Levels of Subtlety in *Pride and Prejudice*

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The clearest fact about Jane Austen is her popularity. She was so popular in her own day that her attempts to remain anonymous by using a pseudonym were all but frustrated.(1) And in the past ten years, virtually every novel she wrote has been transcribed into either a quality television movie or an A-budget film for cinema distribution. Emma Thompson was nominated for the Best Actress award for *Sense and Sensibility* and actually won the award for writing its screenplay.(2) In at least one case, high-quality television and cinema versions of the same novel were made during the same period.(3) Although in diluted form, Austen's works seem to be reaching more people than ever.

As with so many popular writers, however, there is a critical tendency to downplay the serious value of Austen's novels. Some readers seem to doubt that a writer so accessible can have much depth. In her modesty, Austen gave critics the very words with which to underrate her. She once described her work as "the little bit (two inches wide) of ivory."(4) But such statements cannot be taken literally, at least without further investigation. If we accept authors' self-estimates uncritically, we will rate egotists higher than writers afflicted with modesty or high standards. Austen really *is* limited compared to

Shakespeare, but not compared to Gertrude Stein, who never tired of referring to herself as a "genius" (1).[5]

I feel that Austen is not simply popular but quite subtle. While the subtlety of her novels is far from all they have to recommend them, I would like to concentrate on that quality, because it is the least likely to be acknowledged. In this paper I will try to illustrate two different types of subtlety in Austen's novels. The first type is better-recognized and must be noticed to some extent by anyone who enjoys Austen's works. The second type is less obvious. In the analyses of both types I will use scenes from *Pride and Prejudice,* which is ideal for my purpose because it is Austen's most popular novel, and it tends to be regarded as the most superficial of the major ones.[6]

First type of subtlety: By this I mean a subtlety that the reader can comprehend completely on the first reading. It does not depend on later events to give it meaning. A good illustration of this is the scene in which the letter from Mr. Collins to Mr. Bennet is discussed by the family.[7] What makes this scene subtle is the multiple nature of the revelations.

We first learn the simple content of the letter: what Collins informs Mr. Bennet of. He intends to pay the family a fence-mending visit. His late father had a feud with the Bennets, and this is Collins's first overture to them. There is the hint (easier to recognize after reading the aftermath, but not hard to guess at) that he intends to marry one of the Bennet girls, who are renowned in the area for their beauty. Collins regards his intentions as generous. The Bennet estate is entailed to Collins. This refers to the infamous law of the time by which property went to the nearest male heir. The Bennet siblings are all girls, so the nearest male heir is a cousin: Collins.

Consequently, when Mr. Bennet dies, all his holdings — house, property, and capital — will go not to Mrs. Bennet and her daughters, but to Collins. Thus, as he implies in the letter, Collins views his marriage plans as a magnanimous way of sharing the estate with the Bennets. Here is how Collins actually frames his intention. We may note that what follows is not the transparent burlesque that we might expect from a man so basically stupid; it is already subtler than that. At least in retrospect, though, the meaning is clear enough: "I cannot be otherwise than concerned at being the means of injuring your amiable daughters, and beg leave to apologise for it, as well as to assure you of my readiness to make them every possible amends, — but of this hereafter."

At the same time, the letter is a revelation of Collins's own personality. There are several hints in this letter that he is a fool, starting with the quote immediately above. Even Jane, who is normally too sweet to criticize anyone, wonders why Mr. Collins is apologizing for an entailment that he had no hand in causing ("I cannot be otherwise than concerned at being the means of injuring your amiable daughters, and beg leave to apologise for it"), unless he intends to renounce his claim, which he clearly doesn't. Another hint of Collins's foolish nature is the very long sentence preceding that one:

> "As a clergyman, moreover, I feel it my duty to promote and establish the blessing of peace in all families within the reach of my influence; and on these grounds I flatter myself that my present overtures of good-will are highly commendable, and that the circumstance of my being next in the entail of Longbourn estate, will be kindly overlooked on your side, and not lead you to reject the offered olive branch."

Anyone but poor Mary (who will receive her due below) can see that there is something wrong with this sentence. It is not for Mr. Collins to pronounce his own actions "highly commendable." That is for the second party, Mr. Bennet, to decide. Mr. Collins tries to oil his way into this pronouncement with the phrase "I flatter myself that," but the phrase is pompous in its own right. It is an example of La Rochefoucauld's maxim that we reproach ourselves to induce others to praise us. But here the offense is worse, since Mr. Collins really is flattering himself: he is not proposing to give up the entailment; only to marry, which is something he would do anyway, because Lady Catherine advised him to.[(8)] The Bennet girls are famous for their beauty and therefore desirable choices, as he acknowledges by setting his sights on the first and second most beautiful daughters, Jane and Lizzy, in that order. He has sacrificed nothing. Furthermore, Collins assumes that Mr. Bennet has taken an irrational hostility to him — as, indeed, Mrs. Bennet has; but Mr. Bennet has nothing in common with his wife: he is a gentleman. This attribution of unworthy feelings to him is hardly an "olive branch."

