

from “Narrative Asymmetry in *Pride and Prejudice*” [from *The One vs. The Many*]

[In *The One vs. The Many*, Alex Woloch uses the concept of “character-space” to understand narrative focus in realist novels, examining the roles of both central (“The One”) and subordinated (“The Many”) characters in nineteenth-century fiction. In this chapter, he examines *Pride and Prejudice* as an example of novels with “the potential to shift the focus away from the established center, toward minor characters” and argues that the “structure of asymmetry” in Austen’s novel is both a “consequence and manifestation of social reality.”]

Minor Characters in a Narrative Structure

Critics have always noted the presence of flat characters in Jane Austen’s oeuvre—and *Pride and Prejudice* particularly—but they have rarely insisted on analyzing this flatness. On the contrary, the distinction between flat and round characters helps *facilitate* critical analysis—by opening up a rich series of thematic antitheses—but is rarely subject to interrogation itself. Mary Crawford and Fanny Price; Emma Woodhouse and Jane Fairfax; or, in *Pride and Prejudice* itself, Collins against Wickham, Bingley against Darcy, Charlotte against Elizabeth, Mary and Lydia against each other: these oppositions are the grist that has kept the thematic mill running so strongly in Austen criticism for so many years. Critics, of course, use all sorts of characters in this way, but few characters—or character-groups—have proven themselves as useful as Austen’s. To be a character in Austen is to get continually contrasted, juxtaposed, related to others, and, as such, to help build the thematic architecture that critics then discern. And if the weight of narrative signification seems to rest on all of these characters’ backs, it is minor characters, in particular, who bear the heaviest portion: unequal partners in a dialectic that could not take place if attention were limited to the protagonist herself.

How does criticism respond to this multiplicity of persons who are so integral to the novels’ thematic ambitions but who hold their

place so strangely, and precariously, in the narrative world?¹ Most often readers have understood Austen's flat characters as a reasonable imitation of actual life. If there are round and flat characters in Austen, this is an accurate representation of the real social universe—which has a few sympathetic people (always including the reader or critic him- or herself) and many simple and superficial people. For instance, Tony Tanner writes that “Elizabeth has a dimension of complexity, a questing awareness, a mental range and depth which almost make her an isolated figure trapped in a constricting web of a small number of simple people” (126). In this reading, minor characters such as Mary Bennet, Lydia Bennet, Mr. Collins, Mr. Wickham, etc., are essentially verisimilar, and the novel is stocked with flat characters because there are so many “simple people” in real life.²

Other critics take an opposite tack, noting the way that Austen's minor characters are *clearly* distorted and, therefore, cannot be interpreted as the transparent reflections of credible persons. For instance, D.W. Harding discusses a set of techniques that Austen uses again and again to effectuate caricature:

As a general rule attention is then concentrated on a few features or a small segment of the personality to the neglect of much that would make the figure a full human being, and the understanding is that the reader will accept this convention and not inquire too closely into the areas of behavior and personality that the author chooses to avoid. ... [I]t works only because of an implicit

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- 1 I take this phrase from [Charles] Dickens's *Bleak House*, where Esther Summerson (at once a startlingly major and minor character, collapsing the terms of this study in on themselves) writes, “So strangely did I hold my place in this world that until within a short time back I had never, to my own mother's knowledge, breathed—had been buried—had never been endowed with life—had never borne a name” (569).
 - 2 This is already a theme in one of the first important essays on Austen's work. In his unsigned 1815 review of *Emma*, Walter Scott writes of Austen's presentation of Mr. Bennet and Mr. Collins in *Pride and Prejudice*: “This is one of the portraits from ordinary life which shews our author's talent in a very strong point of view. A friend of ours, whom the author never saw or heard of, was at once recognized by his own family as the original of Mr. Bennet, and we do not know if he has yet got rid of the nickname. A Mr. Collins, too, a formal, conceited, yet servile young sprig of divinity, is drawn with the same force and precision” (reprinted in Littlewood, 293). In the subtle play *between* “force” and “precision,” we can already sense the same dynamics of caricature—while precision implies the author's holding back in relation to the object, force implies the opposite.

agreement to ignore the greater part of any real personality in which the exaggerated features are embedded. (89)

Harding's comments invert the simple mimetic reading, but in both cases analysis of minor characters is cut off prematurely. Tanner's argument says, "Real people are actually like this"; Harding's says, "Well, they are not *supposed* to seem real" or "Obviously, no real people are actually like this." Both avoid analyzing narrative asymmetry itself: the dynamic narrative subordination of potentially full human beings.

To justify his model, Harding points to a "convention" that underlies the way we read, but does not provide any evidence for this shared "understanding," "rule," or "implicit agreement." What if we find that Austen's novels constantly, if subtly, call attention to the "areas of behavior and personality" that are distorted or effaced through characterization? How would a reading proceed that does "inquire ... closely" into the "neglect[ed]" (and yet simultaneously "exaggerated") personality of minor flattened characters, not to bring into light what the "author chooses to avoid" but as these rejected potentialities and elided points of view also constitute part of the novel's achieved structure? In this chapter, I want to denaturalize asymmetry, using *Pride and Prejudice* to establish more general interpretive premises: both that many nineteenth-century novels sense the potential to shift the focus away from the established center, toward minor characters, and that novels often obliquely or emphatically represent this process, even while constructing strong distinctions between a central protagonist and a manifold field of minor characters. The more dynamic examples of asymmetric characterization do not simply represent these minor characters but represent characters *becoming* minor within a complex narrative system.

