

from “*Pride and Prejudice: The Speenhamland System*” [from *Jane Austen and the State of the Nation*]

[In *Jane Austen and the State of the Nation*, Sheryl Craig reads Austen’s novels as political novels, arguing that her work displays a lifelong investment in liberal Tory views. In this chapter on *Pride and Prejudice*, she argues that, beyond the novel’s widely recognized engagement with the economics of marriage, in its later volumes *Pride and Prejudice* can be read as a “1796–97 state-of-the-nation novel” reflecting contemporary debate regarding the Poor Laws and the possibility of a minimum wage. Whig characters, Craig argues, are easily identifiable in the novel, and include “admirable” moderates (who might serve as Tory allies) as well as “detestable” radicals.]

When *Pride and Prejudice* was originally written as *First Impressions* in 1796 and 1797, Austen’s novel appears to have been taking a stand in favor of two controversial economic proposals being debated in the House of Commons and in the press, a national minimum wage and an expansion of the existing Poor Law benefits. The minimum wage proposal, known as the Speenhamland System, was based on the price of a loaf of wheat bread. The idea was that at the end of a workday, a man should be paid enough to buy a loaf of bread in order to maintain himself. The other economic proposal was an expansion of the old Elizabethan Poor Laws, which would have made it easier for people to get welfare benefits and would have increased the benefits they were eligible to receive. Both proposals were championed by Tory Prime Minister William Pitt and supported by liberal-Tories and moderate Whigs in the House of Commons. Both proposals were opposed by radical Whigs and reactionary Tories who argued that the proposals were too expensive and entirely unnecessary. The eligible bachelors in *Pride and Prejudice* are all associated with the Whig party, as is Lady Catherine de Bourgh, but the Whig characters have very different attitudes towards money and towards the working class, as did the Whigs in the House of Commons. Moderate Whigs supported Pitt’s welfare reform, but their radical colleagues argued vehemently against it.

Austen’s original readers would have known that Elizabeth Bennet’s agricultural county, Hertfordshire, was, at least for the working class, the poorest county in England, as Frederic Eden’s 1797 *The*

State of the Poor survey documented. At the other end of the spectrum, Fitzwilliam Darcy's Derbyshire, financially stimulated by the Industrial Revolution, was one of the richest counties in the nation, and Lady Catherine de Bourgh's Kent was a mixed county that varied enormously from parish to parish, both in prevailing wages and in the welfare available to the poor. The admirable Whig characters in *Pride and Prejudice*, Fitzwilliam Darcy and Charles Bingley, are kindly and generous, while the radical, evangelical Whigs, Lady Catherine de Bourgh and Mr. Collins, are selfish and stingy. Whig George Wickham is simply an opportunist and a scoundrel. By its presentation of the different Whig characters, the text was appealing to Whig readers to be generous to the working class and encouraging Tory readers to support the Prime Minister and look approvingly on those Whigs who were willing to join with them in order to help the poor.

Pride and Prejudice also includes a large number of characters who are servants, many identified by name. As most of them have no dialogue and do nothing to forward the plot, their presence in the novel at all may seem curious, but the depiction of the working class would have been a clear message to Austen's original readers, as the servants in *Pride and Prejudice* refute the assumptions of prominent radical Whig politicians, Edmund Burke, Frederic Eden, Jeremy Bentham, and Patrick Colquhoun, who depicted the lower class as ignorant, dishonest, and wasteful. Lady Catherine's financial neglect of the poor in Kent conforms to the radical Whigs' advice based on their assumptions that the working class was already adequately compensated for their labor and that poverty was the result of the irresponsible behavior of the poor. In stark contrast, Fitzwilliam Darcy's generosity to the poor in Derbyshire serves as a model response to poverty, and the general prosperity of Darcy's home county suggests that the solution to poverty is a combination of higher wages and liberal charity, exactly what the Prime Minister was proposing in 1797.

