiness to judge responsibly remain intact. And when she acknowledges Darcy as her true object of desire, the plot tells us, that idealism finds its proper fulfilment. Elizabeth's lively individuality – her 'shining talent', to use More's terminology – is provided with an appropriate 'stage' when she marries Darcy and becomes mistress of the 'comfort and elegance of their family party at Pemberley' (III, xviii).

Unlike More, then, *Pride and Prejudice* makes a very clear connection between a (slightly chastened) 'independence of mind' and women's individual happiness. Unlike Wollstonecraft, however, it finds women's 'independence of mind', their opportunities for rational self-improvement, entirely compatible with marrying 'advantageously'. From their very different political standpoints, both More and Wollstonecraft condemned romance fiction for diverting women's energies from more appropriate objects: for More, romantic fantasies deflect women from their duty as the moral centre of the nation; for Wollstonecraft, they reduce women to 'abject wooers and fond

slaves'. A preoccupation with novels, she argues, tends to 'make women the creatures of sensation'; it 'relaxes the other powers of the mind'.<sup>20</sup> Begun in the 1790s but completed in the later, post-revolutionary, period, Austen's novel has assimilated both positions and moved on. It dares to close the gap between 'splendid romance' and 'true history'. Unlike More, for whom happiness was a state of necessary constraint, or Wollstonecraft, for whom it was deferred until some revolutionary future, Austen's romantic comedy makes fulfilment seem both legitimate and attainable in the present. Rather than condemning the pleasures of fantasy, *Pride and Prejudice* directs those energies to a carefully redefined fantasy object: through the ideal of 'rational happiness', it persuades women of their active role in a revitalized version of Burke's 'little platoon'.

So far, in exploring *Pride and Prejudice* as a post-revolutionary romance, I have focused on gender: on Elizabeth as an early-nineteenth-century equivalent of the 'post-feminist' heroine. I want now to consider the wider social meaning, the class allegiance and the literary precedents implicit in the alliance between Elizabeth's new femininity and Darcy's ancient family. In spite of her independence of mind, Elizabeth's marriage is in some ways strikingly conventional – so much so that it thrills Mrs Bennet much more than the marriages of either Lydia or Jane: "'Jane's is nothing to it – nothing at all'" (III, xvii). Like a good daughter, Elizabeth marries above her, and secures upward social mobility, as well as financial advantage, for herself and her family.

Marriage to Darcy represents a particularly impressive example of this standard female route to social improvement. Indeed, Elizabeth could be said to repeat the spectacular success of Pamela, the serving-girl who marries the master of the house in Samuel Richardson's epistolary novel *Pamela; or, Virtue Rewarded*, published in 1740. Pamela withstands physical assaults, abduction and attempted rape from Mr B. for so long and with such moral firmness that he eventually reforms, falls in love with her and makes her his wife and mistress of his estates. *Pamela* was a huge popular success. Industries sprang up to produce the print, the stage show, the ballad and the teaset

of the novel. And, as that level of popularity testifies, the figure of Pamela herself became a kind of cultural myth: the virtuous woman who reforms the rake came to embody the impact of middle-class values on a corrupt ruling class and the possibility of wider social access to wealth and power.

In spite of the sixty or so years and obvious differences between them, *Pamela* and *Pride and Prejudice* are recognizably part of the same woman-centred, middle-class fictional tradition. Unlike Mr B., Darcy is not a rake: the housekeeper at Pemberley very explicitly describes him as 'Not like the wild young men now-a-days, who think of nothing but themselves' (III, i). But though Elizabeth may not be in danger of direct physical assault, Darcy's insulting dismissal of her family and his interference in Jane's happiness are only more subtle modes of violation. Echoing Pamela, who cannot 'look upon [Mr B.] as a gentleman', and doesn't think she could take him as a husband because of his sexual 'rudeness',<sup>21</sup> Elizabeth refuses Darcy's first proposal with a cutting critique of his manners – indeed, of his very identity: "“You are mistaken, Mr Darcy, if you suppose that the mode of your declaration affected me in any other way, than as it spared me the concern which I might have felt in refusing you, had you behaved in a more gentleman-like manner”" (II, xi). As we learn later, these are the words that subsequently 'torture' Darcy (III, xvi) and produce the new man who greets Elizabeth and the Gardiners at Pemberley. Like Richardson's Mr B. who, like all 'people of fortune', had been 'unaccustomed to controul',<sup>22</sup> Darcy confesses to having been 'spoilt' by parents who 'almost taught me to be selfish and overbearing' (III, xvi). As in *Pamela*, desire opens up that faulty class education to the possibility of correction; the shock of resistance and criticism from the lower-class woman excites upper-class masculinity into change: "“You [Elizabeth] taught me a lesson, hard indeed at first, but most advantageous. By you, I was properly humbled”" (III, xvi). Elizabeth's lesson in *Pride and Prejudice* is to learn that she loves the man whose social pride prejudiced her against him; Darcy's is to adjust that 'mistaken pride' (III, x) and welcome into his intimate 'family party' Elizabeth's 'low connections', the relations from