The most revealing blemishes in the letter turn out to be the references to Lady Catherine (whom he refers to by her full title, "the Right Honourable Lady Catherine de Bourgh"). If we didn't read on we could still sense the servility of Collins's allusions to her. He mentions his duty to her before his pastoral duties, which ill-becomes a vicar of the Church of England:

> My mind however is now made up on the subject, for having received ordination at Easter, I have been so fortunate as to be distinguished by the patronage of the Right Honourable Lady Catherine de Bourgh, widow of Sir Lewis de Bourgh, whose bounty

> and beneficence has preferred me to the valuable rectory of this parish, *where it shall be my earnest endeavour to demean myself with grateful respect towards her Ladyship, and be ever ready to perform those rites and ceremonies which are instituted by the Church of England.* (55; italics mine)

There is a clever *double entendre* — unintended by Collins but very apt — on his promise to "*demean* [himself] with grateful respect towards her Ladyship...." Of course he intends the first sense of *demean* given in the *OED:* "to conduct, carry on"; but the later application, "to debase," was already in use in Jane Austen's day. The *OED* cites two such usages from the eighteenth century and one from the year 1601, which was Shakespeare's day (433: all *OED* references to are to this page). This application is so funny because Collins constantly debases himself before Lady Catherine. He can never resist the temptation to grovel in her presence or to make obsequious references to her. Even here, where the epistolary style restrains him, he first puts her before his sacred duties, as noted, then reveals quite innocently that he seeks her permission before leaving the parish:

> If you should have no objection to receive me into your house, I propose myself the satisfaction of waiting on you and your family, Monday, November 18th, by four o'clock, and shall probably trespass on your hospitality till the Saturday se'night following, *which I can do without any inconvenience, as Lady Catherine is far from objecting to my occasional absence on a Sunday, provided that some other clergyman is engaged to do the duty of the day.* (56; italics mine)

The subtlety here is easily appreciated. Readers can be expected to

decode the message in the letter that Collins, the writer, is serenely unconscious of: that Collins is too much of a fool to be any sort of prize, regardless of the financial benefits of marrying him.

But there is one more stratum of revelations. Almost every member of the Bennet family has something to say about the letter, and their comments reveal at least as much about themselves as they do about Collins. The most obvious example of this is Mrs. Bennet. She can hardly contain her glee at the thought that Collins is going to marry one of her daughters. She has already forgotten that before the letter was read — certainly within the hour — she thought of Collins as the enemy. When Mr. Bennet introduced the subject of Collins in preface to reading his letter, Mrs. Bennet's response was: "Pray do not talk of that odious man" (54). But now that Collins has in effect proposed marriage, sight-unseen, to an unspecified daughter, Mrs. Bennet has nothing but praise for him. She foresees no problems involved with his marrying any of her daughters but Jane (whom she regards as already engaged to Bingley, which is why he switches from her to Lizzy). The idea that Collins lacks both sense and sensibility never occurs to Mrs. Bennet because she has the same deficiencies.

Nor does the question of love have any meaning for Mrs. Bennet. We know this for a fact because later, when Collins is rejected by Lizzy,[9] Mrs. Bennet makes it clear that if she had the power she would force Lizzy to marry him. She threatens never to "see" Lizzy again if she refuses Collins's hand. This allows Mr. Bennet, whom she has asked to "make Lizzy marry Mr. Collins" (94), end in the following famous *coup de theatre:*

"An unhappy alternative is before you, Elizabeth. From this

day you must be a stranger to one of your parents. — Your mother will never see you again if you do *not* marry Mr. Collins, and I will never see you again if you *do*." (94)

Jane Austen doesn't draw this scene out. Lizzy actually laughs at Mr. Bennet's excellent little jest. She never felt any serious pressure to marry Collins. Like so many people with no sense of humor, her mother cannot be taken seriously, and as if to prove it, instead of refusing to "see" — or speak to — Lizzy again, she complains incessantly to her about Collins's successful third try, this time with Lizzy's friend Charlotte Lucas.

It goes without saying that Mrs. Bennet sees Collins's letter in completely positive terms because she has no sense of humor, and in more general terms, no sense. The parent who can be taken seriously is Mr. Bennet, and this is reflected in his reaction to the letter. Not only does he see the absurdity in the letter, he invites Collins with relish because he wants to be amused by him. Mr. Bennet is like the kings and lords in the plays of Shakespeare, who have their own "fools": some of whom are elegant latter-day comedians, and only pretend to be fools, like Feste in *Twelfth Night;* and some (the so-called "naturals") are — men whose dementia causes them to be constantly amusing without trying, like King Lear's poor companion on the moors, whose only given appellation is "the Fool." Mr. Bennet thinks of Collins as a "natural" and wants to experience his imbecility first-hand.