Without an awareness of the national economic debate raging in England at the end of the eighteenth century, the modern reader tends to see only the first and still obvious economic theme in the novel, "that a single man in possession of a good fortune must be in want of a wife" (*P&P*). The economics of marriage is certainly the focus of the first half of the novel and a subject that time has done little to obscure. Samuel Macey categorizes Jane Austen's novels as tales of "economic wish fulfillment" and "that typically vicarious pleasure which derives from a poor girl making good" (158–9), but it appears to be the economic wish fulfillment of the reader that is satisfied, rather than the financial aspirations of Elizabeth Bennet. After

all, fully aware of his annual income and “his large estate in Derbyshire” (*P&P* 10), Elizabeth rejects Fitzwilliam Darcy’s first offer of marriage. Darcy would never have had to ask Charlotte Lucas twice.

Through the first two volumes of the novel, Elizabeth Bennet expresses no particular inclination to marry at all. When Elizabeth is slighted by Mr. Darcy, she decides to dislike him in return. Elizabeth is also pursued by William Collins, whom she loathes, and Elizabeth enjoys a flirtation with George Wickham, although she is not “seriously in love” (*P&P* 142). Colonel Fitzwilliam’s “situation in life was most eligible” (*P&P* 181), and Elizabeth’s friendship with the Colonel seems potentially promising, but their entire acquaintance lasts only three chapters and ultimately, and rather abruptly, comes to nothing. Colonel Fitzwilliam’s confession that “there are not many in my rank of life who can afford to marry without some attention to money” takes Elizabeth by surprise: “‘Is this,’ thought Elizabeth, ‘meant for me?’” (*P&P* 183), but Elizabeth is only temporarily embarrassed, not heartbroken. Until the last volume of the novel, Elizabeth, like the reader, merely observes the other characters’ romantic entanglements with an amused detachment, waiting to see how it will all turn out. *Pride and Prejudice* initially distracts the reader, just as Elizabeth Bennet is at first distracted, with the idea of money and matrimony, and the novel changes its focus from domestic economics to political economics so seamlessly that readers often fail to notice the transition.

Once Colonel Fitzwilliam has tactfully withdrawn from the field, then there is no more to be said on the subject of money and marriage. At Rosings, the money and marriage discussion concludes, but a second economic focus has just opened up as Elizabeth and the reader have seen how Lady Catherine de Bourgh treats her dependents in her parish in Kent. When Elizabeth Bennet leaves her home in Hertfordshire in Volume 2 to travel to Kent and then to Derbyshire in the first chapter of Volume 3, both Elizabeth and the reader are drawn out of Elizabeth’s Hertfordshire to different counties where Elizabeth and the reader observe wealthy residents in their homes and learn something significant about economics in other parts of England. Thus, in Volumes 2 and 3, *Pride and Prejudice* functions as a 1796–97 state-of-the-nation novel.

Elizabeth Bennet is a relatively poor gentlewoman from a relatively poor part of the country. According to Frederic Eden’s *The State of the Poor*, Elizabeth’s particularly cozy little corner of the world, appropriately named Meryton, with its balls, and assemblies, and card parties and dinners, seems to be in stark contrast to the grim economic reality of Hertfordshire’s low wages, expensive food,

high unemployment, and widespread poverty (205–07). Elizabeth's enjoyment of the present belies the economic threat looming in her future and just outside of her door.

Georgian economist Arthur Young estimated that after the 1794–95 harvest failure, the poor in England numbered eight million out of a total population of nine million (Himmelfarb 77). Most of the residents in poor houses were either very young or very old. Tax rates to comply with the Poor Law were set by the landowners in each parish, supposedly in response to need. The result was that taxes and welfare benefits varied enormously from county to county and parish to parish, depending on the generosity or miserliness of the local landowners. To prevent welfare shopping, parishes were only required to provide for local residents well-known in the community. Outdoor relief, that is providing benefits to people not residing in the poorhouse, was a common practice, and some counties, like the Bennets' Hertfordshire, were making it increasingly difficult to gain admittance to their poorhouses (Eden 206).

