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Jane Austen: Introductions and Interventions

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JANE AUSTEN

Introductions and Interventions

For
Marie, Roseann and Helen

Preface

This book consists of essays on Jane Austen originally written over the last decade or so for a range of publications and audiences, newly revised for this volume. I have called them Introductions and Interventions to mark their different styles. The first are essays on Jane Austen's novels *Pride and Prejudice, Mansfield Park, Emma* and *Persuasion,* which, without engaging in critical controversy, introduce readers to some of the key features, including the narrative artistry, of these four major texts. The second consists of articles, addressed to readers already familiar with these texts, of a more original and interventionary nature—essays which take up issues in the past and current criticism of Jane Austen.

Austen is a writer whose novels, some more obviously than others, invite, even require, re-reading. In the structure of this book I hope to accompany the reader through the experience of first acquaintance with Austen's work, followed up by a more informed and sophisticated understanding. The final essay, especially written for this volume, explores the attraction of Jane Austen for readers outside England in the contemporary world.

In all of the essays the page references are to the volumes in the currently most commonly cited edition, that of R.W. Chapman, *The Oxford Illustrated Jane Austen,* first published in 1923, and many times reprinted, which reproduces the volume divisions sometimes ignored by other editors. The first reference in each chapter gives the standard abbreviation (*P&P, MP, E, P*): subsequent citations just give the page number.

Earlier versions of Chapters 2, 3 and 4 were originally published in *The Cambridge Companion to Jane Austen* edited by Edward Copeland and Juliet McMaster; an earlier version of Chapter 5 in *Persuasions*, 23, 2001; Chapter 6 first appeared in *The Cambridge Quarterly*; Chapters 8 and 9 are based on essays written for *Approaches to Teaching* Emma, edited by Marcia McKlintock Folsom, Modern Language Association (forthcoming).

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Pride and Prejudice

Jane Austen first wrote the novel that became *Pride and Prejudice* under the title 'First Impressions' between 1796 and 1797. Over the next decade she revised and rewrote it, lopping and cropping it, as she writes in a letter of January 1813 when she received her first copy of the novel. In that letter to her sister, Jane Austen also says 'I must confess that I think [Elizabeth Bennet] as delightful a creature as ever appeared in print', and readers for nearly two hundred years have agreed with her. But partly because of its distance from us in time, modern readers unused to Jane Austen's work will probably have some initial difficulties in approaching her 'world'.

When *Pride and Prejudice* was first published it appeared in three volumes. Although these volume divisions are omitted in many modern editions of the novel, they are important to understanding the novel's structure. Volume I, which consists of the first twenty-three chapters, is set entirely in Longbourn, and though it introduces Elizabeth to both Wickham and Darcy and includes Mr Collins's proposal, ends with the removal of the Bingley party to London and Mr Collins's acceptance by Charlotte. In Volume II the perspective widens as Elizabeth visits Jane and her aunt in London and then Charlotte at Hunsford, making the acquaintance of Lady Catherine de Bourgh at Rosings Park. This volume includes Mr Darcy's proposal and Elizabeth's refusal. In its last few chapters

Elizabeth seems back where she started, confined to the small world of Longbourn again, but it ends with the Gardiners' invitation to visit Derbyshire and the words 'To Pemberley, therefore, they were to go' (*P&P* 241). Thus we can see that the original volume divisions, in this novel as in the later ones, are important. They structure and pace the narrative. Volume III opens with Elizabeth away from home, and with the scene at Pemberley that marks both Elizabeth's and Darcy's change of heart. The broadening of horizons in the novel thus corresponds exactly to the broadening of Elizabeth's personal horizons, which is an important aspect of the novel's subject.

The first two volumes both end with a chapter that reflects severely upon Elizabeth Bennet's family: each emphasizes how much her prospects, both literally and figuratively, depend upon them. And this is because of the importance of her status as a gentlewoman.

A GENTLEMAN'S DAUGHTER

It is best to approach the question of Jane Austen's world—the ways it strikingly differs from and the ways it resembles our own—through a careful reading of *Pride and Prejudice* itself. For the novel is not simply a portrait of a society, nor does it use that society simply as the background setting for a romantic love story (in the manner of many other later novelists, and even some of the films based on Austen's work). Essentially *Pride and Prejudice* is an argument about civil society and the love story is an essential part of the argument. 'He is a gentleman. I am a gentleman's daughter', Elizabeth Bennet cries at the height of her confrontation with Lady Catherine de Bourgh in Volume III, Chapter 14 (Chapter 56 in many modern editions). Clearly, the question of whether one is, or is not, a gentleman or a gentleman's daughter is of some importance in the novel.