Cheapside who he once thought must 'very materially lessen [her] chance of marrying [a man] of any consideration in the world' (I, viii).

Elizabeth and Darcy's 'family party' at Pemberley represents the nation: as in Burke's focus on the 'little platoon', the intimate, domestic group is both the image and the source of national order and responsibility. In the final chapter of *Pride and Prejudice*, the membership of the Pemberley family is carefully defined. It includes Jane and Bingley, of course, and Georgiana Darcy; Mr Bennet is a regular visitor, and Caroline Bingley, Lady Catherine de Bourgh (eventually), and even Lydia, are occasionally entertained; only Mrs Bennet, Mary and Wickham remain remote. But 'with the Gardiners, they were always on the most intimate terms', since it was they who, 'by bringing [Elizabeth] into Derbyshire, had been the means of uniting them' (III, xix). At its most intimate level, then, this ideal community effects an alliance between the traditional ruling élite and a new order: between Darcy, a member of the landowning aristocracy, and the Gardiners, important figures in *Pride and Prejudice*, and representative of that growing commercial and professional class whose 'excursive flights of ambition' Wollstonecraft so admired. The alliance is mediated and secured by Elizabeth. In terms of status, she is herself the daughter of a marriage between much lesser, financially insecure, landowning gentry and commerce; more importantly, in terms of moral and cultural values, her feminine individualism penetrates Darcy's self-satisfied and exclusive definition of what it is to be 'well bred'. Class identity has become as much a function of mental and moral qualities as it is of visible wealth or an ancient name. When the Gardiners are first introduced, for example, Mr Gardiner is described as 'a sensible, gentlemanlike man', and the narrative voice clearly takes sides against 'the Netherfield ladies' who 'would have had difficulty in believing that a man who lived by trade, and within view of his own warehouses, could have been so well bred and agreeable' (II, ii, my emphasis).

Austen's relationship with a traditional élite is not, then, as has sometimes been thought, simply that of straightforward apologist. Her own social status was precarious, both as a

woman, and as the daughter of a family partly dependent on the patronage of wealthier relations. Her novels are alert to the complexities and insecurities of that social position, and preoccupied with questions of respectability and responsibility; they describe the rapidly changing constituency of rural England at a moment when estates were being bought, rented or created by those who had made their money in trade (as has Bingley's family) and when, at the same time, a new metropolitan professional middle class to which people such as the Gardiners belonged was gaining cultural ascendancy. Her heroines are the agents of both change and consolidation. Operating in the private, domestic sphere, they are much closer to the new professional values of self-reliance, rationalism and integrity than to what Austen depicts as the mercenary superficiality of the *rentier* class. Through Elizabeth, through Fanny, the dependent outsider who becomes the moral centre of *Mansfield Park*, even through the more socially secure Emma who has to learn about the proper exercise of responsibility, Austen prescribes reform, adjustment, and thus renewal, for a dangerously unself-conscious and therefore vulnerable ruling class. In that wonderful scene towards the end of the novel, for example, in which Elizabeth has to defend her right to happiness against interference from Lady Catherine de Bourgh, Lady Catherine is an easy target. She is a sharply realized embodiment of a stock comic figure: the caricature of an old order, powerless in the face of youth and desire and incapable of change. Her appeal to "the claims of duty, honour, and gratitude" (III, xiv) stands little chance against Elizabeth's rationality, wit and unswerving belief in autonomous choice:

'Supposing [Darcy] to be attached to me, would *my* refusing to accept his hand, make him wish to bestow it on his cousin? Allow me to say, Lady Catherine, that the arguments with which you have supported this extraordinary application, have been as frivolous as the application was ill judged.' (III, xiv)

'Frivolous' is a key word here. It puts Lady Catherine's rehearsal of Burkean notions of honour on a par with the ostentatious

display of Rosings, and aligns her inflexible version of tradition with the superficial snobbery of a Caroline Bingley. In daring to judge Lady Catherine's argument 'frivolous', Elizabeth enacts an alternative value system identified with mental qualities of seriousness, 'depth' and commitment rather than superficial display.

