

# *PRIDE AND PREJUDICE*: POWER, FANTASY, AND SUBVERSION IN JANE AUSTEN

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To read Jane Austen's letters—with their steady consciousness of bargains, pence, and shillings—is to be aware of one small but nagging way in which she experienced the restrictions of being an unmarried middle-class woman: she had little money, and she had almost no access to more. In 1813, for example, the year *Pride and Prejudice* was published, Jane Austen, her mother, and her sister, Cassandra, were dependent for their living on three sources: a small income of Mrs. Austen's, a small legacy of Cassandra's, and the £ 250 provided annually by four of the Austen brothers.[1] The sum was enhanced to some degree by the money Jane earned through writing, for in July of that year she reports that "I have now . . . written myself into £250—which only makes me long for more."[2] But the £140 brought by *Sense and Sensibility* and the £110 by *Pride and Prejudice* did not go far, and Austen's letters for that year, as for every year, are full of reference to small economies.

To read Jane Austen's letters is also to be aware—to be reminded—of the privilege that belonged to middle-class men. For Austen had five brothers, and they had what she did not: access to work that paid, access to inheritance and preference, and access to the independence, the personal power, that belonged to being prosperous and male. In 1813, for example, all but one brother was rising in a career. James was earning £1100 a year as curate. Henry was partner in a successful banking firm, Frank was captain of a ship in the Baltic, Charles the flag captain of another, and Edward, the only brother without a profession, was living as a country gentleman on one of the two estates he had inherited from the family who adopted him.

The economic difference in the lots of Austen women and Austen men was certainly striking, and yet there is little indication in the letters that this difference was a source of oppression or discomfort to Jane. Her letters, for the most part, make a casual patchwork of

details about her own economies and her brothers' expenditures, about her desire for money and their attainment of it, about her dependence in traveling and their liberties with horseback, carriage, and barouche, about the pressure she felt to marry and the freedom they assumed to marry or not to marry as they chose. Here and there, of course, we find some humorous consciousness of inequity, and there is more than one joke about the economic recommendations of marriage. But, for the most part, Jane Austen's attitude toward the economic restrictions of being a woman, and toward the resulting dependence, confinement, and pressure to marry is, in the letters, amused, uncomplaining, without emphasis.

It is only in Austen's fiction that we begin to feel a certain edge, a certain critical emphasis being given to the difference between the economic privilege of middle-class women and that of middle-class men. The first two sentences of *Pride and Prejudice*, for example, make subtle and ironic point of that distinction and suggest the weight of it in shaping male and female life: "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 neighborhood, 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."[3] Some single men, it would appear, have independent access to money, but all single women, or "daughters," must marry for it. Families with daughters, therefore, think a great deal about marriage, while single men with fortunes do not. Families with daughters may try to control men too, to seize them as "property," but it is really "daughters," the sentence implies, who are controlled, who are "fixed" by their economic situation. Single men, in contrast, appear at liberty—at liberty to enter a neighborhood, for example, and presumably to leave it. Single men have a distinct mobility and a personal power that daughters do not.

The opening of *Pride and Prejudice* thus introduces a familiar distinction between the economic restrictions of middle-class women and the economic privilege of middle-class men, but it does so with an emphasis not characteristic of the letters. It also insinuates a causal connection between economic privilege and personal power, a connection which the letters reflect but hardly articulate. Austen's fiction, as is often observed, obviously did provide outlet for critical energies she could not otherwise express. But the effect of those energies is not what one might expect. For while the rest of the novel sustains an awareness of the economic

inequality of women and men, it does not sustain a felt awareness of the causal connection between money and power. Indeed, for all its reference to money and money matters, *Pride and Prejudice* is devoted not to establishing but to denying the force of economics in human life. In the reading of the novel the real *force* of economics simply melts away.[4]

Despite the first two sentences of *Pride and Prejudice*, despite the implication that access to money in some way determines personal power, the difference between men's economic privilege and that of women is not something we are invited to *experience* as a cause of power and powerlessness in the novel. Men, with all their money and privilege, are not permitted to seem powerful in *Pride and Prejudice*, but rather bungling and absurd; and women, for all their impotence, are not seen as victims of economic restriction. What the novel finally defines as power has little to do with money, and the most authentically powerful figure in the novel is an unmarried middle-class woman without a fortune—a woman, we may note, who bears striking resemblance to Jane Austen.