In a famous passage in *Middlemarch*, George Eliot criticizes precisely the reading model or "implicit agreement" to which Harding subscribes:

One morning, some weeks after her arrival at Lowick, Dorothea—but why always Dorothea? Was her point of view the only possible one with regard to this marriage? I protest against all our interest, all our effort at understanding being given to the young skins that look blooming in spite of trouble; for these too will get faded, and will know the older and more eating griefs which we are helping to neglect. In spite of the blinking eyes and white moles objectionable to Celia, and the want of muscular curve which was morally painful to Sir James, Mr. Casaubon had

an intense consciousness within him, and was spiritually a-hungered like the rest of us. (253)

This passage argues for the approach I want to take to the realist novel, insisting that the balance between different kinds of characterization—and the asymmetrical space that different characters occupy within the novel—is relevant to the significance of the novel as a whole. The distributed pattern of characterization, Eliot suggests, is a dynamic narrative process that can be actively interrogated, rather than simply taken for granted. In other words, the question “why always Dorothea?” or Elizabeth Bennet, or Julien Sorel, is worth asking in the first place. This question, however, does not derive simply from a method of reading (Harding’s convention or agreement) that we bring to bear on a text with its own, different concerns. Rather, I want to argue that the problem of distribution is motivated by, and emerges out of, the text’s own mimetic and structural logic. In this sense, Eliot does not *impose* a moral problematic onto realist narration but rather theorizes or brings to the surface a dynamic literary process that has informed the realist novel all along.¹ Eliot’s comment is an overt ethical intervention, certainly, but it also astutely identifies a literary structure, a central narrative procedure through which a literary text organizes itself.²

The question that Eliot asks is already profoundly elaborated—in its essential narrative and social dimensions—in Austen’s early-nineteenth-century novels. The dynamic, asymmetrical balance between different characters—and between different modes of

1 As I discuss in the introduction [not reproduced here], Dorothea’s ambiguous but finally resilient centrality in *Middlemarch* is one of the more important examples of the dynamics of the protagonist’s space in Victorian fiction. Ironically, this very passage helps *construct* Dorothea’s central space on one narrative register, even while it explicitly motivates a shift toward Casaubon. The double reference to Celia and Sir James builds the larger symbolic opposition between their two different types of superficiality against Dorothea’s depth of character; thus the narrator’s negative judgment of Celia and Sir James—ostensibly invoked to pull attention away from Dorothea—also develops her centrality on the symbolic plane.

2 It is also clear that in one important sense Harding’s model cannot be the basis for a structural understanding because this “implicit agreement,” if it could actually be followed, would drain caricature of any force—would, in fact, make caricature disappear as a descriptive category. If we were actually to become fully oblivious to the wholeness of a human personality, we would be unable to recognize a representation *as* caricature. Even to make Harding’s division between characters and caricatures relies, finally, on the comparison to real people that he then wishes to deny.

characterization—is not simply a thematic concern of Austen’s novels, nor a moral or political question that we impose on the finished text, but rather a narrative process that is intertwined with, and unfurls out of, the novels’ basic internal structure. This is most clear in *Pride and Prejudice*, because the tension between a protagonist who is interesting in-and-of-herself and minor characters who function only in relation to a central protagonist is dramatized through two competing registers of narrative attention: the five Bennet sisters *in general*, as a family unit faced with the same problem and attracting the same narrative interest, and Elizabeth Bennet *in particular*, the protagonist of the novel, who transcends the social context in which she has been placed to become the center of the narrative in-and-of-herself. ...

The Double Meaning of *Character*

Pride and Prejudice does sometimes seem to stratify itself into two distinct levels. It is as though the text encourages us to take in the increasingly intense relationship between Elizabeth and Darcy on one register, while apprehending the many memorable minor characters on another. However, analysis of the novel needs to highlight the dialectical links between these two narrative registers, to bring out the textual logic that makes them coalesce into a unified whole. We can see an early example of these two descriptive modes in the first moment of detailed characterization in the novel, the depiction of Mr. and Mrs. Bennet that ends chapter 1. This opening chapter consists mainly of quoted dialogue between Mr. and Mrs. Bennet; after the first two sentences the narrator rarely intrudes (except to present indirect quotations or an occasional light-hearted comment). In the chapter’s last paragraph, however, the narrator shifts into a quite different tone, offering a summary judgment of the characters who have been talking:

Mr. Bennet was so odd a mixture of quick parts, sarcastic humour, reserve, and caprice, that the experience of three and twenty years had been insufficient to make his wife understand his character. *Her* mind was less difficult to develope. She was a woman of mean understanding, little information, and uncertain temper. When she was discontented she fancied herself nervous. The business of her life was to get her daughters married; its solace was visiting and news. (5)