In 1797, Frederic Eden acknowledged the hardship of the times: "That [the poor] have, during the last two years, been subjected to great distress, from a rise, unexampled within the present century in the price of the necessities of life, everyone will readily acknowledge" (120). Whig MP Jeremy Bentham conceded that for "the great bulk of the inhabitants of this country ... their utmost means are inadequate to their own maintenance" (12). What was also indisputable was that there had been a sharp increase in the number of people requesting Poor Law relief, and the applicants included a large percentage who had never before in their lives applied for parish assistance and, most shockingly of all, were fully employed.

Normally, about ten percent of the inhabitants in a parish received some form of aid through the Poor Laws, but following the harvest failure, the average was more than 40 percent (Rule 116), and in some parishes, more than 60 percent of the parishioners were receiving poor relief. In most parishes, the taxes that funded parish relief, the poor rates, were woefully inadequate to meet the increased demand for welfare benefits in the form of a weekly allowance of money, subsidized bread, or admittance to the poorhouse. Radical Whig Jeremy Bentham referred to the poor rates as "The Limited, or Inadequate-provision system" (151), and Church of England vicars, like Jane Austen's father, were going cap-in-hand to the local gentry to request additional money for the poor.

As Frederic Eden documents, magistrates in some parishes and counties, such as Hampshire, had voluntarily raised their poor rates

to respond to the need (195), while in other parishes and counties, like Hertfordshire, the poor law taxes remained unchanged (206). In the parish of Chalk in northern Kent, “the great” voluntarily paid higher wages to their employees and further “assisted laboring people” by subsidizing the cost of wheat bread (Eden 209), but not so in other parts of Kent, like the parish of Westwell where, according to Eden, “The Poor are not well managed” (212). The gentry in Chipping Barnet in Hertfordshire chose to do nothing, presumably hoping to wait the crisis out, like Mr. Bennet taking refuge in his library. But, as Eden found, they were unwilling to admit it as “parish officers wholly refused to give any information whatever respecting the Poor or assessments” (206). Meanwhile, the well fed fortified their houses, barns, stables, and henhouses against their hungry neighbors.

In the two years Jane Austen was writing *First Impressions*, *The Hampshire Chronicle* was full of accounts of purloined food and missing livestock; sheep seem to have been particularly vulnerable to theft (5 March 1796, 4). Convicted thieves and poachers were either hanged or transported, but it must have been difficult to even narrow down a list of suspects when more than half of the village had a powerful incentive to steal. Everyone acknowledged that the situation was critical, but what they could not agree on was the best response. ...

... [I]n *Pride and Prejudice*, Jane Austen made it easy for her reader to identify the Whigs, both admirable moderates and detestable radicals, among her characters.

When Charles Bingley first appears in the flesh, the Bennet sisters note, and the reader learns, that Bingley “wore a blue coat” (*P&P* 9). As historian Venetia Murray reminds us, a blue coat was the well-known “Trademark of the Whigs” (26), so donning a blue coat was as good as wearing a political campaign button. As Bingley is soon to convert his money into land, however, he may not remain a Whig for much longer, but, even as a Whig, Bingley is a good, kind, and “sensible” man (*P&P* 14). Regardless of political affiliation, once he becomes a landowner, Bingley will be subject to taxation, and his poor rates will support the needy in his local parish.

George Wickham also has “his blue coat” (*P&P* 319), but, as a military man, like Colonel Fitzwilliam, Wickham is dependent on Whig patronage for promotions. Wickham’s political statement, which could be put on or taken off as the occasion required, could be merely a reflection of his rapacious opportunism, but we are also told that old Mr. Darcy “supported [Wickham] at school, and afterwards at Cambridge” (*P&P* 200). As historian Ben Wilson maintains, in

the 1790s, Cambridge had a reputation for turning out religious non-conformists, hell raisers, and Whigs (169). As students, Cambridge alumni, like radical Whigs Lord Byron, Thomas Malthus, and the yet-to-be-converted William Wilberforce, had dined, drunk to excess, and gambled at The True Blue club.