Now, readers of *Pride and Prejudice* have not generally posed questions about the powerlessness and power of women and men. They have not posed these questions, I suspect, for all the usual historical and cultural reasons, but they have also failed to pose them because the author of *Pride and Prejudice* does not invite us to see what she is doing, because she is, in fact, hiding out. Subverting the force of economic privilege and inverting traditional power relations are not activities many women undertake without misgivings and a desire for cover. And indirection, deviousness, evasion, are traditionally feminine covers, means of disguising aggression against things as they are. Much of the multiple irony, the lack of commitment, the irresponsibility which readers of *Pride and Prejudice* have marked again and again in its style[5] may be attributed, I suggest, to the traditional uneasiness with which Austen, *as a woman*, expresses discomposure about, and subtly subverts, the traditional lots, the traditional powerlessness and power of women and men.

In *Pride and Prejudice*, as in Austen's letters, the major difference in the lots of women and men is that men—all men of the upper- and middle-classes— have an independent access to money that women do not. It is the unremarked privilege of men in the novel to have work that pays, to rise through preference and education, and to inherit. Women, in contrast, have no access at all to work that pays and are educated for nothing but display. Although women and men both inherit, women inherit a lump sum, a kind of dowry, while men inherit livings. The entail, then, which so

obviously benefits Mr. Collins and so obviously restricts the Bennet daughters, is really the epitome of an economic privilege that is granted men in general and of an economic restriction that is imposed on women: for most women, lacking men's access to work and inheritance, economic survival means marriage.

As in the letters, then, the economic difference in the lots of women and men is hard to ignore, but once again there is no overt indication that Austen protested this division of privilege. Indeed, where the economic inequity of women's lot seems most unfair, Austen deflects criticism. Mrs. Bennet and Lady Catherine, for example, are the only persons in the novel allowed to object to the entail and neither is permitted to engage our sympathies.

But if, by deflecting criticism, Austen appears to accept, indeed to apologize for, the unequal division of money and privilege, she also appears to limit, subtly, and from the outset, what that inequity can mean. Although the Austen of the letters seems well aware of the status and sense of power involved in earning or preserving money, she omits from the novel almost any reference to, and all observation of, activity which has an economic reward. We may hear that men work, but we never see them at their labors, and if the enforced idleness of upper- and middle-class women seems oppressive in this novel, it is not out of contrast with the more productive activities of males.

It is principally in their personal rather than in their working lives that men appear at first to have more autonomy than women, more power to make decisions, to go, and to do as they please. Throughout *Pride and Prejudice*, for example, men in general have a mobility that women, even women with money, do not, and that mobility must suggest a greater general autonomy. From the first sentence on, men are linked with entering and leaving, women with being "fixed," and it is not surprising that it is women in the novel who are dull or bored, who feel that the country is "bare of news," who suffer when it rains, who repine at "the dullness of everything," who feel "forlorn" (pp. 25, 84, 223, 311).

The patterns of movement in the novel do suggest a dramatic difference in the autonomy of women and men but they are only background, like the fact that men work, and the patterns are neither emphasized nor overthrown. It is in relation to the marriage choice that men's potential autonomy is brought most into conscious focus, and it is in relation to the marriage choice that men's power is most emphatically subverted. Men, as the first two sentences suggest, do not need to marry. They may "want" or desire wives as it turns out, but they do not *need* to want them as women must want husbands. Men in *Pride and Prejudice*, therefore, are

conscious of having power to choose and they are fond of dwelling on it, of impressing it upon women. Mr. Collins, for example, assumes that there is nothing so central to his proposal as a rehearsal of his "reasons" for marrying and for choosing a Bennet in particular, nothing quite so central as the information that there were "many amiable young women" from whom he might have made his selection (pp. 101, 102). Darcy is scarcely less agreeably aware of his power to choose, and from his first appearance in the novel acts the role of high-class connoisseur, finding Elizabeth "tolerable, but not handsome enough to tempt *me*" (p. 9). Like Mr. Collins, moreover, Darcy remains preoccupied with the privilege of choice in the very act of proposing, for his first words are not "I love you" but "in vain have I struggled" (p. 178). Fitzwilliam, Wickham, and Bingley, the other single men in the novel, betray a similar consciousness. Although Fitzwilliam maintains that "younger sons cannot marry where they like," Elizabeth protests that they often choose to like and to propose to, "women of fortune" (p. 173). And Wickham, ever confident in his power to choose, first chooses Georgiana Darcy, and then in succession, Elizabeth Bennet, Mary King, and Lydia Bennet. Even Bingley, who is persuaded not to choose Jane, is still a conscious chooser at first, alive to arguments against her family and ready to oppose them.