Such an attitude, however, must give rise to a question: Is this the proper way to regard a fellow human being? Do other people exist to provide comic entertainment for us? Critics agree (and most readers have concluded without reading any critics)[10] that this attitude

represents a flaw in Mr. Bennet's character. The psychoanalysis of characters from such an unaffected novel may be dangerous. Nevertheless, if we are to take the characters at all seriously, we can hardly help but make a few hopefully-sane inferences about their inner life. It seems reasonable in Mr. Bennet's case to conclude that his real problem is isolation. Jane Austen has already explained, in the final paragraph of the first chapter, that the Bennets are an ill-matched couple:

> Mr. Bennet was so odd a mixture of quick parts, sarcastic humour, reserve, and caprice, that the experience of three and twenty years had been insufficient to make his wife understand his character. Her mind was less difficult to develop [*sic*]. She was a woman of mean understanding, little information, and uncertain temper. When she was discontented she fancied herself nervous. The business of her life was to get her daughters married; its solace was visiting and news. (7)

It is quite believable that the marriage that has driven him to his library has also given him a connoisseur's attitude towards his fellow human beings, as if their value depended on their ability to entertain. He teases his wife and daughters in Chapter 1 — refusing to make overtures to Bingley while secretly making them — simply to enjoy their reaction when he finally mentions Bingley's visit: "The astonishment of the ladies was just what he wished..." (9). And the same spectator's attitude is what his behavior towards Collins exemplifies in an odder form. Paradoxically, the key to Mr. Bennet's perversity is his intelligence: he sees through Collins's letter from the first.

The characters of all the daughters are reflected in a similar way in their responses to Collins's letter. Kitty and Lydia can be disposed of

quickly, since they are treated as a kind of team: the youngest daughter Lydia dominates Kitty, and they have the same opinions on everything. Clearly, Collins isn't an officer, and so they aren't interested in the letter at all. It is noteworthy that Lydia's future trouble (with the "officer" Wickham) is adumbrated here in a very transparent way.

The middle daughter Mary presents a more touching picture. She alone of the Bennet girls is not pretty, and she tries to compensate for this by reading and working on "accomplishments" like the piano. But all this just makes her seem pedantic and ridiculous. She later makes a fool of herself (with her father's rather cruel cooperation) by threatening to play the piano and sing out of turn at Netherfield. And her pedantry is always of a pathetic, miscomprehending order. Thus, her comment on Collins is a literary comment (as if literature and judgment were separable), and it is obtuse:

> "'In point of composition,' said Mary, 'his letter does not seem defective. The idea of the olive branch perhaps is not wholly new, yet I think it is well expressed.'" (56)

The noticeable thing here is how inane this observation is. Collins's "olive branch" is not only a cliché, it is a clue to his conceit. Collins thinks he is being conciliating, when to a real gentleman like Mr. Bennet, the implied need for a peacemaker is silly and even insulting. What Mary calls "composition" cannot be divorced from meaning; so Mary shows herself to be as dull as her mother and Collins. A sort of proportion is implicit here: Mary is to literature as Collins is to Christianity, for which he later shows himself to have no vocation.[11] And it transpires that the one Bennet daughter who would have accepted Collins's offer if it were given is Mary. In the main, Mary's

defects are not her fault, and Mr. Bennet's jokes at her expense are cruel and a definite point against him. Everyone, including Darcy, notices the way he embarrasses her at the Netherfield ball.

For a reading of Collins's letter that reflects more intelligence, we can even turn to Jane. Jane is too sweet to be entirely accurate in her judgment of people, but she is never obtuse: she feels that Collins deserves credit for his desire for "atonement," but she admits "it is difficult to guess in what way he can mean to make us atonement" (56). This is exactly the point. Collins has no intention of giving up his entailment, so what can he have in mind? Actually, he thinks of himself as the gift, through marriage, but Jane is too refined to imagine this kind of conceit.

Finally, for the best comment of all — one which Mr. Bennet himself approves of — there is Lizzy, the most intelligent daughter:

> "'He must be an oddity, I think,' said she. 'I cannot make him out. — There is something very pompous in his stile [*sic*]. — And what can he mean by apologizing for being next in the entail? — We cannot suppose he would help it, if he could. — Can he be a sensible man, sir?'" (56, with proximate quotes)

The question is addressed to Mr. Bennet, and his answer is almost a point-by-point reflection of hers:

> "'No, my dear; I think not. I have great hopes of finding him quite the reverse. There is a mixture of servility and self-importance in his letter, which promises well. I am impatient to see him.'"

Here, Lizzy's complaint about the Collins's "apologizing" anticipates Mr. Bennet's comment on his "servility"; and her comment on "something pompous in his stile" (unlike Mary's comment, a good literary

perception because it does not divorce the "stile" from the substance) coincides with her father's comment on Collins's "self-importance." What Lizzy does not do is rub her hands in gleeful anticipation of laughing at Collins. Mr. Bennet does, of course, which is why he feels that Collins's mixture of defects "promises well," and why Mr. Bennet is "impatient to see him." Lizzy is the responsible member of the family, and while she may not perceive more in the letter than her father does, her attitude toward it is far more humane and responsible.

In summary, this first type of subtlety shows us several things at the same time — in this example, the intended content of the letter, the unintended content of the letter (Collins's character), and also, in detail, the characters of the readers.

Second type of subtlety: The less obvious type of subtlety is exemplified by a scene at Netherfield, where Lizzy is staying to take care of Jane. Mr. Bingley, a very rich and eligible bachelor, has moved into the Netherfield estate three miles across open field from the Bennet's house.[(12)] Bingley has already met Jane and considers her the most beautiful girl in the world. His even richer friend Darcy is staying at Netherfield with him, as are Bingley's sisters, the married Mrs. Hurst (whose cipher of a husband is also there) and his younger sister Caroline.