Mr. Darcy is certainly a Whig as well. As Janine Barchas notes in *History, Location, and Celebrity: Matters of Fact in Jane Austen*, “the hero’s name, Fitzwilliam Darcy, amalgamates two branches of the Wentworth family of Whigs” (27). Lord Fitzwilliam, later Earl Fitzwilliam, was from the north of England and, as historian William Hague describes him, one of the “Three great Earls of the Whig aristocracy” (357), who were chosen to be members of William Pitt’s Cabinet in 1794 in an effort to form “a junction of parties if it could be attained” (356). A nephew of former Whig Prime Minister Lord Rockingham, Lord Fitzwilliam’s house, intriguingly named Wentworth Woodhouse, was and still is the largest private residence in Britain. As Lord Fitzwilliam was able to put aside party politics in order to support the Tory Prime Minister’s proposals and to work with other Cabinet members in the opposition, Fitzwilliam Darcy is similarly open to compromise in order to achieve the greater good, even when it means negotiating with a bounder like George Wickham.

The last name, Darcy, brings the wealthy, northern, industrialist Darby family to mind. The Darbys made an enormous fortune in smelting iron, and Abraham Darby the third, who died in 1791, built the world’s first iron bridge, but he was also famous for his philanthropy to his employees. As Roy Porter summarizes them, the Darbys were among the group of northern Whig entrepreneurs, like Robert Owen, noted for their “industry, frugality and sober living, their secret being not to dissipate profits but to plough them back” into their employees (320). Darby bought farms to raise food for his iron workers, built housing for them, and offered higher wages than other competitive employers. With a name like Fitzwilliam Darcy, in 1797 England, Austen’s hero was bound to be a Whig, but a benevolent, moderate Whig, not a radical, and not opposed to reaching into his own pocket in order to help the poor.

Stingy Whigs

Even without a blue coat, tutoring at Cambridge, or a suggestive name, Lady Catherine’s political affiliation with the radical Whigs is apparent. In Volume 2 of *Pride and Prejudice*, Elizabeth and the reader are no longer dependent on William Collins’ descriptions of

Lady Catherine de Bourgh, tainted as they are by his “veneration for her as his patroness” (*P&P* 70), instead we are allowed to observe Lady Catherine for ourselves through the lens of the novel’s narrator. Lady Catherine’s incessant interference in other people’s affairs, her lecturing, accusing, and scolding conveyed a wealth of information to Austen’s original readers who would have quickly identified Lady Catherine’s assumed superiority and unrelenting bossiness as a caricature of someone following the lead of the radical Whigs, such as Burke, Eden, and Colquhoun, who felt entitled to look into the minutia of the day-to-day lives of the working class and to draw conclusions, pass judgment, and offer advice.

Like Lady Catherine, “delivering her opinion on every subject in so decisive a manner as proved that she was not used to have her judgment controverted” (*P&P* 163), Patrick Colquhoun in his publications was free to make statements without considering any opposition. Certainly the poor were unable to defend themselves in print. This was one of the criticisms leveled at Colquhoun by his contemporary and earliest critic, journalist R. Shaw (Wilson 103). Although Lady Catherine possesses no “extraordinary talents or miraculous virtue” (*P&P* 161), she assumes that because of her money and social position, she is more knowledgeable than the people around her. Distributing a “great deal of advice” and “dictating to others” (*P&P* 163), Lady Catherine’s “many instructions” and “advising” are all she offers to the less fortunate (*P&P* 176 & 213). According to the radical Whig economists, that was appropriate.

Frederic Eden insisted that the gentry should resist any misguided impulse to pay their employees higher wages but should, instead, “consult and co-operate with them in the practice of economy; it is far more useful to teach them to spend less, or to save a little, than to give them much more” (128). Eden maintained that the real problem with the working man was that he wasted his daily shilling:

Instead of the ill-grounded complaints, which have so often been reiterated by writers on the Poor, that the wages of industry are in general too inadequate to provide the labourers with those comforts and conveniences which are befitting his station in the community, they would better serve the cause of the industrious peasant and manufacturer by pointing out the best means of reducing their expenses. (100)

Colquhoun provided a list of topics to be elaborated on for the edification of the poor, including “providence and economy,” “frugal housewifery,” “frugality and sobriety,” “frugal cookery,” “patience

under adversity,” “female chastity,” and “the commendable pride of rearing a family without parish assistance” (99–100). Edmund Burke also advised advising: “Patience, labor, sobriety, frugality and religion, should be recommended to them” (253). According to the group consensus of the radical Whigs, poverty was the direct result of the gross ignorance and rampant immortality of the working class, and the only possible remedy was to make clear to the poor the error of their ways.