Male privilege, then, and access to money in particular, makes men feel autonomous. It also makes them feel empowered to control others, especially women to whom they make advances. For as givers of economic benefit to women, men expect their advances to be received and even sought for. Mr. Collins dwells warmly upon the "advantages that are in [his] power to offer" Elizabeth and tactfully reminds her that she is bound to accept him, for "It is by no means certain that another offer of marriage may ever be made you" (p. 104). Darcy is also pleasantly aware of his power to bestow value, whether it is his desirable attention or his desirable fortune and station. At the first ball, for example, he will not dance with Elizabeth because he is in "no humor at present to give consequence to young ladies who are slighted by other men" (p. 9). His proposal, moreover, like Mr. Collins' is "not more eloquent on the subject of tenderness than of pride" and betrays his confidence in having his own way.

With the exception of Bingley, who is seen as an anomaly, and of Mr. Gardener, who scarcely exists, virtually every man in the novel reacts in the same fashion to his economic privilege and social status as a male. All enjoy a mobility that women do not have. All relish an autonomy that women do not feel. All aspire to a mastery that women cannot grasp. And yet, in spite of their mobility,

their sense of autonomy, their desire to master and to control, we do not feel that men are powerful in this novel. Their sense of power and their real pomposity are at base, a setup, a preparation for poetic justice, a license to enjoy the spectacle of men witlessly betraying their legacy of power, of men demonstrating impressive capacities for turning potential control into ineffective action and submission to the power of others.

It is significant, I think, that the only proposals of marriage recorded in the novel are unsuccessful, and that both suitors are so immersed in their sense of power that they blindly offend the woman whose affections they mean to attach and in the process provoke what must be two of the most vigorous rejections in all of literature. It is also significant that Sir Lucas and Mr. Collins, the only two men in the novel who have risen through preference—another benefit of male privilege—enjoy little more than an inflated *sense* of power and succeed mainly in annoying those whom they propose to influence.

Our sense of male control is also undercut by the comic readiness with which some men submit to the influence of others. Mr. Collins and Sir Lucas manifest such slavish admiration of those who have raised them or of those who stand above them in rank that their own imagined influence is constantly and ironically juxtaposed with images of self-abasement. Collins, moreover, qualifies his potential autonomy by submitting virtually every life decision to the "particular advice and recommendation" of Lady Catherine, and Bingley surrenders Jane because he depends on Darcy's opinion more strongly than on his own (p. 101).

Men are also prone to misusing their autonomy by making bad investments. It is Mr. Bennet's own "imprudence" that must account for his unhappy domestic life and Wickham's failure of resolution that yokes him to Lydia, a woman without fortune (p. 222). Thus access to money, and male privilege in general, do grant men the potential for control of their lives and for control over women, but the men in *Pride and Prejudice* are essentially set up—to surrender, to misuse, to fail to realize the power that is their cultural legacy.

In obvious contrast to men, women in their economic dependence have far less potential to do as they like. Most women in the novel *must* marry and since access to money both shapes and is shaped by traditional attitudes toward women and their proper destiny, even women with money feel pressured to get a man. (The rich Miss Bingley pursues Darcy as does Lady Catherine on behalf of the wealthy Anne.) Women, for the most part, do not dwell on their power to choose, do not debate about getting a hus-

band, and seldom give thought to the value of one husband over another. Some young women, like Lydia and Kitty, are so engrossed with male regard in general, that they lose sight of their reason for securing it, which is to marry, and make the attention of men—any men—an end in itself. Indeed the action in almost the entire first volume of the novel consists of very little but women talking or thinking or scheming about men.