A 'gentleman' can be roughly defined as a man who does not earn his living directly, who lives on the income derived from property, usually held in the form of land, but sometimes in stocks and shares, and thus indirectly in manufacturing

industry. Clergymen of the Church of England were also commonly held to be gentlemen, as were commissioned officers in the army. But this is only a rough working definition because it is an important part of the book's argument that being a gentleman (or a lady) depends on more than just one's place in the social hierarchy or on one's income. Elizabeth's uncle Mr Gardiner would not be considered a 'gentleman' by the definition just given, for he is 'in trade' and earns his income directly, yet he is called a gentleman and it is an important part of Darcy's development to realize that indeed he is one.

Lady Catherine de Bourgh is unimpeachably a lady, having a title and a great income and estate, but is she really a lady in her behaviour to others? Darcy, too, has a great estate, but this does not prevent Elizabeth Bennet, when she rejects his proposal, from commenting sharply on his ungentleman-like manner. It is a blow that goes home. Like many writers in the eighteenth century Jane Austen is engaged in the project to moralise the term 'gentleman'. Steele, for example writing in *The Tatler*, early in the century (about 1710) wrote that 'The Appellation of Gentleman is never to be affixed to a man's Circumstances, but to his Behaviour in them.' Jane Austen is suggesting, as she does on many occasions throughout the novel, that the term gentleman is not and should not be tied to a particular social category: it is for her an honorific title, earned through the possession of personal qualities. It is Darcy's 'arrogance, . . . conceit, and . . . selfish disdain of the feelings of others' (193) that calls forth Elizabeth's rebuke. Throughout the novel then, the social and ethical meanings of the term gentleman are held in tension. Very much the same thing can be said about the associated word 'pride'.

Jane Austen uses language very precisely, with an acute awareness of the various possibilities in many key words, but another initial hurdle is its comparative formality, and beginning readers may tend to associate formality with officialese and politeness. An examination of the scene of Darcy's proposal, which occurs in Volume II, Chapter 11, is a useful corrective to this assumption. A reading aloud is all that is needed. Both speakers are polite, in a sense (they certainly do not swear, for instance). But the formal structure

of their sentences cannot disguise the fury and the indignation they both feel; the more furious they are, the more biting and decisive is their expression.

Another point to note is that although *Pride and Prejudice* is certainly a novel of conversations rather than actions, most of the conversations are arguments. And, though they are conducted in the form of general discussion, they concern matters in which the private stake of the participants is great. The conversation between Elizabeth and Jane in the first chapter of the second volume, for instance, covers such topics as the inconsistency of human character, the relationship between appearance and reality, whether hurtful behaviour is usually the result of design, and so on, and it is conducted in the terms of logical argument ('Your first position is false', says Elizabeth). But underlying and shaping the discussion are intense personal interests and feelings. Jane's happiness has been jeopardized by Bingley's abrupt departure; Elizabeth has been deceived by her best friend. Another scene whose apparent formality certainly does not moderate or mask the intensity of the feelings involved—in this case mutual anger—is Lady Catherine de Bourgh's visit to Longbourn. Elizabeth never exceeds the bounds of politeness, but she speaks with a forthrightness and vigour that is unmistakable.

Darcy, Elizabeth believes, before she has read his letter, has the 'worst kind of pride'—that which is affronted by the lack of 'importance' (meaning wealth and wealthy relations) in Jane Bennet's family. There might be another, and, it is implied, more justifiable, pride, which was offended by their 'want of sense'. Pride, it is evident, has many varieties. For the reader's amusement Jane Austen puts an abstract discussion of the varieties of pride into the mouth of Mary Bennet in Chapter 5, early in the novel; but there is also a more intelligent exchange about pride between Elizabeth and Darcy in Chapter 12. 'Indeed he has no improper pride', Elizabeth cries in defence of Darcy to her father near the conclusion of the novel. But by this time she has learned what Darcy intended when in their earlier exchange he had claimed, 'where there is real superiority of mind, pride will always be under good regulation'. She adds, 'He is perfectly amiable.' What is true

of the word gentleman in *Pride and Prejudice* is true also of the words pride and amiable, and of many of the key terms of the novelist's language. They are not fixed but fluid in their meanings; the meaning of a word varies startlingly with the context and according to who uses it.