Juxtaposed against the clipped conversation, this description announces the omniscient narrator's analytic seriousness, showing us that the novel will not be concerned simply with presenting surface appearances but will scrutinize its characters' essential qualities. To read such a complex, intimate appraisal of a character so early in a novel is jarring—the reader is forced to pause and try to figure out what it means to describe a human being as “a mixture of quick parts, sarcastic humour, reserve and caprice.” This pause can be explained technically and analyzed on a formal level: phonetically, through the lack of assonance and the polysyllabic words; syntactically, through the heavy presence of abstract nouns; and semantically, through the simultaneous deployment of both contradictions (“quick parts”/“reserve”) and synonyms (“sarcastic humour”/“caprice”). But we also have to slow down because of *what* the language is describing, because of the startling way in which the narrator presents a human being, encapsulating such a complicated person in only ten words when “three and twenty years” is insufficient to reveal his “character” to his wife. The formal qualities of the sentence are a reflection of the narrator's insistence on accurately presenting the inner nature of Mr. Bennet's character.

This is an uncommon and original understanding of how to align a work of literature with an individual life—of how a sense of the human can be refracted through a literary text. As Raymond Williams writes:

In most drama and fiction the characters are already pre-formed, as functions of certain kinds of situation and action. “Creation” of characters is then in effect a kind of tagging: name, sex, occupation, physical type. In many important plays and novels, within certain class modes, the tagging is still evident, at least for “minor characters,” according to social conventions of distribution of significance (the characterization of servants, for example). Even in more substantial characterization, the process is often the activation of a known model. ... The detailed and substantial *performance of a known model* of “people like this, relations like this,” is in fact the real achievement of most serious novels and plays. Yet there is evidently also a mode beyond reproductive performance. There can be new formations of “character” and “relationship,” and these are normally marked by the introduction of different essential notations and conventions, extending beyond these specific elements to a total composition. Many of these new articulations and formations become, in their

turn, models. But while they are being formed they are creative in the emergent sense. (*Marxism and Literature*, 208–9)

The description of Mr. Bennet is arguably part of a “new formation of character” in Austen, which is more psychological and analytic than that of previous British fiction. This new mode of characterization emerges in relation to Austen’s strikingly original voice, perhaps the most notable use of omniscient narrative in the British novel since Henry Fielding, whose own omniscience is in quite a different mode. And part of the originality in Austen’s omniscient, impersonal narrative is precisely what we see in this passage: the authority it gives her to probe the psychological workings of her characters.

Besides grounding stylistic or formal originality in the realm of characterization, Williams stresses that both “minor characters” and more rounded characters are subsumed under this creative model—that a signal method of narrative will somehow be directed toward both “character” and “relationship.” How a novel finds new forms of representing individuals is connected, in other words, to how a novel “*distributes*” significance across a group of characters implicated within a single narrative. Austen’s new style of omniscience also, crucially, intensifies this narrative relationship between characters, who are juxtaposed and concatenated within a closed and intricately organized discursive structure. What is so interesting about the closing paragraph of chapter 1 is not merely that Austen’s intriguing description of Mr. Bennet absorbs us, but, also, that we are immediately forced to shift our attention elsewhere. While we expect the concise appraisal of Mr. Bennet’s odd character to be elaborated, we are instead directed toward Mrs. Bennet’s qualitatively different character. The shift is accomplished through the heavily emphasized “*her*”: a use of italics that occurs throughout the novel to foreground a particular character. The narrator again unfurls her nuanced psychological vocabulary, but now a single characteristic emerges in different terms—“mean,” “little,” “uncertain.” It is as though the language of precision—confronted with Mrs. Bennet’s shallow mind—is drained of its own specificity.

We can already see a central tendency of the narrator: to closely link the description of an “intricate” mind with a counterpoised description of a “simple” one. Of course, it makes sense that descriptions of a husband and wife are placed side by side, but this overt motivation for the sentence does not fully explain the logic of the juxtaposition. The sentence places complexity and superficiality together in a way that will be repeated throughout the novel. Besides the two different characters who are linked by marriage, the paragraph suggests

two linked modes of existence—and two registers of description that reflect these modes. And the abrupt shift from Mr. Bennet's depth to Mrs. Bennet's shallowness implies some kind of interconnection, some logic of "relationship," which governs both these modes of existence, and out of which they both emerge.

The achievement of Austen's narrative is to densely correlate two kinds of comparison—so that the abstract comparison between different personal qualities, or the discrimination of interior consciousness and personality, is grounded in the more concrete juxtaposition of different characters, or individuals, within a social field. "In understanding Darcy was the superior. Bingley was by no means deficient, but Darcy was clever" (16). These two short sentences are a very condensed example of a process that repeats itself over and over again in *Pride and Prejudice*. The passage establishes two kinds of comparison: the social distinction between two persons and the more conceptual, abstract distinction between two kinds of intelligence. This second relation—between "understanding" and "cleverness"—does not distinguish Darcy and Bingley per se but rather illustrates more general gradations of human consciousness through Darcy and Bingley. But the nuanced distinction between "understanding" and "cleverness," which concerns the interior realm of human character, is built in-and-through a social comparison that is necessarily exterior. The early juxtaposition of Mr. and Mrs. Bennet, set off at the end of chapter 1, is the novel's first major example of this process, as the interior comparison of different characteristics gets entangled with the exterior juxtaposition of different characters.