Women in *Pride and Prejudice*, then, do not generally act like choosers, and since they devote a good deal of energy to compulsive scheming and plotting, they obviously do not entertain illusions of easy control. What control women do aspire to is manipulative and indirect and is further diminished by the fact that obsession makes them ineffective and unreflecting. It is important, moreover, to note that all young women in the novel are swept to some degree in the same currents, enforcing our sense of a universal female condition. All the Bennet women spend a good part of one evening conjecturing about Bingley and "determining when they should ask him to dinner" (p. 6). All are pleased with their own or with each others' triumphs. All are bored by the "interval of waiting" for the gentlemen, and the prospect of the Netherfield ball is "extremely agreeable to every female in the family" (pp. 72, 82). Our first introduction to Elizabeth, in fact, finds her trimming a hat.

Women, like men, therefore, appear to be determined almost uniformly by a shared economic and social condition, but just as we are not permitted to feel that men's economic privilege *must* result in power we are not permitted to feel that women's lack of privilege *must* result in powerlessness. The first two sentences of the novel may emphasize the idea that women's compulsive husband hunting has an economic base, but we are never allowed to *feel* that base as a determining force in women's experience. As I have suggested, almost every reference in the novel to economic necessity is relegated to Mrs. Bennet, a woman whose worries we are not allowed to take seriously because they are continually undermined by their link with the comic and the absurd: "Miss Lizzy, if you take it into your head to go on refusing every offer of marriage in this way, you will never get a husband at all—and I am sure I do not know who is to maintain you when your father is dead" (pp. 108-109). This is the kind of financial threat which would be taken seriously in a novel by Charlotte Brontë, but in *Pride and Prejudice*, the threat, the sting of potential poverty is undercut. There is consciousness of economics to be sure, but that consciousness is raised and then subverted. It is a distinctly odd maneuver on the part of an author sometimes praised for her awareness of social and eco-

nomic forces, but it serves a purpose in preparing the reader for Elizabeth by defining the nature of Elizabeth's world.

The Charlotte Lucas' episode is especially significant in this light, for at a distance it might suggest that economic forces do indeed have tragic power over "sensible, intelligent" young women (p. 15). But once again this is not what we are actually invited to feel. We are not allowed to dwell on the economic realities of Charlotte's situation because the shifting ironies almost continually direct us elsewhere: we look with irony at Mr. Collins, for example, or at Charlotte's family, or at Charlotte herself. And though we may feel sympathy for Charlotte when she refers to marriage as the "only honorable provision for well-educated women of small fortune," our sense of her as economic and social victim is not sustained. The narrator, in fact, abandons us to ambivalence, and the Charlotte Lucas' episode on the whole is left to suggest, on the one hand, the perverting force of women's economic lot, and to prevent us, on the other, from feeling that force as a reality in the universe of Elizabeth Bennet.

One effect of undermining the force of economic realities is to make most women, in their helpless fixation on men and marriage, look perverse, or merely silly, and to lay the blame on women themselves, not on their economic and social lot. Another effect, however, is to suggest, rather wishfully, that there is some way out. Men may go about acting more powerful than women; indeed their lot in life may give them the potential for having power, but because a sense of power seems to befuddle critical vision, they are not really powerful at all. Conversely, women may seem powerless as men are not, but because we are finally not to *feel* that they are victims of social and economic forces, they do not have to be powerless after all. What we have here, it seems, is a novel that recognizes the shaping influence of economics but that denies its force. The novel, in fact, all but levels what in life we know to have been the material base of power and powerlessness and defines real power as something separate from the economic.

Real power in *Pride and Prejudice*, as is often observed, is to have the intelligence, the wit, and the critical attitudes of Jane Austen; and Elizabeth Bennet, as it is also sometimes observed, is essentially an Austen fantasy, a fantasy of power. But while some critics have noticed that Elizabeth expresses Austen's wit and intelligence in a particularly free and exuberant manner, they have not observed that Elizabeth does more than that. For Elizabeth's world affords her a freedom that Jane Austen's world evidently did not—it affords her scope not only to express critical attitudes, with energy, but to put them into action. Thus Eliza-

beth not only criticizes women's extreme eagerness to please men, but puts herself at some distance from that eagerness and, in the process, is rather direct in challenging Darcy's traditional assumptions of power as a male.

Elizabeth's world, moreover, allows her the power to change her lot through acting upon it, in that it allows her the power to alter Darcy's behavior. Elizabeth's world, that is, in contrast to the world of Jane Austen, permits her something more than spiritual victories, permits her more than that *sense* of autonomy that comes with wittily observing the confinements of one's situation, with standing apart from them in spirit and having to bend to them in daily behavior. Elizabeth's world, in short, permits her not only the energetic expression but the forceful use of those critical energies which Austen herself diverted into ironic novels.