The complexity of this scene reflects an abundance of issues present to Lizzy's mind. In the first place, Jane is ill at Netherfield because, when she was invited there by Caroline Bingley, Mrs. Bennet — ever the matchmaker —insisted on her traveling by horse rather than covered carriage as a stratagem to keep Jane near Bingley. Rain was threatening, and Mrs. Bennet reasoned that when it rained, Jane would be invited to stay the night. (She could hardly be sent home

in the rain on her horse.) Unfortunately, Mrs. Bennet's plan has worked too well: Jane rode into a rainstorm on the way to Netherfield, caught a bad cold, and has been forced to stay for an indefinite period. She sends for Lizzy, who goes at once to take care of her. Lizzy walks across the muddy fields and arrives in a flushed and sodden state. When she has gone up to see Jane and is safely out of hearing,(13) her untidy appearance is ridiculed by the Bingley sisters.

Lizzy is conscious of the general hostility of the Bingley sisters, and though she likes Mr. Bingley, she has reason to dislike Mr. Darcy. At a dance held to welcome the Bingley group, Darcy, apparently in a bad mood, abstained from dancing with any of the local girls. When Bingley encouraged him to ask Lizzy, who happened to be sitting idle, Darcy misgauged the audibility of his own voice as he made the following speech: "She is tolerable; but not handsome enough to tempt me; and I am in no humour at present to give consequence to young ladies who are slighted by other men"(13). The real "consequence" of Darcy's behavior on this occasion was to give Lizzy a strong aversion to him.(14) Moreover, having heard about Darcy's comments,(15) Lizzy's ill-bred mother noisily insulted Darcy at a subsequent ball. And as a further consequence, Lizzy is frozen into the conviction that besides being an unpleasant man, Darcy has contempt for her. She is therefore uncomfortable at Netherfield and spends most of her time with Jane, who in fact gets worse before recovering and needs her attendance.(16) This raises a protest in Lizzy's mind against the stupidity of their mother's schemes.

But Jane gradually gets better, and her mother even pays an embarrassing visit — embarrassing because Mrs. Bennet behaves as if she means to demonstrate how silly she can be. So, Lizzy has no excuse

for staying in Jane's room all day. Civility sometimes obliges her to join the Bingley group in the drawing room, where the only friendly face, she is convinced, is Bingley's. The most painful encounter in the drawing room is not with Darcy himself so much as with the combination of Miss Bingley and Darcy. Miss Bingley never misses a chance to flatter him, and Darcy is rather harsh with her. To the reader — but perhaps mainly the reader who has been through the novel before — this is understandable. While Lizzy was out of the room, Miss Bingley attacked her in the snidest terms, so Darcy is justified in not regarding Miss Bingley's admiring speeches as coming from a very sweet nature. Added to that, as Lizzy can plainly see, the flattery is of a positively baroque order. Here is a typical exchange, which takes place while Darcy is trying to write his younger sister:

> "How delighted Miss Darcy will be to receive such a letter!"
>
> He made no answer.
>
> "You write uncommonly fast."
>
> "You are mistaken. I write rather slowly."
>
> "How many letters you must have occasion to write in the course of the year! Letters of business too! How odious I should think them!"
>
> "It is fortunate, then, that they fall to my lot instead of to yours."
>
> "Pray tell your sister that I long to see her."
>
> "I have already told her so once, by your desire."
>
> "I am afraid you do not like your pen. Let me mend it for you. I mend pens remarkably well."
>
> "Thank you — but I always mend my own."

> "How can you contrive to write so even?"
>
> He was silent.
>
> "Tell you sister I am delighted to hear of her improvement on the harp, and pray let her know that I am quite in raptures with her beautiful little design for a table, and I think it infinitely superior to Miss Grantley's"
>
> "Will you give me leave to defer your raptures till I write again? — At present I have not room to do them justice." (42-43)

This leads directly into the central discussion I wish to consider. However, the point of this preliminary dialogue is that *while* Miss Bingley throws herself at Darcy, and while he administers one witty little asperity after another, Lizzy is a spectator. She is aware of Miss Bingley's shallowness and consciously dislikes her. Even so, she dislikes Darcy at least as much for his relentless sarcasm. He is behaving so much like the man who (unknowingly) insulted her at the party.

Lizzy can't help joining the conversation at the point where Miss Bingley, by way of flattering Darcy, attacks her brother, and Mr. Bingley replies with a good-natured joke at his own expense:

> "'Oh!' cried Miss Bingley, 'Charles writes in the most careless way imaginable. He leaves out half his words, and blots the rest.'"
>
> "'My ideas flow so rapidly that I have not time to express them — by which means my letters sometimes convey no ideas at all to my correspondents.'"
>
> "'Your humility, Mr. Bingley,' said Elizabeth, 'must disarm reproof.'" (43, along with proximate quotes)

By this time, Darcy can hardly stay out of any conversation that

Lizzy has joined. "Nothing is more deceitful," he says, "than the appearance of humility. It is often only carelessness of opinion, and sometimes an indirect boast." Bingley desires to know which of the two his "piece of modesty" amounts to, and this leads to the following exchange:

"'The indirect boast; — for you are really proud of your defects in writing, because you consider them as proceeding from a rapidity of thought and carelessness of execution, which if not estimable, you think at least highly interesting. The power of doing any thing with quickness is always much prized by the possessor, and often without any attention to the imperfection of the performance. When you told Mrs. Bennet this morning that if you ever resolved on quitting Netherfield you should be gone in five minutes, you meant it to be a sort of panegyric, of compliment to yourself — and yet what is there so very laudable in a precipitance which must leave very necessary business undone, and can be of no real advantage to yourself or any one else?'