All of Austen's novels—and not least of all *Pride and Prejudice*—are full of these double comparisons: where an abstract elaboration is purchased through a social distinction. Here are two more examples, one subtly juxtaposing Elizabeth and Jane, and the other more harshly juxtaposing Mr. Darcy and Mr. Hurst.

Elizabeth listened in silence, but was not convinced; their behavior at the assembly had not been calculated to please in general; and with more quickness of observation and less pliancy of temper than her sister, and with a judgment too unassailed by any attention to herself, she was very little disposed to approve them. (15)

Mr. Darcy said very little, and Mr. Hurst nothing at all. The former was divided between admiration of the brilliancy which exercise had given to her complexion, and doubt as to the

occasion's justifying her coming so far alone. The latter was thinking only of his breakfast. (33)

In the first example we see the rich psychological distinction between "observation" and "temper" (a distinction that bears on the very crux of epistemology) getting constructed only in-and-through a social comparison. In the second example these two types of discrimination have been temporally separated, so that the psychological juxtaposition of "admiration" and "doubt" precedes the harsh social comparison between Mr. Darcy and Mr. Hurst. But the motivation of this second comparison, the reason that the narrative suddenly turns to Hurst, lies in the processes of the first comparison: it is an extension and an elaboration of Darcy's depth of character to compare his divided consciousness with Hurst's. And it is precisely in this moment, when the interior is being separated from the social, that we see a truly flattened character. Flatness and asymmetry enter into the novel through this dissociation; they are a residue of the denied relationship between thought and social being.

This dissociation of the two types of comparison helps account for the passages' different tones: the irony that is so clearly emphasized in the second passage is almost imperceptible in the first. This is due to the positions of Hurst and Jane within the asymmetrical character-structure of the narrative as a whole. Hurst is a quintessentially reduced and flattened caricature, while Jane is the character who more than any other seems to gloss over the very fact of asymmetry: the one sister who is not harshly juxtaposed with Elizabeth, who does not experience a radically different fate, and who might be minor but certainly does not suffer from this minorness. Remembering this difference, we can begin to see more clearly the similarity between the two passages. It makes sense that the social distinction which facilitates the first comparison (between "observation" and "temper") is hidden in a subordinate clause, while the second comparison (between Darcy's "admiration" and "doubt") is emphasized through a clipped second sentence and in the mode of comic juxtaposition. It is as though Mr. Hurst is *so* different from Mr. Darcy that he cannot even be assimilated into the same grammatical structure.¹

1 In fact, the putatively subtle distinction between Elizabeth and Jane *is* pointedly ironic: the rhetoric of balance ("more" than, "less" than) obscures how *both* Elizabeth's surfeit of quickness and lack of pliancy work to suggest that Jane is simply not as smart. Furthermore, the identification of Elizabeth with "more quickness" directly echoes Mr. Bennet's claim that Elizabeth has "something more of quickness than her sisters" in chapter 1, which, we will see, both sets in motion and anchors the basic asymmetric elaboration of the character-system. To repeat this general claim in *specific* [continued]

All of these examples illustrate two different conceptions of character that coexist in Jane Austen: character as social being (a person *is* a character) and character as inner quality (a person *has* a character). The narrative structure that mediates between them is precisely asymmetry. Austen famously transforms the novel into a genre that abstracts, elucidates, and diagnoses human characteristics: facilitating contrasts between inner qualities like “observation” and “temper.” ...

The One vs. the Many

“I think you said she was a widow, sir? has she any family?”

“She has one only daughter, the heiress of Rosings, and of very extensive property.”

“Ah!” cried Mrs. Bennet, shaking her head, “then she is better off than many girls.”

—*Pride and Prejudice*, 67

In the first two sections I have tried to show how the distinction between flat and round characters is an organizing structure and not a contingent aspect of *Pride and Prejudice* and, by glancing at various examples from the novel, to show how this asymmetry contributes to a formal process in which characters, in juxtaposition with one another, are turned into interior characteristics. But why does the novel organize characterization in this way? What motivates this formal structure? If asymmetry is a means of recasting social relations within an abstracted psychological framework, Austen simultaneously shows us that the structure of asymmetry is itself a consequence and manifestation *of* social reality. In the next two sections I want to consider how the novel establishes a series of correspondences between the social world that underlies the fiction, the thematic interests of the novel, and this asymmetric narrative discourse.

Pride and Prejudice immediately creates two axes along which all the novel’s events are oriented. These two axes focus, respectively, on

reference to Jane helps enfold the sister who might seem to partially challenge Elizabeth’s lock on narrative centrality safely within the asymmetric structure. The subordinate clause in this sentence—“and with a judgment too unassailed by any attention to herself”—is also fascinating. Here the emphatic negative (“too unassailed”) even more successfully conceals the actual charge of this sentence—not just less intelligent, Jane, distracted by the attention she receives, is somewhat self-absorbed, a combination that is usually quite fatal in an Austen novel. This clause also deviously increases the narrative attention *toward* Elizabeth precisely in terms of her own meritorious self-neglect.

the individual as she develops, in-and-of-herself, across time, and on the individual as she is developed, in relation to many other persons, across social (and narrative) space. It is the combination of these two narrative planes, as they unfurl and interact, that anchors each episode of the novel within a larger semantic structure. To begin an analysis of these two axes, we can look at Austen's famous beginning:

It is a truth universally acknowledged, that a single man in possession of a good fortune, must be in want of a wife.