That we enjoy those energies as we do, that we feel safe with them, that generations of conventional readers have found Elizabeth charming rather than reckless, owes much to the fact that Austen's version of Elizabeth's universe is one that mitigates the punishing potential of her critical views and challenging behavior. If money, for example, were really a force in the novel, we might find Elizabeth heedless, radical, or at best naïve, for insulting and rejecting a man with £10,000 a year or for condemning her best friend, a plain and portionless twenty-seven-year-old, because she married a man who could at least support her in comfort. In similar fashion, if wealthy young men were less given to bungling the personal power and influence that is their legacy, we might feel uncomfortable or incredulous when Elizabeth takes on Darcy. It is Austen's subversion of economic realities and of male power that permits us to enjoy the rebellious exuberance and energy of Elizabeth because it is principally this subversion which limits, from the outset, the extent to which we feel Elizabeth is in conflict with the forces of her society.

But to allow a nineteenth-century heroine to get away with being critical and challenging—especially about male power and feminine submission—is still to rebel, no matter how charmingly that heroine may be represented, no matter how safe her rebellion is made to appear. When Austen allows Elizabeth to express critical attitudes, to act upon them without penalty, when she endows Elizabeth with the power to alter her lot, Austen is moving against traditional notions of feminine behavior and feminine fate. For by any traditional standards Elizabeth's departures from convention ought to earn her a life of spinsterhood, not a man, a carriage, and £10,000 a year. Elizabeth's universe, moreover, is real enough, the economic and social forces kept close enough to the surface, that

we believe in it, that we do not dismiss it as fantasy, and Elizabeth herself is so convincing that we can't dismiss her either. For all its charm and relative safety, Elizabeth's rebellion invites us to take it seriously, and it is for this reason, I assume, that the rebelliousness of *Pride and Prejudice*, like the rebelliousness of most women's writing, is further qualified.

One major qualification of Elizabeth's resistance to male power, to men's assumption of power, and to women's powerless behavior, is that, like Austen, she accepts the basic division in women and men's economic lots. Men, moreover, have a right to money that women do not. Thus Wickham is "prudent" for pursuing Mary King, but Charlotte is mercenary for marrying Collins. Men also have a right to greater autonomy, to greater power of choice, for Elizabeth never challenges Darcy's right to criticize women or to act the connoisseur. Nor is it entirely clear that she objects to men's general assumption of control over women. Her real aim is to resist intimidation, to deny Darcy the power of controlling *her* through the expression of critical judgments: "He has a very satirical eye, and if I do not begin by being impertinent myself, I shall soon grow afraid of him" (p. 21). Elizabeth's habitual tactic with Darcy is thus to anticipate and to deflate him in the role of critic and chooser but never to challenge the privilege by which he is either one.

Elizabeth, of course, in defending herself against the power of Darcy's negative judgments, suggests that she is also defending herself against a desire to please Darcy and to enjoy the benefit of his positive attentions. Elizabeth's defense, that is, continually implies an underlying vulnerability to Darcy's good opinion, and this is another qualification of her rebellion. Elizabeth never does challenge the privilege by which Darcy bestows benefit through his regard, never entirely denies the benefit he does bestow, and is never wholly immune to enjoying it. She merely tries to avoid responding to his attention with that show of gratefulness and pleasure that Darcy egotistically expects and that her own feelings indeed prompt in her. At Netherfield, for example, when Darcy asks Elizabeth to dance she is at first "amazed at the dignity to which she had arrived," but her overriding, defensive purpose is to deny both to herself and to Darcy that the occasion affords her any sense of status or pleasure (p. 86). It is evident, then, that Elizabeth's resistance to Darcy is undermined by a lingering susceptibility to his attentions and by a lingering desire to please. Indeed, the very energy with which Elizabeth defends herself against both pleasing and being pleased argues that she is not only vulnerable to Darcy's power over her feelings but ironically and defensively controlled by it.

