

“*Pride and Prejudice* and the Pursuit of Happiness” [from *Jane Austen: Women, Politics, and the Novel*]

[Claudia Johnson’s *Jane Austen: Women, Politics, and the Novel* has had a formative influence on Austen studies since its publication in 1988. While Austen criticism prior to the late 1980s had tended not to recognize her work as political, Johnson’s *Women, Politics, and the Novel* is mainly interested in the political context surrounding the novelist herself as well as her women characters. In its political focus, Johnson’s book was slightly preceded by Marilyn Butler’s *Jane Austen and the War of Ideas* (1987), which situates Austen primarily in an old-fashioned, conservative tradition. Johnson takes a different position, arguing that Austen cannot be read exclusively as a conservative, and placing her also in an anti-Jacobin, feminist tradition of political novels. This chapter, which focuses on *Pride and Prejudice*, argues that happiness functions in the novel as a kind of social criticism that engages with and transforms conservative myths.]

If we can judge from her few surviving comments about her work, Jane Austen did not appear to have liked *Pride and Prejudice* nearly as much as we have. To her its “playfulness and epigrammaticism” appeared excessive and unrelieved: “The work is rather too light, and bright, and sparkling”: the novel lacked “shade,” and required “a long chapter of sense” or even “of solemn specious nonsense, about something unconnected with the story; an essay on writing, a critique on Walter Scott, or the history of Buonaparté” in order to interrupt, qualify, or somehow contrast with its remorseless high spirits (*Letters*,¹ 4 February 1813). But the deficiency of shade, so far from ranking as a fault, has been the novel’s chief recommendation to general readers and critics alike, who find in the marriage of the exuberant heroine and her manly hero the comedic promise of personal fulfillment as well as social harmony. While the novels of Austen’s contemporaries, with very few exceptions, are given over to crises of social and marital disintegration, *Pride and Prejudice* is

1 [Elsewhere in the text, Johnson notes that “[a]ll references to Austen’s writings are based on the standard editions by R.W. Chapman,” including the one-volume 1959 issue of the *Letters*, the 1982 issues of *Pride and Prejudice* and *Persuasion*, here abbreviated as “PP” and “P,” respectively. Footnotes have been modified to include full references to the material reprinted here.]

a categorically happy novel, and its felicity is not merely incidental, something that happens at the end of the novel, but is rather at once its premise and its prize.

In its readiness to ratify and to grant our happiness, *Pride and Prejudice* is almost shamelessly wish fulfilling. The fantasies it satisfies, however, are not merely private—a poor but deserving girl catches a rich husband. They are pervasively political as well. If *Pride and Prejudice* legitimizes a progressive yearning for pleasure, it also gratifies a conservative yearning for a strong, loving, and paradoxically perhaps, at times even submissive authority. At no other time in Austen's career would she indulge a fantasy of this magnitude to this degree, for it is Darcy himself who secures the happiness the novel celebrates. As an authority figure, “a brother, a landlord, a master” who holds, as Elizabeth remarks, “many people's happiness ... in his guardianship” (PP 250), Darcy is singularly free from the faults that underline comparable figures elsewhere—General Tilney's repressiveness [in *Northanger Abbey*], for example, or Sir Walter's foolishness [in *Persuasion*]. *Pride and Prejudice* is thus a profoundly conciliatory work, and of all Austen's novels it most affirms established social arrangements without damaging their prestige or fundamentally challenging their wisdom or equity. Whereas *Sense and Sensibility* excoriates the traditional family and *Mansfield Park* subjects characters of Darcy's stature to disabling satire, on the surface at least, *Pride and Prejudice* corroborates conservative myths which had argued that established forms cherished rather than prohibited true liberty, sustained rather than disrupted real happiness and safeguarded rather than repressed individual merit. Its hero accordingly is a sober-minded exemplar of the great gentry, a dutiful son and affectionate brother. Its villain is an ungrateful upstart who, by attempting to elope with a female of good family, seeks not simply to enrich himself but also to sully the scutcheons of legitimate male power—as Darcy puts it, “Mr. Wickham's chief object, was unquestionably my sister's fortune, which is thirty thousand pounds; but I cannot help supposing that the hope of revenging himself on me, was a strong inducement” (PP 202). And its turning point is the heroine's contemplation of the household of a private gentleman. Prepared to find Pemberley a grandiose estate designed expressly to overbear subordinates with awe, Elizabeth finds instead an unpretentiously elegant manor, and rather than testimonials to the insolence of power, she hears tributes to a kind master, a beloved landlord, tributes which moreover are not tainted by “prejudice,” that ultimate progressive pejorative.

To some, *Pride and Prejudice* has a markedly fairy-tale-like quality which, while accounting for much of the novel's enduring popular

success, is politically suspect. One of Austen's recent critics observes that the novel's wishful, though aesthetically satisfying, "romantic conclusion" fudges the ideological contradictions uncovered earlier between the "individualistic perspective inherent in the bourgeois value system *and* the authoritarian hierarchy retained from traditional, paternalistic society."¹ By this account, the happy ending of *Pride and Prejudice* is an "aesthetic solution" that cannot really address the "social problems" the novel itself uncovers, and indeed that actually conceals their depth. But while these objections are partly true, we should not let our own rather modern preference for ideological conflict predispose us to undervalue Austen's achievement in *Pride and Prejudice*. To imagine versions of authority responsive to criticism and capable of transformation is not necessarily to "escape" from urgent problems into "romance" and to settle for politically irresponsible "consolations of form" which offer us a never-never land and leave the structures of the "real world" unchanged.² When we recall that Austen's preceding novel could locate her protagonists' contentment only in a retreat from and renunciation of power, Austen's decision here to engage her exceptionally argumentative antagonists in direct, extensive, and mutually improving debates can just as well be viewed as a step towards, rather than an "escape" from, constructive political commentary.

While it is thus indeed true that the happy ending of *Pride and Prejudice* "dismisses the social and psychological realism with which the novel began"—dodging, for example, such dire issues as the destitution we are told the Bennet sisters would otherwise expect after their father's death—nevertheless the novel as a whole certainly does not evade or neutralize social criticism out of a fond or unquestioning allegiance to established forms and the attractive men who embody them.³ In fact, the "conservatism" of *Pride and Prejudice* is an imaginative experiment with conservative myths, and not a statement of faith in them as they had already stood in anti-Jacobin fiction. To be sure, by using these myths, even to hedge, qualify, and improve them, Austen is also, as we shall see, unavoidably used by them. But throughout the course of the novel those myths become so transformed that they are made to accommodate what could otherwise

1 Mary Poovey, *The Proper Lady and the Woman Writer: Ideology as Style in the Works of Mary Wollstonecraft, Mary Shelley, and Jane Austen* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1984), p. 205.

2 Poovey, *Proper Lady*, p. 207. For a discussion of *Pride and Prejudice* as a powerful female fantasy, see Tania Modleski, *Loving With a Vengeance* (Hamden, Conn.: Archon, 1.982), pp. 36, 49–51.