So the reader of Jane Austen is continually invited to notice how a word is being used and to assess whether it is being used justifiably, sloppily or mischievously. 'Amiable', for instance, is initially what Wickham obviously is, and Darcy obviously is not; and the novelist asks the reader to assess what quality it is that this word denotes, and to decide upon its value. She uses it herself continually in different ways: at the opening of Volume II, Chapter 2, for instance, Mr Collins is thinking of 'his amiable Charlotte' and in the next paragraph we are told that Mrs Gardiner 'was an amiable, intelligent, elegant woman'. Does the word carry the same implication in each instance? Other key words of this kind are 'sensible' ('Can he be a sensible man, sir?' Elizabeth asks her father when Mr Collins's letter is read aloud, but Mrs Bennet commends him for speaking so 'sensibly') and 'elegant'.

It is a useful practice to underline and note these recurrent words where they occur and to consider how they are used on different occasions. If you do this, you find that many of the novel's most important words are adjectives or adverbs that have to do with manners. Mr Wickham's amiability is very much a matter of his 'agreeable' manners—'whatever he said was said well, whatever he did was done gracefully'. Such important words are elegant, prudent, or imprudent, impertinent, and especially proper and improper, and associated nouns such as decorum and impropriety. Since these words are no longer used much in assessing people's behaviour it may be difficult for the reader to understand at first what they denote and their importance. A crucial example is Elizabeth's reflections on her father and mother at the end of the second volume:

> Elizabeth, however, had never been blind to the impropriety of her father's behaviour as a husband. She had always seen it with pain; but respecting his abilities, and grateful for his affectionate treatment

of herself, she endeavoured to forget what she could not overlook, and to banish from her thoughts that continual breach of connubial obligation and decorum which, in exposing his wife to the contempt of her own children, was so highly reprehensible. But she had never felt so strongly as now the disadvantages which must attend the children of so unsuitable a marriage. . . . (236)

There are two distinct charges here, though the words impropriety and decorum blend them. Mr Bennet's continual ironic and contemptuous treatment of his wife exposes her to her own children's ridicule; and it also places those children at a social disadvantage. Most modern readers are apt to be much more sympathetic to the first meaning than to the second, which is what the words impropriety and decorum imply.

To be able to sympathize with this charge, one needs to take account of two things: first, the importance the 'connections' of a person have in this society, and second, the significance, in Jane Austen's view, of manners. What Darcy in his proposal speech to Elizabeth calls 'the inferiority of your connections' does not refer, as his letter makes clear, to their lack of comparable wealth or status, but to their 'total want of propriety' (198). 'Connections' means here not just the immediate family of the heroine, but more distant relations: the fact that one of Elizabeth's uncles is an attorney and the other in trade—neither of them positions comfortably within the genteel class. Elizabeth Bennet is not simply an individual, separate from her family: as an unmarried woman particularly she is to an extent at the mercy of her family, whose behaviour, in the eyes of the world, justly, or unjustly, affects her own status and character.

Throughout the novel, to take up the second point, Jane Austen assumes a close association between personal qualities and social manners. The impropriety of Mr and Mrs Bennet's different behaviours is not simply their bad manners—their failure to obey some arbitrary code of genteel conduct; it is, so the novelist suggests, the outward form of a real personal deficiency. The word 'suggests' is used because while Jane Austen sometimes argues or shows, at other times she perhaps merely assumes the direct connection between improper

behaviour and egoism or conceit. Impropriety is sometimes rudeness in the obvious sense, for instance when Lady Catherine demands to know what her nephew is telling Miss Bennet (173) and asks Elizabeth her age (166). But artificial or over-elaborate courtesies and flatteries are equally felt to be embarrassing and improper. There is no difficulty in connecting Mr Collins's obsequiousness and artificial language with his self-importance and stupidity, but on the other hand Sir William Lucas is the butt of comic ridicule merely for his elaborate and extravagant courtesy.

The scene of the Netherfield ball is the crucial one here (Volume I, Chapter 18). 'To Elizabeth it appeared, that had her family made an agreement to expose themselves as much as they could during the evening, it would have been impossible for them to play their parts with more spirit, or finer success . . .' (101). She is intensely mortified and ashamed as first Mr Collins, then her mother and then her sister Mary and her father display their lack of tact. Her shame certainly comes about because she participates, by proxy, in the reactions of the Bingley sisters and Darcy, but it is also because she perceives that Mr Collins's pomposity is a sign of his conceit, that her mother's bragging of her daughter's expected marriage to a rich man is a sign of her ambitiousness and snobbery, and that Mary's bad singing is compounded by her complete lack of self-awareness and by her sharing in her mother's desire to push herself forward. (There is a deeper level to this shame, explored in Chapter 5 of this book.) But the question of how far the accusation of impropriety rests ultimately on personal failings—egoism, conceit and the like—and how far on failure to observe the demands of a social code which we may no longer share, will be answered differently by each reader. A good passage to take as a subject for this discussion, and one that resembles the scene of the Netherfield ball, is Mrs Bennet's visit to Netherfield while Jane is ill (Volume I, Chapter 9).