"'Nay,' cried Bingley, 'this is too much, to remember at night all the foolish things that were said in the morning. And yet, upon my honour, I believed what I said of myself to be true, and I believe it at this moment. At least, therefore, I did not assume the character of needless precipitance merely to shew off before the ladies.'

"'I dare say you believed it; but I am by no means convinced that you would be gone with such celerity. Your conduct would be quite as dependant [*sic*] on chance as that of any man I know; and if, as you were mounting your horse, a friend were to say, 'Bingley, you had better stay till next week,' you would probably

do it, you would probably not go — and, at another word, might stay a month.'" (43-44)

Now it is Elizabeth's turn to join in, either despite or because of her dislike of Darcy.[17] She defends Bingley's malleability:

"'You have only proved by this,' cried Elizabeth, 'that Mr. Bingley did not do justice to his own disposition. You have shewn him off now much more than he did himself.'" (44, along with proximate quotes)

It is easy, at this point, to see why Darcy is attracted to Lizzy. There is a quick and pure logic in this reply that is the opposite of Caroline Bingley's misdirected flattery (praising his quick writing when he knows himself to write slowly and is contented to do so). Yet there is no harshness here. In Miss Bingley's case, the flattery is the obverse side of the coin, and Darcy knows the reverse side to be a very cruel — in fact, a gauche — streak of snobbery, laughing in Lizzy's absence at her muddy clothes when they were proof that Lizzy cared more about Jane's health than her own image or sterile "decorum."

Again, Bingley, who is cheerfully impervious to Darcy's criticism, though he understands it well enough, clarifies the matter in a way that seems to show how implacable Darcy is:

"'I am exceedingly gratified,' said Bingley, 'by your converting what my friend says into a compliment on the sweetness of my temper. But I am afraid you are giving it a turn which that gentleman did by no means intend; for he would certainly think the better of me, if under such a circumstance I were to give a flat denial, and ride off as fast as I could.'"

This leads to a wonderful forensic exchange between Lizzy and

Darcy, originally spurred on by Lizzy's use of the third person, as if she were only talking to Bingley, then direct and elegant:

"'You expect me [replies Darcy, upon Bingley's suggestion that he speak for himself] to account for opinions which you chuse [*sic*] to call mine, but which I have never acknowledged. Allowing the case, however, to stand according to your representation, you must remember, Miss Bennet, that the friend who is supposed to desire his return to the house, and the delay of his plan, has merely desired it, asked it without offering one argument in favour of its propriety.'

"'To yield readily — easily — to the *persuasion* of a friend is no merit with you.'

"'To yield without conviction is no compliment to the understanding of either.'

"'You appear to me, Mr. Darcy, to allow nothing for the influence of friendship and affection. A regard for the requester would often make one readily yield to a request, without waiting for arguments to reason one into it. I am not particularly speaking of such a case as you have supposed about Mr. Bingley. We may as well wait, perhaps, till the circumstance occurs, before we discuss the discretion of his behaviour thereupon. But in general and ordinary cases between friend and friend, where one of them is desired by the other to change a resolution of no very great moment, should you think ill of that person for complying with the desire, without waiting to be argued into it?'" (44)

Darcy at this point prepares to settle in for a lengthy debate, but is diverted by Bingley:

"'Will it not be advisable, before we proceed on this subject, to

> arrange with rather more precision the degree of importance which is to appertain to this request, as well as the degree of intimacy subsisting between the parties?'
>
> "'By all means,' cried Bingley; 'let us hear all the particulars, not forgetting their comparative height and size; for that will have more weight in the argument, Miss Bennet, than you may be aware of. I assure you that if Darcy were not such a great tall fellow, in comparison with myself, I should not pay him half so much deference. I declare I do not know a more aweful [*sic*] object than Darcy, on particular occasions, and in particular places; at his own house especially, and of a Sunday evening when he has nothing to do." (45)

The exchange is an example of the second kind of subtlety because we can read right through it with seemingly perfect comprehension and not recognize its most basic relevance to the story. What we should notice, if we are attentive, are the three personalities involved in this argument. Refereeing, as it were, is Bingley, who always has a wittily appropriate remark, at first to keep the discussion as light as possible, and ultimately to end it. Then, in one corner is Darcy, extremely precise and threatening to become more so at the end of the exchange. In the other corner is Lizzy, adept at drawing Darcy's arguments to their logical extreme. She has a way of showing his views to be immoderate, but without turning the matter into a joke, as Bingley does so deftly at the end. She takes Darcy at his word and seems to demonstrate how inflexible he is. She portrays herself as the humanist and him as the rationalist and even the martinet.