3 Poovey, *Proper Lady*, p. 201.

be seen as subversive impulses and values, and in the process they themselves become the vehicles of incisive social criticism.

Darcy may conform to conservative requirements for one of his rank and sex, but Elizabeth emphatically does not, and many social and political issues cluster around her characterization. Austen's conviction that Elizabeth was "as delightful a creature as ever appeared in print" was well-founded, for, as she could not have failed to realize, no heroine quite like her had "ever appeared in print" before (*Letters*, 29 January 1813). Standing where we do, we tend either to overlook or to underestimate Elizabeth's outrageous unconventional-ity which, judged by the standards set in conduct books and in conservative fiction, constantly verges not merely on impertinence but on impropriety. As if to call attention to this point, Austen has Mr. Collins drone Fordyce's *Sermons to Young Women* "with very monotonous solemnity" (PP 68) to the assembled Bennet sisters. Originally published in 1766, the *Sermons* were steadily popular throughout the rest of the century, but enjoyed particular currency between 1790 and 1810, when they were frequently reprinted in England and Ireland. Collins's approval of such "books of a serious stamp" in and of itself signals Austen's disaffection with the rules about women promulgated in them. Austen could hardly recommend behavior to her readers through anyone so morally stunted as Collins, a fact not sufficiently reckoned with by critics who argue that Austen's inflexibly orthodox morality is anchored in, if not actually derived from, volumes he enjoys.

Although it would appear that Lydia Bennet might actually benefit from Fordyce's teachings on "shamefacedness in women," many of his recommendations, like More's, could only confirm her in her thoughts after the officers, as when he suggests that rather than reading books, women's "business chiefly is to read Men, in order to make yourselves agreeable and useful."¹ But once granted moral authority, Fordyce's injunctions to modesty and humility damn Elizabeth's behavior every bit as decidedly as they do Lydia's. His reproof of "briskness of air and levity of deportment" would fall harshly on a heroine famed for "a lively, playful disposition, which delighted in any thing ridiculous" (PP 12). His disapproval of women who "betray a confidence in [their] charms" would reflect ill on one who assures her modest sister, "Compliments always take *you* by surprise, and *me* never" (PP 14, emphasis Austen's). And his rule that in dress, as in all matters, women ought "never to go beyond their circumstances,

1 Fordyce, *Sermons Addressed to Young Ladies*, 8th ed., corrected and greatly enlarged (Dublin, 1796), *Sermon* 3 ("On female Reserve"), pp. 39ff.; *Sermon* 7 ("On Getting Wisdom and Understanding"), p. 124.

nor aspire above their station" would damage a woman who refuses to dress down in order to respect Lady Catherine's fondness for preserving "distinction of rank" (PP 161).¹ Fordyce's commendation of the "amiable reserve" of "elegant females," together with his underlying assumption that women's primary desire and duty is to please men, especially through the affectation of modesty, may show us where Collins derives *his* notions of female conduct, but they do not provide us with standards flexible and intelligent enough to evaluate Elizabeth.

Not that Mr. Collins is the only one to take seriously the standards set in conduct books. With some justice and with some degree of concurrence from the sensible Mr. Darcy, Miss Bingley censures Elizabeth's "country town indifference to decorum" (PP 36). Elizabeth's wit is occasionally marked by an unabashed rusticity bordering on the vulgar—"I expected at least that the pigs were got into the garden, and here is nothing but Lady Catherine and her daughter" (PP 158). But this "indifference to decorum" does not stop with an independent vivacity of thought and conversation, as it does with the engaging heroines of Restoration comedy to whom she is often compared. Elizabeth's celebrated liveliness is vigorously physical as well, verging sometimes on unladylike athleticism. Whereas Millamant, as we recall, "nauseates walking," Elizabeth not only treks for miles *alone*—something the propriety-conscious Emma would never do—but she also runs, jumps, springs, and rambles. Austen's manifestly self-conscious achievement in Elizabeth Bennet thus consists precisely in having made her "creature" so "delightful" despite her continual infractions of the rules of propriety. Lydia's offending presence in the novel makes this possible. Even though, as a husband hunter patterned after her doting mother, she has nothing in common with the feminist ideologies of turn-of-the-century fiction, she serves in much the same way they do in the novels of moderate social critics. Instead of standing as living proof that young ladies must be disciplined into "shamefacedness," as Fordyce would term it, Lydia is a decoy who attracts the disapproval to which Elizabeth herself could otherwise be subject, and by lamenting Lydia's glaring excesses, Elizabeth is cleared for her less egregious but "improper" rambles, conceit, and impertinence without arousing our discomfort or incurring our censure.

By linking Elizabeth and Lydia, Austen eludes rather than reiterates conventional moral codes, and the carefully elaborated cross-referencing of other characters, qualities, and relationships throughout

1 Fordyce, *Sermon* 3, p. 46; *Sermon* 2 ("On Modesty of Apparel"), p. 24; *Sermon* 1 ("On the Importance of the Female Sex..."), p. 3.

the book functions in the same way: not to serve some neoclassical taste for balance, but rather to impede generalization. Austen has contrived *Pride and Prejudice* in such a way that virtually every argument about it can be undercut with a built-in countervailing argument, a qualifying “on the other hand” which forestalls conclusiveness. Take, among numberless examples, the important issue of education. Mr. Collins’s bullyish obsequiousness is attributed largely to the “subjection” he experienced at the hands of his “illiterate and miserly father” (PP 70). On the other hand, Darcy’s snobbery is attributed to a father who indulged his self-importance. Yet as antithetical as their educations are, both men are similarly conceited and inattentive to the feelings of others. On the subject of female education too, Austen orchestrates opposites and analogues, not to clarify, but rather to embarrass judgments. The same parental neglect that somehow turns Lydia into a thoughtless flirt turns Jane and Elizabeth into independent and responsible moral agents. By contrast, no pains are spared in the education of Miss Anne de Burgh, but she, comically enough, is the novel’s reigning nonentity who never utters a single word on her own behalf. In none of these cases does Austen prescribe a symmetrically poised middle way, or imply some formula for moderation. On the contrary, the very method of the novel obstructs the impulse to make a tidy moral. Instead of opposing “good” liveliness to “bad” liveliness, “good” education to “bad” education, the intricately counterbalanced construction of *Pride and Prejudice* obliges us to regroup and reassess characters and issues, to broaden our judgments and to accept contradiction.¹

1 For a contrasting view of Austen’s artistic methods and objectives, see Jan Fergus, *Jane Austen and the Didactic Novel: Northanger Abbey, Sense and Sensibility and Pride and Prejudice* (Totowa N.J.: Barnes & Noble, 1983). The act of generalizing itself was perceived as fraught with political import during the period in question. A misguided penchant for generalization was precisely what Burkeans laid at the door of Jacobin reformers, whom they variously dubbed geomericians, rationalists, economists, and the like. In stymieing efforts at generalization here, Austen, it could be argued, is in fact engaging in a very Burkean fondness for particularity. But the issue is more complex than this especially when we remember that Burke’s own supporters were embarrassed by and nervous about the uncontrollable particularity of his own prose, which seemed to indulge in precisely the sort of wildness and eccentricity he deplored. As Olivia Smith has observed, at the same time that counterrevolutionary writers suspected the efforts of cold, autonomous reason, they wished to retain the moral and political authority generalizing could yield, the kind of authority Austen’s practice confounds; see Olivia Smith, *Politics of Language 1791–1819* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1984), pp. 1–34.