The humorlessness, priggishness, and self-righteousness of Lady Catherine, William Collins, and Mary Bennet is suggestive of a stereotype of the evangelical movement, which had political as well as religious connotations. Almost all evangelicals, dissenters, and Quakers were Whigs, and in the 1790s, they were founding “visiting societies” to call at the homes of the poor, to inspect the living quarters, question the inhabitants, and offer advice and religious counseling (Wilson 92). Whig MP Jeremy Bentham and political economist Patrick Colquhoun helped to form The Spitalfields Benevolent Society. Evangelical author Hannah More describes an idealized version of one of the Spitalfields Benevolent Society home visits in her 1817 religious tract, *The Delegate*.

The visitors in *The Delegate* give the poor protagonist money at the conclusion of their home inspection, but first he must prove himself above reproach and be judged morally worthy; his poverty is never in doubt. Victorian stereotypical evangelical characters very much like Lady Catherine de Bourgh are Mrs. Pardiggle, “a formidable style of lady” in Charles Dickens’ 1853 *Bleak House* (94), and the “habitually authoritative” Mrs. Proudie in Anthony Trollope’s 1857 *Barchester Towers* (23). In *The Angel Out of the House*, Dorice Williams Elliott examines this busybody character in Victorian literature, but Lady Catherine de Bourgh is surely its predecessor. As “Visiting lady” characters (Dickens 95) like Lady Catherine, Mrs. Pardiggle, and Mrs. Proudie demonstrate, the primary focus of the visiting society evangelicals was to offer advice, not financial aid.

According to Ben Wilson, the apparent stinginess of the radical Whig politicians and the religious zeal of the evangelicals made them oddly compatible in their opinions:

The doctrines of political economy and evangelicalism said that wealth creation, discipline and competition were not just good in themselves but religious and moral duties. For those uneasy people worried about the personal disadvantage of suppressing their emotions, the exploitation of others in a fierce capitalist economy or the social stigma of new money, it offered immediate

reassurance that what they were doing was natural, perhaps even a noble thing, and certainly the inevitable consequence of progress. It reassured people as consumers as well, for conspicuous consumption of luxuries was a stimulus to the economy. The successful deserved their riches by natural right; by the same token, the benighted poor merited their own position. (377)

No doubt, Lady Catherine would have agreed.

In *Jane Austen and the Clergy*, Irene Collins reminds us that a system for poor relief was already in place: “The parish vestry, at its annual meeting, elected not only the churchwarden but two overseers of the poor whose duty it was to collect and dispense the Poor Rate. ... The overseers of the poor were responsible to the magistrates” (118), but in *Pride and Prejudice* Lady Catherine usurps the established system. Instead of going through the usual channels with the church council, Mr. Collins, in his self-appointed roles as toady and busybody, carries all parish business directly to Lady Catherine who assumes the duties of the overseers and magistrate:

Elizabeth soon perceived that though this great lady was not in the commission of the peace for the county, she was a most active magistrate in her own parish, the minutest concerns of which were carried to her by Mr. Collins; and whenever any of the cottagers were disposed to be quarrelsome, discontented or too poor, she sallied forth into the village to settle their differences, silence their complaints, and scold them into harmony and plenty. (*P&P* 169)

The reader will note that money plays no part in Lady Catherine’s dealings with the poor. All Lady Catherine offers is unsolicited advice and criticism. The poor are no better off for Lady Catherine’s meddlesome visits. She leaves them just as hungry and poverty-stricken as she found them, and Lady Catherine does not limit her officious interference exclusively to the poor.