We are reminded of an earlier drawing room discussion, this one of women's accomplishments. "I cannot boast of knowing more than

half a dozen, in the whole range of my acquaintance, that are really accomplished," Darcy claims in that exchange (35). Absurdly, since it is inconceivable that she provides a decent example of her own specifications, Caroline Bingley fills in most of the particulars of an accomplished woman; and Darcy then adds another requirement:

> "'Oh! certainly,' cried his faithful assistant [Miss Bingley], 'no one can be really esteemed accomplished, who does not greatly surpass what is usually met with. A woman must have a thorough knowledge of music, singing, drawing, dancing, and the modern languages, to deserve the word; and besides all this she must possess a certain something in her air and manner of walking, the tone of her voice, her address and expressions, or the word will be but half deserved.'
>
> "'All this she must possess,' added Darcy, 'and to all this she must yet add something more substantial, in the improvement of her mind by extensive reading.'" (35)

This gives Lizzy the chance to undermine Darcy's argument and Miss Bingley's pretensions in the same breath: "I am no longer surprised at your knowing only six accomplished women. I rather wonder now at your knowing *any*" (36, with proximate quote). To Darcy's wonder that she is so hard on her own sex, Lizzy simply replies, "*I* never saw such a woman. *I* never saw such capacity, and taste, and application, and elegance, as you describe, united."

Lizzy employs the same technique to undermine Darcy's strictures against Bingley's easygoing nature. She implies that by (in effect) requiring Bingley to change, Darcy is requiring him to give up his sweet and spontaneous nature. Ultimately, the argument is quite balanced. As in the discussion of women's accomplishments, Miss Bingley is out

of her depth and doesn't venture a word until the discussion is over. She pretends to be angry at her brother's irreverence, but she is clearly relieved at being provided with the opportunity to speak, and, she hopes, to offer her own sweet personality as a foil to her rival's (Lizzy's) conceited lack of awe before Darcy's forensic demonstrations.

This much we should be able to grasp on first reading the above scene. It is a display of personality, intelligence, and character. Nevertheless, there is a subtlety in the discussion that we can be expected to miss our first time through the novel, and this is not something deeply hidden. It is quite simply the subject of the discussion itself. The issue deserves a paragraph to itself:

Bingley took his home at Netherfield like a twelfth-hour Christmas shopper, without asking many questions. The step was serious, but it was taken lightly. Moreover, Bingley has said without any appearance of embarrassment that it would be in his nature to relinquish the estate just as quickly and lightly if some inducement — say the importunities of a friend — were presented to him. Darcy thinks this irresponsible. Lizzy thinks it is the difference between Bingley's warmhearted humanism and Darcy's cold rationalism. However — and this is what we are almost sure to miss our first time through the novel — the hypothetical situation under discussion soon occurs in the story. At least in my own case, on first reading *Pride and Prejudice* many years ago, I failed to think back on this discussion even when I came to the situation. Bingley leaves Netherfield, and the question then becomes whether he will return. Lizzy assures Jane that he will, but she eventually learns (from the innocent Colonel Fitzwilliam, who has no idea he is referring to Lizzy's sister) that Darcy has successfully

counseled him against returning.

And thus flow the ironies. Does Lizzy still think Bingley's pliability to a friend's will so charming? In fact, she doesn't. She never blames him as she does Darcy, for heartlessly "ruining, perhaps for ever, the happiness of a most beloved sister" (158), but she does think Bingley weak and thoughtless. Her respect for him takes a great plunge, and if there were no further developments, we could imagine her going out of her way never to meet him again. The structural beauty of this irony can be seen in the fact that sides are reversed: Lizzy is disappointed with Bingley for taking his friend's advice to make a permanent move to London; and Darcy, of course, approves of Bingley's taking the friend's (Darcy's) advice and making the move.

Fortunately, the matter is quickly cleared up. Lizzy only learns for sure (though she has suspected) what she considers this damning indictment of Darcy's humanity and Bingley's character the very day that Darcy proposes to her. The proposal gives her the opportunity to express herself openly on the subject. For his part, Darcy takes the matter with his usual seriousness and answers it in a letter that she receives the next day (along with his answer to her more serious accusation that he ruined Wickham). His answer is that after "the evening's scrutiny" of Jane's manner towards Bingley, he could not see that her feelings for Bingley were of the same order as his feelings for her: "that though she received his attentions with pleasure, she did not invite them by any participation of sentiment" (163). This is easy for Lizzy to believe, because her more calculating friend Charlotte had already warned her that Jane should show her feelings for Bingley more. Darcy's perception of Jane's blandness isn't the first word Lizzy had heard on the subject.

To Lizzy's amazement, Darcy actually apologizes for his misperception. He now realizes that he was mistaken about Jane's feelings. Darcy never for a moment questions Lizzy's honesty; he says quite disarmingly that she understands her sister better than he can. Eventually, Darcy makes full amends by bringing Bingley back to Longbourn, where he soon proposes to Jane.