Austen leaves it to Mary Bennet to compile precepts about human nature and female delicacy. Elizabeth, for her part “was not formed for ill humour” (PP 90), much less for sober moralizing. Elizabeth regards as unmerited censure Caroline Bingley’s suggestion that she “has no pleasure in any thing else” but books, and assures the company on the contrary “I have pleasure in many things” (PP 37). Indeed, Elizabeth’s “temper,” we are assured, is “to be happy” (PP 239), and it is her readiness for happiness, enjoyment, and pleasure, words which ring on virtually every page, that makes her and her novel so distinctive. In marked contrast to counterrevolutionary literature, *Pride and Prejudice* is a passionate novel which vindicates personal happiness as a liberal moral category, rescuing it from the suspicion into which it had fallen. Elizabeth Hamilton counted on her readers’ unhesitating dismissal of Bridgetina Borherim’s at once ridiculous and dangerous doctrine, “And is not happiness and pleasure the only true end of our being. ... These are the sublime principles of philosophy.”¹ But in *Pride and Prejudice*, Elizabeth can explain to Darcy a “philosophy” (PP 369) not categorically different from Bridgetina’s without sounding absurd or licentious. Whereas conduct-book moralizers would urge reviews of past conduct as means for earnest self-examination, to be followed by vows of reformation, Elizabeth says simply, “Think only of the past as its remembrance gives you pleasure” (PP 369). Darcy, of course, insists on heeding “painful recollections” of his own past errors, not because he finds Elizabeth’s philosophy of pleasure objectionable, but rather because he gallantly wishes to show her how much he is willing to change for her sake.

In making the wish for and experience of happiness and pleasure central to her novel, Austen is no less than redeeming a tradition of liberal moral and political philosophy which antedates the post-revolutionary controversies that called it into question. Her acceptance of happiness as a morally acceptable goal proves not that she was a closet radical but rather that she and progressives were drawing on a shared tradition. Austen’s relation to Samuel Johnson can help illustrate this point. Because readers have known ever since the “Biographical Notice” of 1818 that Johnson was Austen’s favorite moral writer in prose, Johnson has always been acknowledged as an important factor in her intellectual development.² Indeed, owing to

1 Elizabeth Hamilton, *Memoirs of Modern Philosophers*, 3 vols. (Bath, 1800), vol. 2, p. 221.

2 Johnson is often mentioned in passing in Austenian criticism, but the following studies discuss Austen’s relation to Johnson in some detail: Peter L. De Rose, *Jane Austen and Samuel Johnson* (Washington, D.C.: [continued]

what has been a longstanding tendency to disparage or overlook the perspicacity of the women writers whom Austen read and admired, he has generally been considered the only formidable figure on Austen's conscious literary horizon, and as a result has been credited as a source for all her ideas or, more to the present point, as a political mentor, as that great "Tory conservative" from whom she drew her ideological inspiration.

But it by no means follows from Johnson's privileged status as Austen's favorite prose moralist that she regarded him as an archauthoritarian, and on this point Austenians have not kept abreast of the Johnsonians. Some turn-of-the-century conservative novelists indeed do look to Johnson as a mentor. His belief that happiness is not attainable endeared him to counterrevolutionary writers who saw their opponents as quixotic projectors vainly attempting to perfect society or increase the lot of human happiness. In *Tale of the Times*, the heroine's first step towards ruin is made to coincide with her disenchantment with *Rasselas*. Because she has believed her Jacobin seducer's suggestions that Johnson is an "enemy to levity and simplicity, a lover of discipline and system," Lady Geraldine can no longer receive the support from the sage who would reconcile us to the infelicity we must endure here below.¹ Soon thereafter, Lady Geraldine lets herself feel discontented with her husband, and she comes to tolerate—note, not to approve—Fitzosborne's heterodox talk about relaxing divorce laws, because he seems to her sincerely concerned for "the improvement and happiness of the world."² A wish for personal as well as public happiness is thus seen as a disastrously seductive dream from which the supposedly stoic Johnson, given the chance, could save us. In conceiving Johnson as a stern moralist warning us to sacrifice happiness to duty, West, it must be emphasized, is not drawing on, but is herself actually creating, literary history, for there is an important distinction to be made between the moralist and the moralizers—the self-confessed regulators of manners—who recurred to him in order to enhance their own undertakings. Writing from her own conviction that women are the sacred guardians of morals, particularly in an age swarming with noxious ideas, West often prescribes standards of right behavior which

University Press of America, 1980); Robert Scholes, "Dr. Johnson and Jane Austen," *Philological Quarterly* 54 (1975): 380–90; and my "'The Operations of Time and the Changes of the Human Mind': Jane Austen and Dr. Johnson Again," *Modern Language Quarterly* 44 (1983): 23–38.

1 Jane West, *Tale of the Times* (London, 1799), 3 vols., vol. 2, p. 181.

2 West, *Tale of the Times*, vol. 3, p. 18.

Johnson of all people—what with his peculiar domestic life and in his notoriously singular, even repulsive manners—could not attain.¹

Throughout the nineteenth century until recently in our own, readers more or less shared Fitzosborne's view that, "averse to those rights which man inherently possesses, tenacious of those bulwarks which society forms," Johnson was in fact "repulsive in his politics, uncompromising in his morality, and austere in his religion."² But not all of Johnson's contemporaries and near contemporaries considered him to be the forbidding and bigoted Hercules of Toryism whom Boswell described in his biography and whom West and More, among others, venerated. While they were busily writing him out of a political tradition from which they had much to fear, many progressive writers perceived in Johnson a potentially, if not actually, sympathetic figure. Among those who anticipated twentieth-century scholars in esteeming Johnson's feisty and rebellious sympathy with the underdog, his reluctance to be prescriptive, and his impatience with metaphysical cant that obfuscates or sentimentalizes political realities were early feminists, such as Macaulay, Hays, and Wollstonecraft, who admired him despite their awareness that he often—and with what Macaulay considered to be perverse inconsistency—stood on the other side of political questions.³ Johnson has no difficulty endorsing an ethic of pleasure later generations could brand hedonistic; even in a religious context he does not hesitate to declare that "Every man is conscious, that he neither performs, nor forbears any thing upon any other motive than the prospect, either of an immediate gratification, or a

1 When inveighing against the license to "strangeness of behavior" and the "privilege of disgusting" which men of genius assume, West humorously limits the number of men who can so qualify to a quota of "half a dozen," so as to spare the community at large the offensiveness of their manners. Perhaps it was the occasional grossness of Johnson's own habits which prompted her to set a quota so liberal. See West's *Letters Addressed to a Young Man* (London 1801), Letter 12, vol. 3, pp. 30ff.