Elizabeth's qualified resistance to being controlled by one attractive male is juxtaposed, moreover, with her complete vulnerability to the power of another, for Elizabeth succumbs to pleasing and being flattered by Wickham even before he reveals himself as ally. Indeed, Elizabeth's readiness to believe Wickham is partially explained by the fact that, like all the young women in the novel, she is ready to approve any attractive and charming man who pays her attention, to decide absurdly that his "very countenance may vouch for [his] being amiable" (p. 77). Elizabeth's head is full, not only of what Wickham "had told her" about Darcy, but of Wickham himself, and even after Wickham has thrown her over for Mary King, or Mary King's fortune, she continues to be flattered by "a solicitude, an interest which she felt must ever attach her to him with the most sincere regard" (p. 44).

As it turns out, of course, Elizabeth is not only not autonomous with Darcy and Wickham, she is mistaken and wrong. She is wrong about Darcy's intentions and she is wrong about Wickham's. She is wrong, moreover, for the same reason that she is not self-directing. Despite her intelligence, wit, and critical energies, she cares too much about male regard. As she herself is aware, after reading Darcy's letter, it is her "vanity," her vulnerability to the good opinion of men, that has blinded her both to Darcy's character and to Wickham's (p. 196).

If there is any force left in Elizabeth's resistance to Darcy's traditional assumptions of power, it is certainly mitigated by our continuing awareness that the rebellion itself works in the interest of tradition. That is, Elizabeth's assertion of autonomy attracts Darcy rather than putting him off. Elizabeth, we are assured, has a "mixture of sweetness and archness in her manner which made it difficult for her to affront anybody; and Darcy had never been so bewitched by any woman as he was by her" (p. 48). Heightened aggression on Elizabeth's part is met by heightened feeling on Darcy's, by greater fears of "the danger of paying Elizabeth too much attention" (p. 54). Thus we may enjoy Elizabeth's self-assertions, but we are never invited to value them in themselves, as we are invited to value Maggie Tulliver's or Jane Eyre's or Lucy Snowe's. Elizabeth's qualified resistance to Darcy, attractive as relief from the extreme male-centering of most women in the novel, is valued in great measure, nevertheless, because it attracts the attention of a desirable man.

Elizabeth's rebelliousness, then, is quiet, is not intended to alarm. It invites the conventional female reader to identify with unconventional energies, but it commits her to nothing more. It permits the conventional male reader to admire Elizabeth's spirit while finding

comfort in the fact that she is wrong, not autonomous after all, and that her whole resistance to male power only secures and gives value to the love of a good man. It is as if Austen could not be indirect or qualified enough in presenting this self-assertive heroine, for we almost never see Elizabeth's rebel energies without feeling the undermining force of one irony or another. It is, in fact, Austen's qualification of Elizabeth's power that accounts for most of the complexities and ironies in the first two-thirds of the novel, and it is these ironies, I suspect, that have permitted the most conventional readers to find Elizabeth charming, and most charming of all when she asserts her independence of Darcy's traditional powers as a male.

Elizabeth, then, as a power fantasy, is in some ways astoundingly modest. The remarkable thing, perhaps, is that her rebelliousness, undercut and qualified as it is, still maintains a quality of force, still strikes us as power. It does so in part because of its juxtaposition with Miss Bingley's ineffective machinations and Jane's well-intentioned passivity, both reminders of what it means to be traditionally feminine. But most importantly, Elizabeth's rebel energies retain a quality of force because, as I have noted, they really act upon her world; they change Darcy, change the way he responds to his economic and social privilege, change something basic to the power relation between him and Elizabeth. Without intending to, Elizabeth renders Darcy more courtly, less liable to impress upon her the power he has to choose and to give her benefits, less liable to assume control of her feelings.

Still, it is not Elizabeth's much qualified self-assertion or even her unintended alteration of Darcy that establishes her as the powerful character she is. The most profound source of what we feel as Elizabeth's power is her ability in the last third of the novel to turn her critical vision upon herself, upon her own unthinking vulnerability to male approval. It is at this point in the novel that Elizabeth establishes what we could call real autonomy. It is at this point in the novel, moreover—the point at which Elizabeth redirects her critical energies from Darcy to herself—that the multiple ironies which have characterized the first two-thirds of the novel are suddenly dropped. It is a less anxiety-provoking business for a woman to assert power against an aspect of herself, against the enemy within, than against the traditional power relations of her culture. And though it is necessary and vital to assert oneself against one's own blindness, in a patriarchal society, it is also a much surer and more lasting form of power than pitting oneself against the traditional privileges of men.