But this begs the question: Isn't Bingley rather weak-willed after all? Even his proposal to Jane would seem to suggest this. Darcy's answer exonerates Bingley completely. Neither he nor Bingley's sisters had any chance of keeping Bingley away from Jane except by convincing him that she did not return his feelings. Bingley's vulnerable point was actually a virtue: he was modest about his own attractions, and could be convinced (with no dishonesty on Darcy's part) that the most beautiful Bennet sister did not find him as attractive as he found her.

Finally, then, the whole Bingley question is treated very subtly before Bingley leaves Netherfield for London. The small debate about Bingley's character exactly predicts the action to come, but with so many nuances accompanying it — above all, the contrast in personalities of the major and minor participants — that it remains transparent, and we are unlikely to read it as an augury of coming events. This is the rare kind of subtlety that Jane Austen provides.

Appendix: Collins's Letter to Mr. Bennet

DEAR SIR,

THE disagreement subsisting between yourself and my late honoured father, always gave me much uneasiness, and since I have had the

misfortune to lose him, I have frequently wished to heal the breach but for some time I was kept back by my own doubts, fearing lest it might seem disrespectful to his memory for me to be on good terms with any one, with whom it had always pleased him to be at variance. — "There, Mrs. Bennet." — My mind however is now made up on the subject, for having received ordination at Easter, I have been so fortunate as to be distinguished by the patronage of the Right Honourable Lady Catherine de Bourgh, widow of Sir Lewis de Bourgh, whose bounty and beneficence has preferred me to the valuable rectory of this parish, where it shall be my earnest endeavour to demean myself with grateful respect towards her Ladyship, and be ever ready to perform those rites and ceremonies which are instituted by the Church of England. As a clergyman, moreover, I feel it my duty to promote and establish the blessing of peace in all families within the reach of my influence; and on these grounds I flatter myself that my present overtures of good-will are highly commendable, and that the circumstance of my being next in the entail of Longbourn estate, will be kindly overlooked on your side, and not lead you to reject the offered olive branch. I cannot be otherwise than concerned at being the means of injuring your amiable daughters, and beg leave to apologise for it, as well as to assure you of my readiness to make them every possible amends, — but of this hereafter. If you should have no objection to receive me into your house, I propose myself the satisfaction of waiting on you and your family, Monday, November 18th, by four o'clock, and shall probably trespass on your hospitality till the Saturday se'night following, which I can do without any inconvenience, as Lady Catherine is far from objecting to my occasional absence on a Sunday, provided that some other clergyman is engaged to do the duty of the

day. I remain, dear sir, with respectful compliments to your lady and daughters, your well-wisher and friend,

WILLIAM COLLINS

Notes

1 Lord David Cecil, among others, mentions this (81).

2 The award was for the best script for a work from another medium, in this case the Austen novel. (The other screenplay award is for a script created from scratch for an original film.) That this was definitely a quality film, even in the judgment of Hollywood, is underscored by the fact that Emma Thompson, besides also being nominated for the Best Actress award for this movie, actually won the Best Actress award the year before.

3 In the case of *Emma,* Austen's novel about a beautiful young matchmaker, two versions have come out recently: for television, an excellent BBC version, starring Kate Beckinsale, and a quality film starring Gwyneth Paltrow, who has since won the Academy Award for Best Actress for *Shakespeare in Love.*

4 The real context of this sentence makes it much harder to interpret. As David Nokes points out, in his biography of Austen (483-85), she had to fend off recommendations that she write something on a grander scale, such as an historical romance, rather than the novels of country village life she excelled in. The phrase about her work being "the little bit (two inches wide) of ivory" is part of her explanation to a nephew who wanted to collaborate with her as to why that would be impossible: "How could I possibly join them on to the little bit (two inches wide) of ivory on which I work with so fine a brush, as produces little effect after much labour?" (*Letters,* 323) If we are aware of this context, it is no longer honest to characterize the above phrase as Austen's dismissal of her own work. She was saying, in a suitably modest way, that she had to write from personal experience.

5 Actually, this is said in third person more than once in the book. E.g., "I have met three geniuses in my lifetime: Picasso, Alfred North Whitehead, and Gertrude Stein" (1). The "autobiography" refers to Stein in third person because Stein is using the persona of her intimate friend Alice. There is no secret that the real writer is Stein, though.

"Alice" says so towards the end of the book.

6 From the list of Austen's major novels I exclude *Northanger Abbey and Sense and Sensibility.* The latter has some claims to being called major. It couldn't have been such a favorite of Austen's if it were a failure. It was actually written after the novel that became *Pride and Prejudice,* entitled *First Impressions,* though before the published version. Furthermore it is fairly large, and its themes are representative of Jane Austen's work in general. However, I regard it as the bridge between the charming but limited *Northanger Abbey* and the true masterpieces that followed it: *Pride and Prejudice, Mansfield Park, Emma,* and *Persuasion.*

7 The entire letter can be found in the appendix at the back of this paper.

8 Collins mentions Lady Catherine's advice in his proposal to Lizzy. "Twice," he says, "she condescended to give me her opinion (unasked too!) on this subject; and it was but the very Saturday night before I left Hunsford...that she said, 'Mr. Collins, you must marry. A clergyman like you must marry — Chuse properly, chuse a gentlewoman for *my* sake; and for your *own*, let her be an active, useful sort of person, not brought up high, but able to make a small income go a good way. That is my advice. Find such a woman as soon as you can, bring her to Hunsford, and I will visit her'" (89).