2 West, *Tale of the Times*, vol. 2, p. 181.

3 Macaulay alludes to the paradox of Johnson's conservatism in *Letters on Education* (London, 1790), pp. 166–67; Wollstonecraft recurs to Johnson, though not to Boswell, with great respect in *Vindication of the Rights of Woman*, and Hays opens her *Appeal to the Men of Great Britain* approvingly with a quotation from him. Although her study focuses on the political dimension of language theory, Olivia Smith briefly discusses the social as well as stylistic inconsistencies and contradictions that needed to be glossed over before Johnson could be offered up as an exemplar of authoritarianism; see O. Smith, *Politics of Language*, 13–17.

distant reward.”¹ And if he did not think that happiness was attainable, he still insisted that the desire for happiness—or pleasure, or gratification—was our sole motive for action, whence the distinctive tension of his vision: “We desire, we pursue, we obtain, we are satiated; we desire something else, and begin a new pursuit” (*Rambler* 6). In considering Austen’s relation to Johnson and to the political discourse of what was for her the recent past, we must remember that Johnson’s legacy could, and did, go two ways. For some writers he served as a leonine champion of authoritarianism, but for Austen he served as a philosophic psychologist, a writer who legitimized the energy generated by our desire for happiness, and who, unlike his later, anti-Jacobin admirers, was less interested in prescribing rules of behavior than in exploring the never-concluding dynamic of desire, hope, and disappointment set into motion by our pursuits of happiness.²

In all of Austen’s novels, but especially in *Pride and Prejudice*, pursuing happiness is the business of life. Austen trots character after character before our attention so that we may consider what pleases or, conversely, what vexes and mortifies them, thus inviting us to assess the quality and durability of their happiness. At the outset, at least, Darcy’s sense of self-consequence is characterized by a haughty determination to be mortified by everyone outside his small circle. Unlike the easygoing Bingley, who has an agreeable disposition to be pleased anywhere, Darcy is much as the neighborhood around Meryton first perceives him: “proud ... above his company ... above being pleased” (PP 10). But if this refusal to be pleased is a serious moral failing, as Darcy himself later admits, a determination to be imperturbably agreeable is little better. Knighthood has given Sir William Lucas license to spend all his time thinking “with pleasure of his own importance” (PP 18), and he feels this pleasure most acutely by being pleased—quite indiscriminately—with everything, smiling

1 *Yale Edition of the Works of Samuel Johnson*, vol. 14, *Sermons*, ed. Jean Hagstrum and James Gray (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1978), p. 149. All further references from Johnson are drawn from the *Yale Edition* and will be indicated parenthetically.

2 Many historicist discussions of Austen’s conservatism have borne the traces of decidedly late twentieth-century preoccupations and associations. Among these is Butler’s emphatic insistence that “psychology” is an intrinsically amoral enterprise and that Austen, as a Tory conservative, abhorred and eschewed all such vile and subjectivist stuff; see Marilyn Butler, *Jane Austen and the War of Ideas* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1985), pp. 295–96. Of course the assumption that the interests of psychology and morality were not complementary would have been unintelligible to many an eighteenth-century moralist, Johnson foremost among them.

graciously even as Darcy snubs him with quips about the savagery of dancing, or even as Mrs. Bennet insults the claims of his daughter to marry Mr. Collins. With her “high animal spirits” (PP 45) Lydia Bennet, by contrast, finds her boisterous pleasures in redcoats and balls. Because she has never been taught that “her present pursuits are not to be the business of her life” (PP 231), a visit to the encampment at Brighton “comprised every possibility of earthly happiness” (PP 232). Mrs. Bennet’s grip on happiness is considerably weaker, and she is hardly able to take any pleasure at all. Though marrying off her daughters is the chief “business” of her life, so firmly is she convinced that the world conspires to irritate her “poor nerves” (PP 5, 113) and thwart her wishes that she passes most of her time in vexation.

Austen’s care to establish the standards of her characters’ happiness provides us with an index to their moral imaginations, tempers, and resources that enables us to engage in judicious moral evaluation without resorting to the conclusive moralizing characteristic of some of her contemporaries. By leaving censorious reflections on Lydia’s elopement to the “spiteful old ladies in Meryton” (PP 309) and to the pompous Mary, for example, Austen distances herself from prescriptive pronouncements on this subject, and no specifically authorial moral opprobrium is ever attached to Charlotte’s frankly mercenary marriage to Collins. It is enough instead that Lydia’s abrupt lapse into conjugal indifference and pecuniary want shows just how little her previous ideas of “earthly happiness” comprehended after all, and that Charlotte’s choice of and apparently successful adjustment to Mr. Collins as a husband indicates where she rates the exigencies of physical maintenance relative to the pleasures of rational society. Thus, although Austen’s refusal to settle the differences in what her characters seek as desirable—in *Persuasion* Admiral Croft likes and Anne Elliot dreads the prospect of “future war” (P 252)—implies a toleration of some ethical relativity which some of her contemporaries could have found disturbing, she nevertheless does not leave us bereft of rational means for ethical discrimination.

The attention devoted to happiness in *Pride and Prejudice* does not stop with characterization. Happiness itself has distinctive social and political ramifications which the novel carefully develops. First of all, in keeping with the liberal tradition of moral philosophy to which *Pride and Prejudice* is affiliated, happiness is something many of the characters feel they have a basic right to. Darcy’s central fault, after all, is to have been careless about pleasing other people, to have had what Elizabeth stingingly terms “a selfish disdain of the feelings of others” (PP 193), and Lady Catherine and he both are judged

wanting precisely because their own pride renders them incapable of regarding the happiness of their inferiors. In ways which illuminate Austen's agenda in *Pride and Prejudice*, Johnson, himself touchy about this subject, reproves the overbearing disdain with which the high and mighty can torment their inferiors:

Some, indeed, there are, for whom the excuse of ignorance or negligence cannot be alledged, because it is apparent that they are not only of pleasing, but studious to offend; that they contrive to make all to them difficult and vexatious, and imagine that they aggrandize themselves by wasting the time of others in useless attendance, by mortifying them with slights, and teasing them with affronts.

Men of this kind, are generally to be found among those that have not mingled much in general conversation, but spent their lives amidst the obsequiousness of dependants, and the flattery of parasites; and by long consulting only their own inclination, have forgotten that others have a claim to the same deference.

Tyranny thus avowed, is indeed an exuberance of pride.
(*Rambler* 56)

Lady Catherine, as Collins assures Elizabeth, "likes to have the distinction of rank preserved" (PP 161). Rather than make others feel at ease, she patronizes Elizabeth so superciliously that even Darcy looks "a little ashamed of his aunt's ill breeding" (PP 173). But Elizabeth also takes him to task for a carelessness of pleasing, and when he lamely pleads shyness with strangers, she taxes him with the same ugly failure of civility Johnson describes: "Shall we ask him [Darcy] why a man of sense and education, and who has lived in the world, is ill qualified to recommend himself to strangers?" (PP 175). Fitzwilliam, who happily does possess "the readiness and case of a well-bred man" (PP 171), answers in Darcy's stead: "It is because he will not give himself the trouble" (PP 175). Just as Lady Catherine takes every "occasion of dictating to others" (PP 163), Darcy too, as Elizabeth puts it, enjoys "the power of doing what he likes" (PP 183), without troubling himself with the consideration that others have what Johnson calls "the same claim to deference."