However little known the feelings or views of such a man may be on his first entering a neighbourhood, this truth is so well fixed in the minds of the surrounding families, that he is considered as the rightful property of some one or other of their daughters.

The opening sentence, set off as an entire paragraph, is a well-known encapsulation of the marriage plot. After reading only one sentence, we immediately know what will be the chief problem of this novel—and can even anticipate the happy conclusion. The opening sentence lays the foundations for a linear narrative, for a story that will delay, obscure, and ultimately satisfy the “want”—both a desire and a lack—that is the governing subject of the marriage plot. In satisfying this want, the marriage plot centers on marriage not as a social process but as the fulfillment of individual desire. Social reality is incorporated into this individual marriage plot only in a strictly linear form: as the stable transmission of private property. “Possession of a good fortune” is the precondition for the “want of a wife” both because marriage requires property—only a wealthy man is an eligible husband—and because property requires marriage, as the stable form of its transmission.

The second paragraph of *Pride and Prejudice*, also just one complete sentence, introduces a second plot, a subplot, which, in interaction with the marriage plot, creates the vitality of the narrative as a whole. Here, too, there is a “want” that must be satisfied and an instability that must be resolved, although they are more subtly emphasized. The sentence hinges on the indefinite nature of the closing phrase—“some one or other of their daughters”—which puts the marriage plot in a specifically social context. The first sentence asks, “When will the single man marry?” while the second sentence expands this question to “Whom—among many different choices—will the single man marry?” The narrative that emerges out of the first sentence is singular and internal, and can be resolved over time; this second narrative is plural, intersubjective, and can be resolved

only across a social space. Together they form the novel's two grids, a horizontal and a vertical plane, that assimilate a long list of dialectically charged terms—personal/public, temporal/spatial, psychological/ social, diachronic/synchronic, metaphoric/metonymic. The first sentence anticipates Elizabeth, who will occupy the narrative space of the protagonist; the second sentence anticipates Elizabeth's four sisters, who will necessarily become minor characters.

These two different ways of looking at the same institution of marriage will soon become a governing logic of the text, embodied in the tension between Elizabeth Bennet, projected forward across time by her own developing internal consciousness, and the five Bennet sisters, represented as a single social (and narrative) group.

"Is he married or single?"

"Oh! single, my dear, to be sure! A single man of large fortune; four or five thousand a year. What a fine thing for our girls!"

"How so? how can it affect them?"

"My dear Mr. Bennet," replied his wife, "how can you be so tiresome! You must know that I am thinking of his marrying one of them." (3-4)

This snippet of dialogue emphasizes the social dimension of the marriage plot; the competition that had been alluded to generally in the second paragraph as between "some one or other of their daughters" is now placed more specifically within the Bennet family. Mrs. Bennet is concerned with the individual as part of a larger group: she sees marriage as exterior to the particular point of view or character of any one of her daughters. Later in the paragraph Mr. Bennet, as though responding to this polycentric drift, makes a counterclaim, organizing the marriage plot around Elizabeth.

"I dare say Mr. Bingley will be very glad to see you; and I will send a few lines by you to assure him of my hearty consent to his marrying which ever he chuses of the girls; though I must throw in a good word for my little Lizzy."

"I desire you will do no such thing. Lizzy is not a bit better than the others, and I am sure she is not half so handsome as Jane, nor half so good humoured as Lydia. But you are always giving *her* the preference."

"They have none of them much to recommend them," replied he; "they are all silly and ignorant like other girls; but Lizzy has something more of quickness than her sisters." (4-5)

This crucial paragraph positions Elizabeth as protagonist of the novel—and makes being the protagonist a position defined *only in juxtaposition with her sisters*, and a position that is contested from the start. Thus Mr. Bennet's suggestive comment that Elizabeth "has something more of quickness than her sisters" is a comparative understanding of Elizabeth's character—and this comparison is built into the very quality that Elizabeth possesses. Elizabeth isn't first described as having, like Mr. Bennet, "quick parts," but rather "something more of quickness"—a quality that is comparative *prior* to being descriptive. Thus Elizabeth's distinguishing quality, which will motivate her narrative centrality, emerges in a comparative context, a comparison that arises only because of the social problem of marriage. A social pressure catalyzes a cultural comparison out of which the protagonist emerges—who will then develop along a plot-line that reverses these events, as she undergoes a cultural or interior education resulting in social stability.