PREJUDICE

Elizabeth may be clear-sighted about her family, but she is certainly much less so about herself, about Darcy and Wickham

and her closest friend, Charlotte Lucas. The conversation at Netherfield alluded to in the previous paragraph is concerned with knowing people, with the study of human nature and with 'intricate characters'. Much of *Pride and Prejudice* is concerned with these questions: how much do we know of the people about us, and how do we really come to know them? Elizabeth is shocked by Charlotte's acceptance of Mr Collins, but the reader has been given warning signs in the preceding chapters. In her remarks about Darcy in Chapter 5, and in her discussion with Elizabeth about marriage in Chapter 6 ('Happiness in marriage is entirely a matter of chance . . . it is better to know as little as possible of the defects of the person with whom you are to pass your life,' says Charlotte), she reveals a worldliness and cynicism that, as Elizabeth laughingly declares, is 'not sound'. And, with the benefit of hindsight, one may find something suspicious in Charlotte's apparent friendliness to Elizabeth at the Netherfield ball: 'She owed her greatest relief to her friend Miss Lucas, who often joined them, and goodnaturedly engaged Mr Collins's conversation to herself' (102). Then there is the moment at the end of Chapter 21 where Charlotte deliberately stays about so that she can overhear what Mr Collins says about his proposal to Mrs Bennet. Charlotte may be scheming, and then again she may not.

What happens with Charlotte happens also with Wickham, and in a much more important and complex way, with Darcy. Charlotte's remarks and behaviour do not necessarily mean that she has her sights already set on marriage with Mr Collins; Elizabeth's refusal to believe what she says is attractive and justifiable in its context, and the reader, what is more, shares Elizabeth's responses. The important thing is to avoid interpreting the novel 'backwards', that is to say, reading the characters' speech and behaviour through knowledge of their ultimate outcomes. If we do this, the danger is that we find ourselves in an artificial position of superiority to Elizabeth Bennet, through whose eyes most, though not quite all, of the action of the novel is seen. And her understandings make perfect sense whilst we are reading.

So when Elizabeth engages in conversational duelling with Darcy, the reader naturally takes her side. We hear Darcy's remarks as Elizabeth hears them. It is only later, and on turning back to their dialogues, that we see his remarks have potentialities of meaning that Elizabeth misses. The critic Reuben Brower remarked on Jane Austen's 'awareness that the same remark or action has very different meaning in different relations'. Part of the achievement of *Pride and Prejudice* is to make the reader realize, he wrote, 'that it is difficult to know any complex person, that knowledge of a man like Darcy is an interpretation and a construction, not a simple absolute'. A discussion of the exchange between Elizabeth and Darcy in Chapter 11 illustrates this:

'Mr Darcy is not to be laughed at!' cried Elizabeth. 'That is an uncommon advantage and uncommon I hope it will continue, for it would be a great loss to me to have many such acquaintance. I dearly love a laugh.'

'Miss Bingley,' said he, 'has given me credit for more than can be. The wisest and the best of men, nay, the wisest and best of their actions, may be rendered ridiculous by a person whose first object in life is a joke.'

'Certainly', replied Elizabeth—'there are such people, but I hope I am not one of *them*. I hope I never ridicule what is wise or good. Follies and nonsense, whims and inconsistencies do divert me, I own, and I laugh at them whenever I can.—But these, I suppose are precisely what you are without.'

'Perhaps that is not possible for any one. But it has been the study of my life to avoid those weaknesses which often expose a strong understanding to ridicule.'

'Such as vanity and pride.'

'Yes, vanity is a weakness indeed. But pride—where there is a real superiority of mind, pride will be always under good regulation.'

Elizabeth turned away to hide a smile.

'Your examination of Mr Darcy is over, I presume,' said Miss Bingley;—'and pray ~ what is the result?'

'I am perfectly convinced by it that Mr Darcy has no defect. He owns it himself without disguise.'

'No'—said Darcy, 'I have made no such pretension. I have faults enough, but they are not, I hope, of understanding. My temper I dare not vouch for.—It is I believe too little yielding—certainly too