Nowhere is Darcy's failure of deference to others clearer than in his proposal, bearing as it does an appalling resemblance to that of Collins. To Collins only one person is worthy of deference. Accordingly, he expects Elizabeth to be gratified to learn that he is proposing to her on Lady Catherine's advice that he choose "an active, useful sort of person, not brought up high, but able to make a small income

go a good way" (PP 106). But as deferent as Collins is to Lady Catherine, his principle concern is with himself, and consequently he expresses no wish to contribute to Elizabeth's happiness but rather only a conviction that matrimony will add to his own. Even after he must accept the reality of Elizabeth's negative, Collins believes that a refusal of himself can derive only from a "defect of temper" on Elizabeth's part, rather than a failure to please on his own. Like Collins, Darcy also parades hollow gallantries that do not veil his assurance of immediate success and that tax Elizabeth with her unfavorable fortune and connections. So little is Darcy concerned for Elizabeth's happiness that he does not hesitate to inform her of the damage he is doing to his own self-consequence by proposing marriage to her in the first place, expressing his "sense of her inferiority—of its being a degradation—of the family obstacles which judgment had always opposed to inclination" (PP 189).

Considered with respect to the liberal ideas about personal happiness, Darcy's failures of politeness are quite momentous, and Johnson once again elucidates them with a morally fervent solicitude for the unempowered that shows us why progressive social critics liked him, his approval of subordination notwithstanding:

Though all are not equally culpable with Trypherus, it is scarcely possible to find any man who does not frequently, like him, indulge his own pride by forcing others into a comparison with himself, when he knows the advantage is on his side, without considering that unnecessarily to obtrude unpleasing ideas is a species of oppression; and that it is little more criminal to deprive another of some real advantage, than to interrupt that forgetfulness of its absence which is the next happiness to actual possession. (*Rambler* 98)

Although Johnson does not go so far as Hume in vindicating vanity, he employs politically charged language which describes the offensiveness of hauteur as just short of criminal, a theft of that self-approbation to which, he implies, we all have a right. Johnson's remarks can suggest how Elizabeth's initial pique with Darcy ought to be considered as more than "merely" injured vanity, an implicitly rear-guard construction which places the problems squarely in Elizabeth's court. Elizabeth effortlessly concurs with Charlotte's opinion that Darcy "has a *right* to be proud," but she believes that she has a right to pride as well: "I could easily forgive *his* pride, if he had not mortified *mine*" (PP 20). Readers who contend that *Pride and Prejudice* is a didactic novel consistent with the orthodox morality expounded in

sermons and conduct books typically observe here that Elizabeth is guilty of the “sin” of pride, either in her all-too-fallible private judgments or in her personal attractions, for both of these wounds to her self-esteem render her susceptible to Wickham’s flattery.¹ Yet *Pride and Prejudice* invites us not to chide Elizabeth with threadbare morality about original sin, but on the contrary, if not actually to flatter people’s pride as Wickham and Collins do, then at least to honor it. In Johnson’s words, “unnecessarily to obtrude unpleasing ideas” onto people about themselves is almost criminally to take their happiness away. Defending the honesty of his proposal, Darcy insists that “reason” vindicates him in confronting Elizabeth with painful truths about her circumstances (PP 192), but to Johnson it is no excuse that “reason” may be on the side of the offender: “a thousand incivilities may be committed, and a thousand offices neglected, without any remorse of conscience, or reproach from reason” (*Rambler* 98).

Unless we acknowledge that Darcy’s pride is a “criminal” assault on Elizabeth’s happiness, we will not appreciate the profundity of his eventual transformation. Darcy himself later explains that Elizabeth taught him “how insufficient were all my pretensions to please a woman worthy of being pleased” (PP 369). The “most certain way of giving any man pleasure,” as Johnson explains the economy of social pleasures, “is to persuade him that you receive pleasure from him” (*Rambler* 72), and this is precisely what Darcy cannot do when he still thinks “meanly of all the rest of the world” (PP 369) outside his family circle. Elizabeth can easily account for Colonel Fitzwilliam’s visits at Hunsford: he “came because he had pleasure in their society, a persuasion which of course recommended him still more.” But Darcy’s visits remain a puzzle: they seem “the effect of necessity rather than of choice—a sacrifice to propriety, not a pleasure to himself” (PP 180). When Darcy improves his manners, however, he becomes “desirous to please” (PP 263) Elizabeth, and “determined, to be pleased” (PP 262) by her, and it is this finally which impresses her with grateful desire that their happiness depend upon each other. Austen’s concern with good manners, then, has decidedly political underpinnings: to be guilty of hauteur is to deprive people of a pleasing sense of self-esteem that it is legitimate for them to have.

Because no one else can be happy for us, the pursuit of happiness privileges private judgment and invites a degree of autonomy of which more conservative novelists were suspicious. Although Elizabeth is merely articulating the principle which, as we have seen, actuates everyone’s behavior in the novel, among Austen’s contemporaries perhaps only declared radicals would have a sympathetic

1 See, for example, Butler, *War of Ideas*, p. 206.

character defiantly aver as she does, “I am only resolved to act in that manner, which will, in my own opinion, constitute my happiness, without reference to *you*, or to any person so wholly unconnected with me” (PP 358). Admittedly, Austen does not push her luck, here or anywhere else in *Pride and Prejudice*. Elizabeth can say this and retain her credibility because we know that her happiness, unlike Lydia’s, is not constituted by illicit sex. Further, she does not carry her determined autonomy so far as to rule out the wishes of people *not* so wholly unconnected with her, such as her parents. But whereas Hamilton, West, and More, for example, oppose the duty of filial obedience to the vagaries of private judgment, Austen, as critics have long recognized, typically removes her heroines from the parental abode altogether precisely in order to free them from this necessity and to oblige them to think and act for themselves. Except in *Mansfield Park*, Austen tends to skirt the whole issue of filial obedience. The conflict momentarily evoked when Elizabeth must decide whether forever to alienate her mother by refusing Collins or her father by accepting him is comically dissipated when Mrs. Bennet’s rage dwindles into impotent peevishness. Elizabeth would presumably not defy concerted parental opposition, although everything we have seen of her mother’s folly and her father’s negligence plainly shows that they need their young daughter’s advice more than she needs theirs. But if Elizabeth does not specifically rule out the possibility of consulting with her parents before acting in that manner which will, in her own opinion, constitute her happiness, her omission specifically to rule it in here as an obligation is just as striking.