To put it another way, Elizabeth is first singled out only because there is a social disequilibrium, an external pressure that forces the parents to make distinctions between their daughters. The social process of being "singled out" is then slowly transformed, over the course of the asymmetric narrative, into the lived experience of "singularity." Nancy Armstrong has noted the competitive nature of the marriage plot in *Pride and Prejudice*: "*Pride and Prejudice* presents the reader with a group of women who are daughters of polite country gentlemen and who compete among themselves in a matchmaking game. ... The game of love decides which female virtues are the most advantageous in a woman aspiring to live the good country life. As a result, such traditional female attributes as chastity, wit, practicality, duty, manners, imagination, sympathy, generosity, beauty, and kindness are pitted against each other in the competition among the Bennet sisters and their friends" (50). *Pride and Prejudice* does not just demonstrate how marriage puts various female "attributes" in competition with one another. Rather, it suggests, that attribution itself is a result of competition. The analysis of a person in terms of a quality, the understanding of a quality as distinct and independent of the person, the engulfing of a person within this hardened, reified quality—all this emerges out of competition itself. The first evaluation of the Bennet daughters as individuals does not precede the social question of marriage but is necessitated by it. We are back to the crucial narrative and descriptive process that we discussed above: the transformation of characters into characteristics. And we can now see more clearly the social pressure that motivates this rhetorical process. It is not simply that Austen's narratives often depict

social relationships in psychological terms. This incessant psychological comparison—which underlies the distinction between major and minor characters—revolves around a specific social problem, the tension between the one and the many. And in *Pride and Prejudice* this tension is condensed into, and finds its symbolic form in, competing representations of marriage as an individual experience and as a social institution.

The opening of *Mansfield Park* succinctly states the social problem that lies at the heart of *Pride and Prejudice*'s structure:

She had two sisters to be benefited by her elevation; and such of their acquaintance as thought Miss Ward and Miss Frances quite as handsome as Miss Maria, did not scruple to predict their marrying with almost equal advantage. But there certainly are not so many men of large fortune in the world, as there are pretty woman to deserve them. (3)

All the asymmetry of Jane Austen's work flows out of this final sentence, out of her struggle to produce a closed and ordered fictional universe that reflects a fundamentally fragmented and disordered social one. The sly tone of the sentence, its lighthearted irony, softens but does not elide the grim central insight: that the *system* of marriage as it operates on a social level inevitably produces disequilibrium, even if the experience of the marriage plot, for a particular individual, might produce stability. This disequilibrium is inevitably generated by the competition among many human agents for a limited number of positions and resources, and is one of the essential phenomena of modern capitalism. This is Austen's great imaginative achievement: to represent the disequilibrium of the new, dynamic competition which is emerging in her period through her depiction of a sphere of life that was typically understood as sheltered from, and even an alternative to, these economic structures. ...

Asymmetry: From *Discourse* to *Story*

“We must not be so nice. A few characters too many, must not frighten us.”

—*Mansfield Park*, 131

The first chapter of *Pride and Prejudice* obscures the novel's central focus. Will the narrative continue to depict all the five sisters as a social group or orient itself around Elizabeth, whom Mr. Bennet claims has “something more of quickness”? This wavering continues

a good way into the story. Austen's omniscience allows her to defocalize the novel, so that narrative attention drifts from person to person. Chapter 2 is set in an unspecified room in the Bennets' house, where Mr. and Mrs. Bennet and at least four of their daughters are talking. However, we do not find out that a particular daughter is present until Mr. or Mrs. Bennet actually speaks to her. The narrator simply follows the parents' wandering attention, as Elizabeth, Catherine, Mary, and Lydia are addressed before we are told that they are in the room. Throughout the chapter we have to repeatedly reconstitute our frame of reference to include more and more people:

Observing his second daughter employed in trimming a hat, he [Mr. Bennet] suddenly addressed her. (6)

Mrs. Bennet deigned not to make any reply; but unable to contain herself, began scolding *one of her* daughters.

"Don't keep coughing so, Kitty, for heaven's sake!" (6, emphasis added)

"What say you, Mary? for you are a young lady of deep reflection I know, and read great books, and make extracts." (7)

The five daughters are never explicitly located in the room; rather their presence seems to be simply assumed—as though the existence of *a* daughter implied the existence of *the* daughters. In fact, by the chapter's end all five sisters except Jane have been addressed and have spoken.¹ Furthermore, the group of daughters seems to *act* as a whole, so that the plural "they" or "the girls" is often the subject of a sentence, as in "[t]he girls stared at their father" (7) or, in the closing sentence (and paragraph) of the chapter: "The rest of the evening was spent in conjecturing how soon he would return Mr. Bennet's visit, and determining when *they* should ask him to dinner" (8, emphasis added). The sisters are presented primarily as a collective group, and the force of each character's own individuality is enough to arrest just the slightest narrative attention. Meanwhile, the

1 Is Jane in the room? This unanswerable question, in fact, leads into several others: Why wouldn't Jane be there—is there any textual evidence *included* that motivates her exclusion? If Jane *is* in the room (in the story), why doesn't she get incorporated into the narrative discourse? Or has Austen simply forgotten the character or not even considered this question? This third suggestion seems least likely: the rigorous configuration of "the girls" as a unit in the beginning of the narrative is necessarily reinforced by this final extreme of neglect, the lack of *any* attention directed toward the eldest sister, so that we don't even know whether she is present in the scene.

conversation itself revolves around each girl's reaction to Mr. Bingley's arrival and the way that his presence precipitates the question of marriage. The precarious space of the daughters within the narrative discourse thus mirrors the tension that Mr. Bingley's arrival naturally provokes, since "there are certainly not so many men of large fortune in the world, as there are pretty women to deserve them." Mrs. Bennet makes particular allusion to Lydia's especially difficult situation, as the youngest of the five daughters:

"Lydia, my love, though you *are* the youngest, I dare say Mr. Bingley will dance with you at the next ball."