Elizabeth's Wollstonecraftian 'liveliness' of mind, her habit of ironic laughter and self-awareness (however imperfect), can thus be identified in quite precise cultural terms. Selfconscious, rational, sceptical: Elizabeth is an Enlightenment figure skilfully integrated, through the mechanisms of romantic comedy, into the traditional Burkean hierarchy which Enlightenment values sought to dismantle. Elizabeth's victory over Lady Catherine is inevitable rather than revolutionary: traditional values in that form are no longer the target, as they were when Wollstonecraft attacked Burke. Darcy, on the other hand, is much less easy to overcome. He can appreciate, match and accommodate the potentially revolutionary qualities which differentiate Elizabeth from the likes of Caroline Bingley – because they rouse his desire. At the end of the novel, Elizabeth and Darcy indulge in the familiar lovers' pleasure of confirming love by narrating its origin. Elizabeth, characteristically, speaks for Darcy:

'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 for *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; but in spite of the pains you took to disguise yourself, your feelings were always noble and just . . . really, all things considered, I begin to think it perfectly reasonable.' (III, xviii)

The tone is playful, flirtatious, ironic. It libidinizes the serious moral and political vocabulary of nobility, amiability, justice, reason and, in doing so, forges unobtrusive connections between private and public histories. Elizabeth's loving retrospect rewrites Darcy's insupportable snobbery as mere 'disguise';

aristocratic culture is discovered to be essentially 'amiable' after all.

In the previous chapter, Elizabeth tells Jane the story of how her own love developed: "It has been coming on so gradually, that I hardly know when it began. But I believe I must date it from my first seeing his beautiful grounds at Pemberley" (III, xvii). From the moment the novel was published, criticism of Richardson's *Pamela* turned on the possibility that Pamela's 'virtue' was no more than mercenary self-interest masquerading as moral rectitude. Similar questions have been asked of Elizabeth's motivation in *Pride and Prejudice* – usually reaching the comfortable conclusion that she is blamelessly free of any ignoble interest in Darcy's wealth. But the novel is less complacent than some of its critics have been: Elizabeth's ironic narrative of falling in love is properly selfconscious about the impossibility of easily distinguishing between disinterested motives and the attraction of material advantages. A conflation of morality, aesthetic pleasure and social power is at the very heart of the female-centred fiction of upward social mobility: middle- or lower-class heroines (and their readers) are seduced precisely by the prospect of 'reforming', and therefore participating in, the attractive power of the upper-class male. In *Pride and Prejudice*, the seduction is intellectual and aesthetic rather than physical, but that just makes it all the more effective. When Elizabeth sees Pemberley, what impresses her is the extent of Darcy's influence:

As a brother, a landlord, a master, she considered how many people's happiness were in his guardianship! – How much of pleasure or pain it was in his power to bestow! – How much of good or evil must be done by him! . . . she thought of his regard with a deeper sentiment of gratitude than it had ever raised before; she remembered its warmth, and softened its impropriety of expression. (III, i)

Elizabeth's rational judgement is modified by the prospect of effective power; she is seduced out of her class-based indignation by the thought that, through marriage, she might have shared

this position of influence over others' happiness. And the romance plot immediately rewards her with Darcy himself, 'strikingly altered' in his manner towards her (III, i). At the personal level, confrontation gives way to the compromise which will make romantic fulfilment possible. At the public level, by implication, class antagonism settles for a mutually beneficial consensus.