If Austen tends to avoid considering how and when the independence she dearly values conflicts with those sensitive imperatives of duty as would apply between parent and child, her novels devote a lot of attention to coercion, bullying, and advice among friends, and all of these are problematic to an ethic championing personal choice and self-responsibility. Austen clearly highlights such issues when Elizabeth and Darcy debate the merits of adherence in a personal decision versus persuadability to a friend’s opposing advice:

“To yield readily—easily—to the *persuasion* of a friend,” [Elizabeth observes,] “is no merit with you.”

“To yield without conviction is no compliment to the understanding of either.” (PP 50)

Johnson had pointed out that giving advice is gratifying because of the “temporary appearance of superiority” (*Rambler* No. 87) it gives us, and conversely, receiving advice is typically painful because it

“interrupts our enjoyment of our own approbation” (*Rambler* No. 40). Austen matches Johnson’s awareness of how the love of power and claims of pride complicate the giving and receiving of counsel. Indeed, Bingley rather offends his friend when he impatiently divulges that, claims to persuade by conviction rather than by coercion to the contrary, what Darcy really likes is to box him around: “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 awful object than Darcy, on particular occasions, and in particular places” (PP 50–51). As it happens, the ideal of enlightened counsel and freely reasoned assent is achieved notably *not* in his own relations, but rather in those of women. Mrs. Gardiner’s offer and Elizabeth’s acceptance of advice not to encourage Wickham, for example, is “a wonderful instance of advice being given on such a point, without being resented” (PP 145) because both persons here are equal and unreserved parties in a rational friendship, where domination plays no part.

Elizabeth has cause later to reproach Bingley for the sweet-tempered ductility she praises here. The same amiable disposition which conduces so to his happiness also jeopardizes that happiness. Elizabeth finds it hard to think “without anger, hardly without contempt, on that easiness of temper, that want of proper resolution which now made him the slave of his designing friends, and led him to sacrifice his own happiness to the caprice of their inclinations” (PP 133). Austen puts a high premium on self-responsibility and stability of purpose even with her female characters—many of whom have little truck with the deference and hesitancy dictated to them as sex-differentiated virtues. But for her male characters, dependence on the wishes or the purses of others, if sometimes exonerated as a necessity, is never admirable, as we have already seen in *Sense and Sensibility*.¹ Thus if the “fire and independence” (PP 121) evinced by Mr. Collins’s abrupt shift from Jane to Elizabeth to Charlotte show, among other things, an unattractive confidence that the ladies are standing in line for him, Bingley’s converse readiness to doubt his judgment and to withdraw a suit so essential to his happiness shows, as Elizabeth’s politically potent metaphor suggests, a slavish failure to live by the principles of dignity and self-respect Elizabeth herself formulates to Lady Catherine. *Pride and Prejudice* backs off somewhat from the subversive potential of its material here. Bingley recovers from these heavy charges: what looks at first like a feeble surrender of self-direction into “the custody” of stronger friends later looks more like plausible modesty; Darcy’s officious interference looks more like friendly,

1 *Sense and Sensibility* is discussed in a chapter not reproduced on this site.

even sensible, advice. And Bingley's easy temper works out for the best after all: the reformed Darcy turns him towards Jane once again just as sure-handedly as he had earlier turned him away. But even though Elizabeth no longer has grounds to resent Bingley's readiness to let Darcy "determine and direct in what manner" he "was to be happy" (PP 186), she still observes that he is more compliant to Darcy's judgments than assertive of his own. Unwilling to rile her prospective husband too much too soon with corrective ridicule, Elizabeth remarks ironically to herself that "Mr. Bingley had been a most delightful friend; so easily guided that his worth was invaluable" (PP 371).

As we have seen, Austen's valorization of self-responsibility causes her to be somewhat evasive on the score of parental authority, and highly qualified even about the appropriateness of friendly advice. But concerning the meddlesomeness of social superiors she is fairly clear. Elizabeth believes, and Darcy himself later bears her out, that Lady Catherine has "certainly no right" (PP 357) to interfere in Elizabeth's decisions. But in demanding that Elizabeth forswear Darcy and keep to the "sphere" in which she was brought up, "this great lady" is exercising what she believes to be her authority to dictate to others, just as she takes it upon herself to settle differences among her cottagers and "scold them into harmony and plenty" even though she is not in "the commission of the peace for the county" (PP 169). Lady Catherine appears to consider it a matter of public importance that ancient families such as hers not be sacrificed to the "upstart pretensions of a young woman without family, connections, or fortune" (PP 356). Moreover, to her mind the interests of great families and the imperatives of morality itself are one and the same. As a result, Elizabeth's refusal to recognize the legitimacy of her application seems like a headstrong repudiation of "the claims of duty, honour, and gratitude" (PP 358). Lady Catherine's argument would have been familiar to any reader of Hays's, Inchbald's, or Smith's novels. In Smith's *The Young Philosopher*, for example, Mrs. Crewkhearne similarly contends that it is a matter of national importance that her noble nephew not degrade his family by forming a low connection, and her position is avidly seconded by toadies, particularly by a doltish clergyman who advances his own worldly position by catering in this manner to the "prejudices" of his well-born patrons.¹

Austen's simultaneously bold and delicate handling of the confrontation between Elizabeth and Lady Catherine typifies her entire relationship to the novelistic tradition of social criticism under discussion here. The treatment is decisively progressive because Elizabeth does

1 *The Young Philosopher*, 4 vols. (London, 1798), vol. 1, pp. 321–35.

not consider the interests of the ruling class to be morally binding upon her: “Neither duty, nor honour, nor gratitude,” Elizabeth holds, “have any possible claim on me, in the present instance. No principle of either, would be violated by my marriage with Mr. Darcy” (PP 358). Defending her love of laughter from charges of cynicism, Elizabeth proclaims, “I hope I never ridicule what is wise or good” (PP 57), and this promise of principled restraint differentiates Elizabeth’s laughter from Lydia’s animal glee. But at a time when Hannah More, among others, was writing conduct books for the middle classes and tracts for the lower, enjoining both not to question the wisdom of Providence in placing them in humbler spheres, Elizabeth’s disclaimer is not quite as innocuous as it may appear, for the point of contention is exactly what or who is “wise or good” and Elizabeth appears not to doubt her own qualifications to decide for herself, and has no trouble censuring a Lady’s officious airs or ridiculing a pompous patrician with his failure to behave like a gentleman. As far as Elizabeth is concerned, “extraordinary talents or miraculous virtue” will always command her respect, but the “mere stateliness of money and rank” (PP 161) will not awe her. Convinced that they occupied high ground, progressive novelists seize on the same kinds of distinctions and exploit them for all they are worth, contending, more systematically and more conspicuously of course, that the defenders of money and rank marshal speciously ethical artillery—such as Lady Catherine’s “duty,” “honour,” and “gratitude”—in order to sustain their hegemony, and that it is only by force of “prejudice” that we are either bullied or duped into equating our moral imperatives with their interests.