"Oh!" said Lydia stoutly, "I am not afraid; for though I *am* the youngest, I'm the tallest." (8)

It is important to remember that if the narrative were to stop at this moment, Elizabeth would not stand out. The only bits of dialogue we hear from the daughter who has "something more of quickness" seem fairly banal:

"But you forget, mama," said Elizabeth, "that we shall meet him at the assemblies, and that Mrs. Long has promised to introduce him." (6)

and:

"When is your next ball to be, Lizzy?"

"To-morrow fortnight." (6)

It is from this inconspicuous origin that Elizabeth will soon grow to engulf the entire form of the narrative. The narrator herself does not seem particularly interested in Elizabeth in this chapter—we get no sense of her emotions or thoughts. The narrator uses existential adverbs to describe Lydia and Catherine ("I do not cough for my own amusement," replied Kitty *fretfully*" and "'Oh!' said Lydia *stoutly*" [emphases added]); and explicitly tells us what Mary is thinking: "Mary wished to say something very sensible, but knew not how." Elizabeth starts completely on the surface: lost among the rest of the family, making only an uninteresting comment about other people, *and* not attracting any of the narrative's own attention.

Chapter 3 continues to develop the novel's divided structure, and by the end of this section the essential armature of this structure is in place. At first glance, chapter 3 seems a bit scattered by exposition, since the narrator is concerned with introducing different characters

and conveying background information. In fact, the tension between the one and the many unifies this chapter, getting thematized both on the level of narrative form and style and in the referenced world of the story. In this sense, the asymmetric discourse of characterization becomes intertwined with the social conditions that it is attempting to describe. This brief chapter, as much as any other section of *Pride and Prejudice*, grounds the novel's own *discours* within its *histoire*. And these overlapping registers of asymmetry are emphasized by the chapter's brevity, with sudden juxtapositions calling attention to thematic continuities.

The chapter starts with the announcement of a party at Bingley's, prompting Mrs. Bennet to make a sort of double wish that concisely exemplifies the contradiction we have been examining: "If I can but see one of my daughters happily settled at Netherfield," said Mrs. Bennet to her husband, 'and all the others equally well married, I shall have nothing to wish for'" (9). Mrs. Bennet's wish occurs along two contradictory axes, united uneasily through the conjunction "and." She fluctuates between imagining the culturally privileged individual marriage plot—which must necessarily concern only "one of my daughters"—and recognizing the inadequacy of this structure for "all the others." Her statement wants to gloss over, but in fact calls attention to, the stubborn fact that if one daughter marries Bingley, it will be impossible for the other four to settle at Netherfield, and that there are not many other eligible husbands to be had. (And this tension among the five Bennet sisters is itself only the tip of the iceberg, since each family is also competing with the other "eligible" families.)

This asymmetry is presented more concretely, within the novel's visual field, when Mr. Bingley visits the Bennets and his singular presence is contrasted with the girls' plurality. In an image that encapsulates the inequality of social interaction, we see the five daughters look as a group at Bingley, as an individual, while he wishes, as an individual, to see them, as a group:

He had entertained hopes of being admitted to a sight of the young ladies, of whose beauty he had heard much; but he saw only the father. The ladies were somewhat more fortunate, for they had the advantage of ascertaining from an upper window, that he wore a blue coat and rode a black horse. (9)

This visual field—which blurs the sisters into a single mass while accentuating Mr. Bingley's individuality—is both a symbol for, and a

consequence of, the asymmetrical nature of marriage as a system of social organization and property transmission.

Chapter 3 begins to focus on Mr. Bingley's ball, which is the field in which the struggle among many women for a little property is actually enacted. At the same time, descriptions in this chapter revolve around questions of "character." Mr. Darcy's introduction immediately positions him on the two different registers of character that we previously examined: "Mr. Bingley was good looking and gentlemanlike; he had a pleasant countenance, and easy, unaffected manners. His sisters were fine women, with an air of decided fashion. His brother-in-law, Mr. Hurst, merely looked the gentleman; but his friend Mr. Darcy soon drew the attention of the room by his fine, tall person, handsome features, noble mien; and the report which was in general circulation within five minutes after his entrance, of his having ten thousand a year" (10). Here Darcy's privileged *social* position within a large group of characters—the way he draws "the attention of the room"—is intertwined with the valorization of his internally grounded *characteristics*, his "handsome features" and "noble mien." Which comes first? If the passage suggests that Darcy's social presence in the room is contingent on his own internal characteristics (he draws attention *by means of* his own qualities), these characteristics are themselves linked to his social position—as his "person," "features," and "mien" seem to flow inevitably out of his privileged position of "ten thousand a year." In either case it is important that the final elaboration of Darcy's presence is represented spatially, in a way that is almost a staging of the narrative's own tactics. We could say that Mr. Darcy draws the attention of the room around him the way that Elizabeth has not yet, but soon will, draw the structure of the narrative around her.