9 This is the kind of comic scene that might have been played for its tragic possibilities by Samuel Richardson, who undoubtedly portrayed a less civilized society. Lizzy is first compelled to remain in the room with Collins by her mother, though she knows what is coming and has made it plain that she isn't interested. Then she has to endure Collins's long-winded proposal, which is comic for the reader but would have to be less so in reality. And as a final, hilarious, bonus, Collins refuses to believe that Lizzy's *no*s mean *no*. She racks her brain for the means to make it plain to him that she will never marry him, but he keeps smiling and repeating variations on his first statement: "I am not to learn that it is usual with young ladies to reject the addresses of the man whom they secretly mean to accept, when he first applies for their favour, and that sometimes the refusal is repeated a second or even a third time. I am therefore by no means discouraged by what you have just said, and shall hope to lead you to the altar ere long" (90).

10 Juliet McMaster, for one, is very good on the impropriety of Mr. Bennet's way of treating people (47).

Samuel Kliger (362) says the antithesis between art and nature is "the ground of the book's action and its mode of organization." In

this case, Lizzy's rather less accomplished mode of playing — doing her part to contribute to the evening, but in the role of the modest amateur — is preferred, as more "natural," by the guests at the Netherfield ball to Mary's studied (artificial) performance. This seems hardly fair, since Mary has little else to recommend her, but Austen is a realist.

11 When Lydia runs away with Wickham, Collins's "Christian" advice in a letter to Mr. Bennet is never to see or speak to his daughter again. Mr. Bennet's short and contemptuous response (after Lizzy has accepted Darcy) is to advise a shift of allegiance from Lady Catherine to Darcy: "But, if I were you, I would stand by the nephew. He has more to give" (308).

12 The distance might even be greater. Describing Lizzy's walk to Netherfield (to be discussed presently), Caroline Bingley dismisses it in the following terms: "To walk three miles. or four miles, or five miles, or whatever it is, above her ancles [*sic*] in dirt, and alone, quite alone!" (33).

13 The Bingleys are a paradoxical family, like the Bennets, and like Mrs. Bennet's family, the Gardiners; Mr. Gardiner being as dignified as his sister is ridiculous. Mr. Bingley is a fine gentleman: honorable, open, and kind. His sisters, though, are extremely snobbish and unpleasant. Caroline Bingley is one of Jane Austen's least likeable creations. Penelope Joan Fritzer points out that the way the Bingley sisters attack Lizzy after dinner was a violation of the code of the courtesy writers that Austen and contemporary young ladies were schooled in. The "courtesy books" provided a full code of gentile conduct, with which Austen agreed. As Fritzer puts it, Jane Austen agrees with the courtesy writers: "None of her characters who speaks deleteriously in public about another is admirable or heroic." In the case of both Bingley sisters, "The Bingley women make themselves look foolish and mean-spirited by complying with the letter of courtesy but not the spirit" (53, with previous quote).

14 The critic Roger Gard claims that Lizzy has loved Darcy from the beginning (99, as is the following idea). This strikes me as rather far-fetched, but the point is an interesting one: Austen, he claims, is implying that love by its nature begins as an irritation.

15 Mrs. Bennet shows a maternal resentment here against anyone criticizing her daughter. This is ironic because she really resents and almost dislikes Lizzy, for obvious reasons. Besides being infinitely more intelligent than she is, Lizzy is the surrogate mother in the family. It is Lizzy who takes care of Jane at Netherfield, while Mrs. Bennet mistakenly

assumes that Jane is in no danger and tries to dissuade Lizzy from attending her. Later, Lizzy does her best to prevent Lydia from going on her disastrous trip to Brighton — an expedition boisterously supported by Mrs. Bennet. Lizzy appeals to Mr. Bennet, who refuses to veto his wife's permission: "Do not make yourself uneasy, my love. Whenever you and Jane are known, you must be respected and valued; and you will not appear to less advantage for having a couple of — or may I say, three very silly sisters. We shall have no peace at Longbourn if Lydia does not go to Brighton. Let her go then." As usual, Mr. Bennet has amusing reasons why there will be no danger, but Lydia does get in serious trouble — trouble that threatens, in fact, to ruin Jane and Lizzy's future prospects as well, for all Mr. Bennet's assurances — and he gets an object lesson in who is the responsible woman in his family. The sequel underscores the point: Mrs. Bennet washes her hands of the matter and takes to bed, becoming one more burden for the adults in the house to deal with.

16 Perhaps because her own health was so uncertain (she died in her early forties), Jane Austen seems to be obsessed with the dangers of exposure to the outdoors. Fanny Price, in *Mansfield Park,* grows ill if she exerts herself too much in the garden. And Marianne Dashwood, in *Sense and Sensibility,* nearly dies from the fever she gets after being caught in a rainstorm.

17 Again, we are reminded of Gard's speculation that Lizzy loved Darcy from the first time she saw him, and the irritation she feels towards him is part of the cycle of that love (99).

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