When Lady Catherine visits Hunsford parsonage, she conducts a tour of inspection similar to the fact-finding tactics of Eden and Colquhoun who forced their way into poorhouses, almshouses, charity hospitals, and cottages all over England. Like the poor targeted by the politicians and the visiting societies, Charlotte Lucas Collins never knows when Lady Catherine may descend:

Now and then, they were honoured with a call from her Ladyship, and nothing escaped her observation that was passing in the

room during these visits. She examined into their employments, looked at their work, and advised them to do it differently; found fault with the arrangement of the furniture, or detected the housemaid in negligence; and if she accepted any refreshment, seemed to do it only for the sake of finding out that Mrs. Collins's joints of meat were too large for her family. (*P&P* 169)

Lady Catherine's interest in what the Collinses were eating and her suggestion that Charlotte should be more frugal with the household budget seems to be an echoing of the radical Whigs' advice to the poor. As the text suggests, Lady Catherine's accusations and fault-finding do nothing to render her advice more palatable; the same was true of the politicians and presumably of the evangelical visitors.

Lady Catherine stages yet another "intrusion" at the Bennets' home (*P&P* 351). Arriving uninvited and unannounced, Lady Catherine obviously intends to take the family by surprise. She barges into the room as "the door was thrown open" (351), criticizes the Bennets' park and sitting room, and further inspects the house on her way out: "As they passed through the hall, Lady Catherine opened the doors into the dining-parlour and drawing-room, and pronouncing them, after a short survey, to be decent looking rooms, walked on" (352–3). Like the evangelicals during their home inspections, Lady Catherine expects Elizabeth Bennet to be humble and contrite through her accusatory tirade: "I will not be interrupted. Hear me in silence" (*P&P* 356).

According to Edmund Burke, the haves were far too indulgent in listening to the have-nots at all: "The cry of the people ... the most regarded, ought, in *fact*, to be the *least* attended to ... for [the poor] are in a state of utter ignorance" (262). In her "extraordinary visit" to Longbourn (*P&P* 360), Lady Catherine assumes a similar ignorance in Elizabeth Bennet and proceeds to tell Elizabeth, "if you were sensible of your own good" (*P&P* 356), what she should think. Elizabeth, naturally, resents Lady Catherine's "interference" (*P&P* 360), but, in the novel, Elizabeth is free to do what the poor and the readers of the politicians' writing were not: to answer back.

When first hearing of Lady Catherine from Mr. Collins, Mrs. Bennet remarks that "It is a pity that great ladies in general are not more like her" (*P&P* 67), but Lady Catherine's presence in the novel at all suggests that there may already have been too many. As historian David Kent observes, in Georgian England "desperate poverty existed in the midst of great wealth, none of which trickled down to ease the condition of the laboring poor" (5), certainly not in Lady Catherine's parish at any rate.

The irony of the rich advising the poor on how to spend less money never seems to have occurred to the radical Whigs. In their view, the wealthy were inherently qualified to offer sage advice, but it was decidedly a case of do as I say, not as I do. As William Collins is ever-ready to point out, Lady Catherine is not at all hesitant to spend her money frivolously and in ostentatious display. In “only one of Lady Catherine’s drawing-rooms ... the chimney-piece alone had cost eight hundred pounds” (*P&P* 75). Given that the average British family survived on a combined annual income of £45, according to Patrick Colquhoun (*Treatise on the Wealth* 124), other estimates, such as Frederic Eden’s, were considerably lower, Lady Catherine’s conspicuous consumption seems insensitive, rather vulgar, and utterly shameless. Lady Catherine’s “elegance of dress” (*P&P* 160), and “several” carriages (*P&P* 157), demonstrate that she routinely purchases expensive things she does not need and probably has no use for, and Lady Catherine’s rampant consumerism appears to be a corrupting influence on the impressionable. Mr. Collins’ “enumeration of the windows in front of the house, and his relation of what the glazing altogether had originally cost Sir Lewis De Bourgh” betray Collins’s parroting of Lady Catherine’s own boastful materialism (*P&P* 161). Although “the dinner was exceedingly handsome, and there were all the servants, and all the articles of plate which Mr. Collins had promised” (*P&P* 162), Elizabeth remains unimpressed, at least until she travels into Derbyshire.