Yet Elizabeth's recognition of her vulnerability to male attention

does force her into painful, even humiliating recognitions. It is a hard thing for a woman to have felt herself powerful against the greater power of a man and to discover after all that she had been led astray by her extreme vulnerability to his good opinion. It is humiliating to feel apologetic toward an oppressor—for Darcy has greater potential power than Elizabeth and he has made her feel it. Why, one wants to know, has Austen put her through it? One answer, perhaps, is that Elizabeth's recognition of her "vanity" is a further undercutting of her rebellion against male power. But Elizabeth's confessions may also be seen as a hard lesson in the difficulties of confronting the enemy within, a hard lesson in the fact that the most apparently powerful women may be creatures of their culture too.

Elizabeth's honesty, of course, is also a tribute to her potential for true self-direction, for no other character in the novel achieves her measure of self-knowledge or potential self-rule. The self-knowledge which comes to Darcy comes to him offstage and at the instigation of Elizabeth. Elizabeth alone is her own analyst, and in a novel in which Austen brilliantly arranges for intelligence to mitigate the force of economics and of social position, Elizabeth emerges for the readers as the most powerful because she is the most intelligent and self-directing character in her world.

In reading Darcy's letter, then, Elizabeth gains a measure of real autonomy, in that she gains a measure of freedom from unthinking desire for male regard. But what Elizabeth's freedom finally purchases is an ability to consider, to weigh, to choose which male's regard she really values. Elizabeth's autonomy, that is, frees her to choose Darcy, and Elizabeth's untraditional power is rewarded, not with some different life, but with woman's traditional life, with love and marriage.

Austen's commitment to the economic inequities of women's and of men's lives permits her no other happy ending, but there is, of course, a major difficulty in Elizabeth's reward. For marriage in this novel, as in life, involves a power relation between unequals, and that is hardly a fitting end for a fantasy of power. What we find at the end of *Pride and Prejudice*, therefore, is a complicated and not entirely successful juggling act in which all the economic and social powers of the traditional husband/hero must be demonstrated at last but demonstrated without diminishing the powers of the heroine. It is not until late in the novel, for example, not until Elizabeth rejects Darcy's proposal, reads Darcy's letter, and establishes herself as the most powerful character in the book, that we are permitted first-hand exposure to Darcy's economic and social significance. It is only at Pemberly, for example, that we

are made to *feel* the reality of Darcy's power to act upon the world: "As a brother, landlord, a master, she considered . . . how much of pleasure or pain it was in his power to bestow" (p. 234). Darcy's social and economic power, moreover, is juxtaposed on this visit with the first signs that he has been altered by Elizabeth's self-assertion: "Never in her life had she seen his manners so little dignified, never had he spoken with such gentleness as in this unexpected meeting" (p. 235).

Darcy's rescue of Lydia is another demonstration of the hero's traditional powers, the powers belonging to money, class, and male privilege, but it is also to be construed as further demonstration that Elizabeth has altered Darcy, that he is not only more courtly to her but more courtly to her family, whom he is now not above serving. Darcy's proposal, moreover, is brought on by still another spirited assertion of Elizabeth's autonomy, her refusal to conciliate Lady Catherine, and even the timing of the proposal scene is set by Elizabeth. The proposal itself, finally, is followed by Darcy's lengthy reminder that it is Elizabeth who has changed him: "You taught me a lesson, hard indeed at first but most advantageous. By you I was properly humbled" (p. 349).

But it "will never do" for Elizabeth to seem more controlling than Darcy (p. 361). That is not what traditional marriages, what "good" marriages are all about. Darcy must protest, then, that he would have proposed whether Elizabeth had opened the way or not, and Elizabeth, for her part, must betray some consciousness of, and gratefulness for, the traditional economic and social benefits. She must appreciate Pemberly not just for the taste that it exhibits but for its economic grandeur, for the "very large" park and for the "lofty and handsome" rooms (pp. 228, 229). She must acknowledge that to be mistress of Pemberly might be "something" and she must experience "gratitude" to Darcy for loving her (p. 228). And yet, Elizabeth's own power must not be diminished. She is allowed, therefore, to see more than Darcy to the last: "she remembered that he had yet to learn to be laughed at, and it was rather too early to begin" (p. 351). We leave her, in fact, in the last paragraph of the novel, surrounded by Pemberly's splendor but seeming to hold her own, astonishing Georgiana with her "lively, sportive manner" and her "open pleasantry" and persuading Darcy against his will to make peace with Lady Catherine (p. 367).