The effectiveness of that consensus is demonstrated when Darcy, working in close partnership with Mr Gardiner, saves Lydia from the worst social consequences of her liaison with Wickham. As Mrs Gardiner tells Elizabeth, Darcy's 'mistaken pride' at first made him think it 'beneath him' to share his knowledge of Wickham's character and behaviour (III, x). By entering into a more open form of government and giving others access to that knowledge, Darcy is instrumental in returning Lydia – and Wickham – to a kind of respectability. Wickham, a vestigial example of the old rake figure, is effectively disempowered as the new alliance, between Darcy's wealth and influence and Mr Gardiner's professional expertise, acts to guarantee public morality and order.

By the end of the novel, then, Darcy has been converted into a figure of comic reconciliation. Lady Catherine, representing the older generation of aristocracy, would have thwarted the romantic fulfilment on which comedy depends. Darcy, the new aristocratic man, uses his power and knowledge to re-establish social harmony, a harmony symbolized – as at the end of Shakespearean comedy – by multiple marriages: Lydia's to Wickham, Jane's to Bingley, and most important, of course, his own to Elizabeth. In doing so, he recalls another of Samuel Richardson's heroes: not the dangerously predatory Mr B., but the protagonist of Richardson's last work, *Sir Charles Grandison* (1753–4), a novel Austen greatly admired. Sir Charles is a model of new masculine sensibility who spends a lot of money and moral effort persuading other characters into marriage, to the unqualified admiration of all around him. But Austen, the inheritor also of a tradition of women's writing, significantly modifies her Richardsonian original. Sir Charles acts out of disinterested and rather tediously unassailable masculine virtue. Darcy acts out

of love for Elizabeth. 'Her heart did whisper, that he had done it for her', and her instincts are triumphantly confirmed when Darcy confesses that his main motivation in saving Lydia was "the wish of giving happiness to you" (III, x; III, xvi). Romantic love makes individual happiness both the motivation and the goal of moral and social change. As a result of Elizabeth's influence, and in the hope of pleasing her, Darcy rethinks his pride, opens himself up to new social alliances and acts to ensure Lydia's respectability. His reward, when Elizabeth accepts his second proposal, is 'happiness . . . such as he had probably never felt before' (III, xvi).

So the power to motivate and reward change, both personal and social, lies with the woman. As in the standard popular romance, as in Richardson's *Pamela*, the hero is ultimately shown to be loving and therefore lovable; through desire for the heroine, he is transformed from an aggressive and potentially threatening figure into an ally and a husband. Elizabeth's Wollstonecraftian 'independence of mind' makes her desirable to Darcy and brings laughter, 'ease and liveliness' to Pemberley. This plot formula seems to give women, and the values they represent, a lot of power and responsibility. But it is power of a carefully circumscribed kind. The social order has been modified, not radically altered. Austen's post-revolutionary achievement in *Pride and Prejudice* is to put Wollstonecraft's revolutionary femininity at the service of the Burkean 'family party' by writing what is still one of the most perfect, most pleasurable and most subtle – and therefore, perhaps, most dangerously persuasive – of romantic love stories.

Vivien Jones

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## NOTES

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| 1. <i>Letters</i> , p. 203.                     | 14. Wollstonecraft, <i>Vindication</i> , p. 192.       |
| 2. <i>Ibid.</i> , p. 201.                       | 15. More, Vol. VII, p. 6.                              |
| 3. Southam, p. 46.                              | 16. Wollstonecraft, <i>Vindication</i> , p. 192.       |
| 4. Steiner, p. 9.                               | 17. More, Vol. VII, pp. 181, 183-4.                    |
| 5. <i>Letters</i> , p. 275.                     | 18. Wollstonecraft, <i>Maria</i> , p. 114.             |
| 6. Burke, pp. 170, 315, 135.                    | 19. More, Vol. VII, pp. 195-6.                         |
| 7. Wollstonecraft, <i>Vindication</i> , p. 152. | 20. Wollstonecraft, <i>Vindication</i> , pp. 224, 152. |
| 8. <i>Ibid.</i> , pp. 150-51.                   | 21. Richardson, p. 78.                                 |
| 9. <i>Ibid.</i> , p. 151.                       | 22. <i>Ibid.</i> , p. 463.                             |
| 10. <i>Ibid.</i> , p. 81.                       |  |
| 11. <i>Letters</i> , p. 202.                    |  |
| 12. More, Vol. VIII, p. 24.                     |  |
| 13. <i>Ibid.</i> , Vol. VII, p. 4.              |  |

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P E N G U I N



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