“Mr. Pitt’s Friends”

... Darcy is “generous” (*P&P* 311), “the most generous-hearted” (*P&P* 249), “the most generous of his sex” (*P&P* 312), and he can afford to act on his magnanimous impulses as “he had liberality, and he had the means of exercising it” (*P&P* 326). Even in the act of character assassination, George Wickham allows that Fitzwilliam Darcy is “liberal and generous” and spends “his money freely” in order “to assist his tenants, and relieve the poor” (*P&P* 81). Wickham’s story of his own mistreatment would have been immediately suspect without this disclaimer. Only Elizabeth’s prejudice prevents her from questioning Wickham’s allegations of Darcy’s cruelty and neglect. Jane Bennet remains unconvinced by Wickham’s account: “It is impossible. No man of common humanity, no man who had any value for his character, could be capable of it” (*P&P* 85), and when Elizabeth travels to Derbyshire, she learns that her sister was right and that a significant part of Darcy’s income is invested back into the local community.

At Pemberley, Wickham's grudging admission of Darcy's generosity is seconded by the much warmer commendation of Darcy's housekeeper, Mrs. Reynolds, who gives Darcy "a most flaming character!" (P&P 248). Mrs. Reynolds praises Fitzwilliam Darcy for being "affable to the poor ... the best landlord, and the best master. ... There is not one of his tenants or servants but what will give him a good name" (P&P 249). As Mrs. Gardiner observes, high wages will ensure the loyalty of a man's employees: "he is a liberal master, I suppose, and that in the eye of a servant comprehends every virtue" (P&P 258), but, to remove all doubt, Mrs. Gardiner's friends in Lambton also "acknowledged, however, that he was a liberal man, and did much good among the poor" (P&P 265). Darcy's kindness to his underlings in Derbyshire covers a multitude of social *faux pas* in the ballrooms and drawing rooms of Hertfordshire, and Darcy is redeemed by his philanthropy.

As Elizabeth stares at Darcy's portrait, she reflects on his generosity and begins to fall in love with him:

There was certainly at this moment, in Elizabeth's mind, a more gentle sensation towards the original, than she had ever felt in the height of their acquaintance. The commendation bestowed on him by Mrs. Reynolds was of no trifling nature. What praise is more valuable than the praise of an intelligent servant? As a brother, a landlord, a master, she considered how many people's happiness were in his guardianship!—How much of pleasure or pain it was in his power to bestow!—How much of good or evil must be done by him! (P&P 250–51)

Darcy's "valuable qualities" are revealed in how he spends his money (P&P 265), and Elizabeth and the reader are simultaneously converted into admirers of a moderate Whig. Now assured that Darcy is "perfectly amiable" (P&P 376), the reader and Mr. Bennet are united in their acceptance of Darcy as Elizabeth's husband: "I could not have parted with you, my Lizzy, to any one less worthy" (P&P 377). Everyone is prosperous and content in Darcy's Derbyshire, which suggests that a combination of higher wages and more liberal charity would produce similar results in the rest of the nation.

Just as Fitzwilliam Darcy has been maliciously slandered, *Pride and Prejudice* also calls into question the radical Whigs' assumptions about the working class. The politicians blamed not the crop failures, nor low wages, nor high prices, but the poor themselves for their failure to thrive. In Edmund Burke's opinion, the poor had a volatile, bloodthirsty, mob mentality, like the French revolutionaries, and

would “rise to destroy the rich” by cutting their throats (252), if they were given a chance. Jeremy Bentham argued that the rate-payers should feed the poor out of “regard for the safety of the other classes” (150). Patrick Colquhoun also believed that the working class harbored decided criminal tendencies, and he compared the poor to an infectious disease spreading through the nation, “a gangrene in the body politic” which would grow “to threaten [the government’s] total dissolution” (64). But none of this paranoid fear of the poor is evident in *Pride and Prejudice*, neither does *Pride and Prejudice*, or any of Jane Austen’s other novels, depict servants as fools for the purpose of comic relief.