Austen's difficulties with Elizabeth's reward, her attempt to give her marriage but to alter what marriage means, her tinkering with heroine and hero, must account for the fact that most readers of *Pride and Prejudice* find the end of the novel less satisfactory than the beginning. On the one hand, the charge that Elizabeth, as witty

heroine, is now too inclined to moralize and be grateful owes much to the fact that marriage requires her to dwindle by degrees into a wife. On the other hand, the observation that Darcy as hero is less convincing than as villain owes much to the requirements of Austen's fantasy, which are that Elizabeth not dwindle too far, that she maintain her equality with, if not her ascendency over, her husband. Darcy, therefore, although he must demonstrate all the economic and social powers of the traditional hero—which are plenty—may not have everything; he may not have Pemberly, £10,000 a year, rank, looks, intelligence, flexibility, wit, and a convincing reality as well. There is point, though unconscious point, to his stiffness and unreality, for both function at some level to preserve the fantasy of Elizabeth's power.

The end of *Pride and Prejudice*, nevertheless, witnesses a decline in Elizabeth Bennet, for in *Pride and Prejudice* as in much of women's fiction, the end, the reward, of woman's apprenticeship to life is marriage, and marriage demands resignation even as it prompts rejoicing, initiates new life while it confirms a flickering suspicion that the best is already over. Given the ambivalent blessing of marriage as a happy ending, it is simply a tribute to Austen's genius that what we take from *Pride and Prejudice* is not a sense of Elizabeth's untimely decline but a tonic impression of her intelligence, her wit, and her power, and it is an even greater tribute that we believe in her power, that we do not perceive it as fantasy. For Austen's brilliant construction of her heroine's world, her recognition and subtle subversion of economic forces, the mobile intelligence of the heroine herself, the ironies directed at that intelligence, the complexities of Elizabeth's failure in vision and of her recovery, complicate what is at base a wish fulfillment, give it an air of credibility which lends force to the power of the fantasy upon us; as one of my students put it, we need more fantasies like Elizabeth.

It is not, of course, that the fantasy of Elizabeth's power leaves us with any real hope for the majority of women—how many Elizabeths, how many Jane Austens are there? But what *Pride and Prejudice* does do is to give us a heroine who is at once credible, charming, and the deepest fulfillment of a woman's intelligent desire for autonomy. And that is more than most women's fiction has been able to accomplish. Most women in women's fiction pay a price for autonomy—madness, for example, or death by drowning—but Elizabeth does not. The brilliance, perhaps, and certainly the joy of *Pride and Prejudice* is that it makes us believe in her.

## NOTES

[1]F. B. Pinion, *A Jane Austen Companion* (London: The Macmillan Press, Ltd., 1973), p. 15.

[2]Jane Austen to Frank Austen, July 3, 1813, in *Jane Austen's Letters to her Sister Cassandra and Others*, ed., R. W. Chapman (London: Oxford University Press, 1959), p. 317.

[3]Jane Austen, *Pride and Prejudice* (New York: Holt, Rinehart and Winston, Inc., 1949), p. 1. Subsequent references appear in the text.

[4]Critics like Daiches and Schorer, for example, emphasize Austen's consciousness of economic forces. See David Daiches, "Jane Austen, Karl Marx, and the Aristocratic Dance," *American Scholar* 17 (1947-1948): 289. See also Mark Schorer, "Pride Unprejudiced," *Kenyon Review* 18 (1956): 83, 85.

[5]Critics like Mudrick and Harding, of course, have written admirably about Austen's general evasiveness as critic of her culture, about her general unwillingness to risk confrontation, but they have not dealt with the particular relation of this evasion to Austen's situation as a woman, nor have they noted the relation between Austen's indirection and the central focus of her critical energies in this novel: the traditional power relations between women and men. See Marvin Mudrick, *Jane Austen: Irony as Defense and Discovery* (Berkeley and Los Angeles: University of California Press, 1968). See also D. W. Harding, "Regulated Hatred: An Aspect of the Work of Jane Austen" in *Jane Austen: A Collection of Critical Essays*, ed., Ian Watt, *Twentieth Century Views* (Englewood Cliffs, N.J.: Prentice-Hall, Inc., 1963).