Although this much is clearly true, the conflict between Elizabeth and Lady Catherine nevertheless remains exceedingly discreet in that even as it demarcates this politically volatile issue, it circumnavigates it at the same time. Austen dramatizes social prejudice, and her revised title highlights that buzzword. But people lower on the social scale can be prejudiced too, and the disputants themselves stand well back from polemical jargon. *Pride and Prejudice* thus alternately verges on and recoils from radical criticism: Lady Catherine is not quite so extreme as to claim outright that the wellbeing of the kingdom depends on the purity of her family line. And for her part, Elizabeth claims not that she has the right to quit the “sphere” of her birth, but rather that in marrying Darcy, she would be staying within that sphere: “He is a gentleman; I am a gentleman’s daughter; so far we are equal” (PP 356). To the extent that this assertion of equality demystifies the great gentry, it serves reformist ends, for it deprives *men* like Darcy of any rationale for their pride. But in the meantime,

it leaves the social structure radicals had assailed substantially intact. Elizabeth, after all, changes her mind about Darcy when she realizes how conscientiously he tends to the happiness of those in his charge as a good master, landlord, and brother: "How many people's happiness were in his guardianship!—How much of pleasure or pain it was in his power to bestow" (PP 250–51).

The challenge Elizabeth poses to the power of rank and wealth is further diminished when we consider Lady Catherine's sex as well as her utter ridiculousness. Unlike Mrs. Smith in *Sense and Sensibility* and Lady Russell in *Persuasion*, who both figure as alternatives to male authority, women such as Lady Catherine and Mrs. Ferrars are parodies of male authority. As such, although they defend and conclude in the interests of the patriarchal family, they themselves obviously are not the most formidable embodiments of it. Because these surrogates are easier to assail than, say, fathers and uncles, they make it possible to show what is oppressive about the power of rank and wealth, and what is overbearing about their assumptions of superiority. Further, they also make it possible to represent rebellion against the claims of familial authority, because in Austen's novels, at least, female authority figures are invariably defied by their young male relations. Though they may hold some purse strings, they hold virtually no moral sway. They cannot enforce obedience, their imperiousness is risible. This need not have been so. Austen could have endowed Lady Catherine with some of the daunting majesty Burney extends to Mrs. Delville in *Cecilia*, for example, a figure who for similar reasons makes similar appeals to the heroine's honor and gratitude, but who does command the respect and voluntary obedience of both her son and Cecilia. But far from being dignified, Lady Catherine is in her own way every bit as ludicrous as Mrs. Bennet. If Austen's use of a weak and ridiculous female authority figure makes it possible to dramatize effectual resistance, it is at the cost of minimizing the extent and perhaps even obscuring the object of that resistance. Quite simply, it is left unclear whether all attempts on the part of the high and mighty to meddle in the autonomous choices of others are to be deemed insufferable, or whether it is merely that Lady Catherine's attempts to wield power are incompetent, inappropriate and eccentric.

Elizabeth's and Darcy's defiance of Lady Catherine exemplifies the balancing act everywhere in evidence in *Pride and Prejudice* and indicates the advantages as well as the limitations of complying, even critically, with conservative myths about the gentry as Austen does in this novel. The figure of Lady Catherine invites as well as dispels a critique of authority, for she receives all of the opprobrium we are

never permitted to aim directly at Darcy or his parents, or at great gentry families in general. Though Darcy assures Elizabeth that his parents were “good themselves (my father particularly...)” [PP 369], they evidently share the same sentiments which prompt Lady Catherine to assert her authority on their behalf: solicitude for the “shades of Pemberley” (PP 357) demands it. Conflict with the aunt thus averts a more politically potent and sentimentally complicated conflict with parents. Here, the family is spared a frontal attack. We have to read closely in order to discover that Darcy’s own parents taught him to “care for none beyond my own family circle, to think meanly of all the rest of the world” (PP 369), and by the time we learn this, it does not matter any more, for they are deceased, and Darcy is too touched by filial piety to dishonor their memories. But even though the “shades of Pemberley” are finally “polluted” by Elizabeth, her middle-class relations, a steward’s rascally son, and the barely respectable Lydia, the majesty of Pemberley itself is still affirmed, and any suspicion on our part that it may have been tarnished is soon set to rest by our confidence that the now properly proud Darcy would never permit any real compromise of its integrity. Austen thus disclaims and exploits mythology about the gentry that counterrevolutionary writers employ. The insolence of rank and power has been chastized, but never radically enough to make us doubt their prestige or wonder whether it really would be “something” after all, as Elizabeth says, “to be mistress of Pemberley” (PP 245). The same worldly advantages that have not been allowed to bully Elizabeth into respect have still been allowed to exalt her in the end.

Austen’s attempt to reform gentry myths in *Pride and Prejudice* entailed consenting to most of their basic outlines. The resulting tension is just as conspicuous in her treatment of marriage and family as it is in her treatment of class relations. To most readers, Austen’s allegiance to conservative social values is proven by the inevitability of marriage in her novels, for it is marriage that at all times confirms and reproduces established social arrangements, and marriage that, at this particular time, was seen as the best possible arrangement in an imperfect world and, moreover, the sole arrangement by which we can nurture precious moral affections. On some counts, as we have already seen, Austen clearly parts company with the conservative apologists of her own time. Family affections are so far from being considered sufficient or essential to the development of rectitude here, any more than in *Sense and Sensibility*, that Darcy cannot be an acceptable husband until his moral imagination has been broadened enough to respect the dignity of those outside his “family circle.” Furthermore, the wish to subordinate unruly individual passions to

prescribed social duties prompts conservative novelists such as Hamilton and West to minimize and even dismiss the importance of love as a precondition of marriage. Austen, on the other hand, puts a premium on it. Not without a touch of self-mockery which seems to imply an awareness that she is the heroine of an extraordinary novel, Elizabeth boasts that the marriage of Darcy and herself can “teach the admiring multitude what connubial felicity really was” (PP 312). At least one reason why she is right is that unlike Charlotte’s marriage to Collins, her marriage, as well as Jane’s, promises “rational happiness” as well as “worldly prosperity” (PP 307).

But there is more. Unlike Jane’s marriage to Bingley, Elizabeth’s relationship with Darcy resonates with a physical passion the milder couple lacks. The rapport between these two from start to finish is intimate, even racy. Even as he disapproves, Darcy, for example, admires “the brilliancy which [Elizabeth’s] exercise had given to her complexion” (PP 33). Furthermore, their exchanges are marked either by playful invitations to aggression—Elizabeth’s semiearnest “Despise me if you dare” (PP 52), and Darcy’s gallant “I am not afraid of you” (PP 174)—or by mutual accusations, the eventual acrimoniousness of which both proves and advances their intense intimacy: their arguments about personal motives or family embarrassments leave them more and more exposed to each other, and as a result more and more implicated in each other’s trust. The fact that Darcy and Elizabeth form and pursue most of their relationship in secret and alone not only electrifies this intimacy, but also pushes it to the verge of an impropriety unique in Austen’s fiction. As a rule, Austen’s lovers must contrive excuses for their tête-à-têtes: Henry Tilney’s dissembled wish to visit the Allens wins Catherine and himself a walk alone together; when Wentworth and Anne Elliot find themselves at an evening assembly together, they can only review their emotionally fraught history in a series of joyful but “short meetings” during which both pretend to be “occupied in admiring a fine display of green-house plants” (P 246). Often described with an attention to physical details which conservative novelists omit and with an indifference to the rules about proper parental guidance and the public supervision they recommend, the relationship between Elizabeth and Darcy, as Donald Greene has memorably written, is sure to comprehend more than the sober and cooperative companionship conservative novelists approved.¹ Austen’s implicit approval of erotic love, here and elsewhere in her