Silly and unscrupulous servants were common characters in popular fiction such as Laurence Sterne’s 1767 novel *The Life and Opinions of Tristram Shandy, Gentleman*, Tobias Smollet’s 1771 *The Expedition of Humphry Clinker*, and in David Garrick’s popular plays, *High Life Below Stairs* and *Bon Ton; or, High Life Above Stairs*, plays Jane Austen knew well (Byrne 9). According to an 1809 edition of *A Collection of Farces and Other Afterpieces*, *High Life Above* and *Below Stairs* were both still being performed on the stage in London as Jane Austen was writing *First Impressions* and revising *Pride and Prejudice*. As John Mullan reminds us in *What Matters in Jane Austen?*, servants “are ever-present in Austen’s fiction ... the servants see everything, and we as readers should *see* them watching and listening” (131), as Austen’s first readers would have, and it is significant that there are no servant buffoons in any of Austen’s novels.

The presence of so many industrious servants in *Pride and Prejudice* suggests the codependency of the classes and the inherent stability of Georgian England, in stark contrast to the radical Whigs’ negative stereotypes and violent predictions. American traveler Louis Simond recorded in his 1810 journal that the servants in England were surprisingly cheerful, hardworking, “civil and attentive” (2), especially so when compared to the servants in the United States: “Domestics are here not only more obliging and industrious, but, what is remarkable, look better pleased and happier” (5). As Simond noted, the tranquil lives of the gentry would not have been possible without staffs of competent and dependable menials: “The creditable and decent look of the servants is no less remarkable, and they are the mainspring of all the other comforts” (14). The servants in *Pride and Prejudice* would appear to confirm Simond’s observations and to supply ample evidence that, as the Bible says, “the labourer is worthy of his hire” (Luke 10:7).

Mrs. Nicholls at Netherfield, Mrs. Hill at Longbourn, and Mrs. Reynolds at Pemberley keep the home fires burning. Charles Bingley’s

acknowledgment that the Netherfield ball is entirely dependent on his housekeeper's preparing "white soup enough" is a tactful reminder that all of the gentry's social events were made possible by the labor of their servants (*P&P* 55). Mrs. Jenkinson and her four nieces, Miss Pope, and Mrs. Annesley care for and educate their employers' children. What would the Collinses do without their manservant John, or Mr. Philips without his man, Richard, or the Gardiners without their own John, or the Bennets without their footman? The Bennets' upper maid Sarah and Bingley's upper housemaid no doubt have an easier time of it than Mrs. Forster's maid Sally and the chambermaid at the inn in Lambton (*P&P* 41). Dawson, Lady Catherine's "waiting woman" (*P&P* 353), has, perhaps, the most unenviable job of all and would presumably be happy to change places with either of "the two elegant ladies who waited on [Bingley's] sisters" (*P&P* 41), but they all serve their employers without any hint of a complaint on either side.

The gardener at Pemberley escorts Elizabeth, her uncle, and aunt through the grounds and, "with a triumphant smile" (*P&P* 253), reveals his pride in his work. Austen's original readers did not need reminding that all of those carriages transporting people here and there were being driven by coachmen, the horses cared for by grooms and ostlers, and that the various estates were also working farms that employed villages of agricultural laborers. Miss Darcy's former companion, the perfidious Mrs. Younge, proves unworthy of the trust placed in her by her employer, but she is the shocking exception that proves the general rule. Mr. Darcy is so well served by his employees that he does not even suspect Mrs. Younge's duplicity. When Mr. Bennet teases Jane that, with her placid temperament and Bingley's ample income, "every servant will cheat you" (*P&P* 348), no one, not even Mrs. Bennet, takes his remark seriously. ...

... At the time *Pride and Prejudice* was published, the Speenhamland system and the reform of the Poor Laws were still topics of heated debate in the House of Commons. The radical Whigs now wanted to reform the Poor Laws themselves, but in order to cut taxes by reducing aid to the poor.

The Speenhamland system became both a minimum and a maximum wage in practice, a blessing and a curse to the working class. Beyond a doubt, it helped the poor to survive, but Speenhamland guaranteed the laborer bread and nothing more. When the cost of bread went down following a good harvest, the working man's wages were reduced as well, which was not at all the original intention of the Berkshire magistrates who met at Speenhamland. ...

(2015)

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1 This list has been modified to include only references relevant to the material reprinted here.