A little later, as Bingley tries to prod Darcy out of his aloofness, their discussion turns on this same social asymmetry, with Darcy insisting that besides Bingley's sisters, "there is not another woman in the room, whom it would not be a punishment to me to stand up with" (11). Bingley's response hovers on the fault line between the one and the many: "Upon my honour, I never met with so many pleasant girls in my life, as I have this evening; and there are several of them you see uncommonly pretty." Mr. Bingley's "and" is similar to Mrs. Bennet's conjunction at the beginning of the chapter. It juxtaposes his attempt to accommodate the multitude of "pleasant girls," as a group, with his need to distinguish "several of them" (e.g., Jane Bennet) as being, precisely, "uncommonly" pretty. ...

At the end of chapter 3, Mrs. Bennet attempts to describe the ball to Mr. Bennet. Once again the problem of asymmetry comes to

the surface, as we can read Mrs. Bennet's description as a particular mode of representation, which is radically distorted by multiplicity.

"Oh! my dear Mr. Bennet," as she entered the room, "we have had a most delightful evening, a most excellent ball. I wish you had been there. Jane was so admired, nothing could be like it. Every body said how well she looked; and Mr. Bingley thought her quite beautiful, and danced with her twice. Only think of *that* my dear; he actually danced with her twice; and she was the only creature in the room that he asked a second time. First of all, he asked Miss Lucas. I was so vexed to see him stand up with her; but, however, he did not admire her at all: indeed, nobody can, you know; and he seemed quite struck with Jane as she was going down the dance. So, he enquired who she was, and got introduced, and asked her for the two next. Then, the two third he danced with Miss King, and the two fourth with Maria Lucas, and the two fifth with Jane again, and the two sixth with Lizzy, and the Boulanger—"

"If he had had any compassion for *me*," cried her husband impatiently, "he would not have danced half so much! For God's sake, say no more of his partners. Oh! that he had sprained his ankle in the first dance!" (13)

Mrs. Bennet's speech exemplifies the type of unstructured, repetitive talk that Austen commonly uses to flatten many of her characters. Mrs. Bennet almost seems to flatten herself out while making this description: becoming more minor by the minute. Within the speech we also see flattened human figures, presented quite fleetingly—Miss King and Miss Lucas are fictional individuals rigidly positioned in a structure of multiplicity that drains them of any depth. (Note how Elizabeth also gets pushed into this structure. We can contrast the way her character will become completely "round" with the less fortunate narrative fate of Miss King.) But what elicits this flattening—in form and in content—is precisely the social disequilibrium that underlies the marriage plot. To gaze objectively at all of the women included as "some one or other of" the daughters of "the surrounding families" necessitates this type of catalog description. Mrs. Bennet's speech—so flat and monotonous—is really a strategy of representation, somewhat like the narrator's own catalog description of the five daughters returning from the ball. Mr. Bennet's impatience can then be seen as the pain that the consciousness of singularity experiences when confronted with the reality of multiplicity. To hear about all the girls at the ball makes Mr. Bennet uncomfortable, like a factory owner

walking past an assembly line. This discomfort is displaced into his more superficial irritation with the *tone* of Mrs. Bennet's speech. It makes sense that Mrs. Bennet's description gives Mr. Bennet a headache. Mr. Bennet prefers Elizabeth and hates to talk about the entail that makes all his daughters' futures insecure; Mrs. Bennet favors Lydia and, of course, always talks about the entail. Their positions were already made clear in the double description that ends chapter 1. We now can start to more fully understand the last sentence of this description: "The business of her life was to get her daughters married; its solace was visiting and news." Mrs. Bennet's speech is flattened in the same way as her consciousness is here described: it becomes coequal with an exterior world governed by multiplicity, by other families, gossip, and the social understanding of the marriage plot. ...

... The system of characterization in *Pride and Prejudice* shows that Austen is not simply using secondary characters to reflect back on the real center of interest, Elizabeth and Darcy, but rather that Elizabeth, Darcy, and all the secondary characters fit into one unified, although asymmetric field, which is the controlling structure and final representation of the novel. This field of characterization rigorously links the protagonist's interior development to the dispersion and fragmentation of the many other minor characters, producing a textual structure homologous to the social structure of capitalism. "The more formed the product the more deformed the worker" [(Karl Marx, *The Economic and Philosophical Manuscripts of 1844*, 79)]. What makes *Pride and Prejudice* a representation of, rather than simply a derivative reproduction of, this structure is precisely the way that we recognize minor characters *as* caricatures. At the root of caricature is an implied standard that organizes the interpretive process. Our sense that these characters are distortions implies, if only in a negative form, a radical sense of human commonality. Beneath the fragmentation and dispersion inherent in Austen's asymmetry is a controlling vision of human equality, without which the poetics of the narrative system would not coalesce. The alienating nature of the structure she is depicting, however, makes the notion of equality invisible, persisting only as the receding assumption of an ineluctably human quality. Only this assumption causes the caricatures in *Pride and Prejudice* to appear as ironic, rather than purely descriptive. The disturbing recession of equality to the invisible horizon of Austen's narrative shows the profound and perhaps unique way in which she grasped the emergent structure of modern capitalism and represented it on the literary plane.

(2003)

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1 This list has been excerpted to include only references relevant to the material reproduced here.