1 On this subject, Donald Greene’s “Jane Austen and the Myth of Limitation” is still illuminating.

fiction, suggests how she endorses the “affective individualism” that anti-Jacobin novelists were trying to quell.¹

These departures from orthodox injunctions about marriage aside, marriage is still the only destiny for women that Austen ever dramatizes at any length. True, marriage seems at times to be the way an author ends her novel not the way she represents what could or recommends what should happen in life. In *Northanger Abbey*, for example, Austen’s eleventh-hour fabrication ex nihilo of a husband for Eleanor Tilney is a self-conscious repudiation of the verisimilitude of her own ending, as well as a swipe at gothic procedure. Austen’s acute interest in probing and manipulating the conventional import of fiction, announced as early as the juvenilia, should make us chary about inferring that the marriages concluding her novels constitute an unequivocal ideological statement about marriage itself, considered either as a goal for women, or as a boon to society. But even if marriage in Austen’s novels is not always described realistically as a woman’s purpose in life, nothing else is, and because *Pride and Prejudice*, unlike all of the other novels, actually celebrates marital felicity as an ideal it has been particularly vulnerable to cogent feminist critiques. Unlike Edgeworth, Burney, and West, for example, Austen does not extensively consider female friendship as an important alternative or even supplement to the marital relationship, and considering her own circumstances as well as the accessibility of fictional alternatives, this omission has seemed like either a failure of nerve, or—worse perhaps—a failure of imagination.² When Elizabeth, for example, is trying to negotiate a tea-table tête-à-tête with Darcy, someone described only generically as “one of the girls” interposes herself with an untoward assertion of female solidarity: “The men shan’t come and part us, I am determined. We want none of them; do we?” (PP 341). But indeed we do want “them” to come and part “us,” and the success of this passage depends on our agreeing that it is folly to suppose that female bonding can or should displace men in the minds of sensible women.

Although Austen cannot completely recuperate from such criticism, some of its sting must be softened. *Pride and Prejudice* does

1 The controversial phrase “affective individualism” is of course from Lawrence Stone’s *The Family, Sex and Marriage, 1500–1800* (New York: Harper and Row, 1977).

2 Scholars who have considered Austen’s views on the subject of women’s friendship patriarchal include many who have influenced me: Janet M. Todd, *Women’s Friendship in Literature* (New York: Columbia University Press, 1980); and Nina Auerbach, *Communities of Women* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1978), pp. 38–55. See also Edna L. Steeves, “Pre-Feminism in Some Eighteenth-Century Novels,” *Texas Quarterly* 16 (1973): 48–58.

subscribe at least partially to myths about the glamour of social status and the fulfillment ideally offered by marriage, all of which progressive novelists had challenged, but only so that it can proceed to modify and repossess them from within. One of the most important reasons Elizabeth's marriage to Darcy is so wholly satisfying is that it requires no sacrifice of the two friendships Elizabeth has actually placed before Darcy all along. When he first proposes, he does not dream that Elizabeth's loyalty to her disappointed sister could possibly prevent Elizabeth from jumping gratefully at the chance to marry him, and to his immense mortification, he is mistaken: "Do you think that any consideration," Elizabeth retorts, with a mixture of indignation and incredulity, "would tempt me to accept the man, who has been the means of ruining, perhaps for ever, the happiness of a most beloved sister?" (PP 190). Darcy later makes himself desirable by righting the wrong done to Jane, thereby fostering rather than curtailing Elizabeth's attachment to her. Similarly, during her first survey of Pemberley, Elizabeth is saved "from something like regret" (PP 246) by recollecting that her uncle and aunt, a particular friend, would not be welcome there, and when the chastened Darcy does meet them, he is visibly surprised and relieved to perceive that they would be acceptable guests and relations after all.

While much eighteenth-century fiction, as Janet Todd has demonstrated, ridicules women for sacrificing the purities of disinterested friendship to the treacheries of husband hunting, Austen's novels do not in my view join the chorus. They do not present female community as an "oppressive blank" to be dispersed only by the relieving "solidity of marriage." Nor do they suggest that the marital relationship ought to take precedence over rational friendship or the dictates of self-respect.¹ Marriage is an unquestioned necessity in Austen's novels, but it is never the first or only necessity, and the women, as well as the men, who pursue it as though it were never enjoy the full benefits of authorial approval even if they are spared the burden of specific censure. Elizabeth Bennet is not any less haunted than Charlotte Lucas is by the specter of poverty, and she wins our respect by refusing unsuitable proposals anyway, fully conscious that, as Mr. Collins does not scruple to assert in the recommendation of his own suit, "it is by no means certain that another offer of marriage may ever be made" (PP 108) to her. *Pride and Prejudice* is a work of wish fulfillment precisely because it does not bring Elizabeth's refusal to put marriage first to the test: it happily averts a showdown between survival and self-respect, or love and friendship, for the two principal

1 Nina Auerbach, *Communities of Women* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1978), p. 55.

marriages at the end settle potentially competing claims without conflict or sacrifice. Like *Sense and Sensibility*, *Pride and Prejudice* widens the family circle beyond the narrow boundaries to which counter-revolutionary writers had implicitly or explicitly confined it. Its conclusion preserves the heroines' friendships and promises the mutual regard of husbands and relations. The band of good friends is all related by marriage in the end, but they are not good friends because they are related—as conservative apologists would have it—rather they are good relations because they were good friends first.

The celebrated balance of *Pride and Prejudice* is less a triumph of conviction than a provisional experiment, an effort to work through established forms—a conservative enterprise, after all—in order to transform them into the purveyors of ecstatic personal happiness. But although Austen would work through received forms throughout her career, we will certainly misrepresent her accomplishment if we posit this singular novel as the typical one against which the others are to be judged, for in no other novel, not even in *Emma*, would Austen allow us to believe that structures of authority could be assailed without irreparably tarnishing their luster. The aura of hyperbole permitted to glamorize Darcy is so powerful that we typically extend it to all of Austen's novels. But Austen's next novel would immediately retrench and strip institutions of the obfuscating and seductive myths with which conservative apologists had invested them. Mr. Rushworth is richer than Darcy by far, and yet he is never more than a booby squire, oddly deserving the disgrace of cuckoldry to which he is treated in the end. In *Pride and Prejudice* patricians may be laughed at, and even brought low, but that is only to purge them from the insolence that makes them oppressive, not the dignity that makes them desirable. In *Pride and Prejudice* alone Austen consents to conservative myths, but only in order to possess them and to ameliorate them from within, so that the institutions they vindicate can bring about, rather than inhibit, the expansion and the fulfillment of happiness.

(1988)