Charlotte and Elizabeth: Multiple Modernities in Jane Austen's *Pride and Prejudice*

Melina Moe

ELH, Volume 83, Number 4, Winter 2016, pp. 1075-1103 (Article)

Published by Johns Hopkins University Press
DOI: *https://doi.org/10.1353/elh.2016.0040*

CHARLOTTE AND ELIZABETH: MULTIPLE MODERNITIES IN JANE AUSTEN'S *PRIDE AND PREJUDICE*

BY MELINA MOE

Like all of Jane Austen's novels, *Pride and Prejudice* considers what it means to marry well. For Charlotte Lucas, to marry was to marry well. Charlotte considered her fiancé along the following lines: "Mr. Collins was neither sensible nor agreeable; his society was irksome, and his attachment to her must be imaginary."[1] Yet, Charlotte was "tolerably composed," even felt "general satisfaction" about her upcoming marriage (*P*, 152). Charlotte's marriage was the outcome of a deliberate "scheme" carried along by anxiety about her economic future and a conviction that marriage was a social necessity for young women (*P*, 151). Her "whole family [was] properly overjoyed," relieved from their apprehension of "Charlotte's dying an old maid" and "at the age of twenty-seven, without having ever been handsome," Charlotte "felt all the good luck of it" (*P*, 152). She was also convinced that "happiness in marriage is entirely a matter of chance and so even with an unlikable man, marriage was a risk always worth taking (*P*, 61).

Elizabeth Bennet finds Charlotte's views on marriage embarrassing, illogical, and morally disquieting. She takes them first as a joke—"You make me laugh, Charlotte; but it is not sound" (*P*, 61)—and later, as a "most humiliating picture!" (*P*, 155). Though Elizabeth "had always felt that Charlotte's opinion of matrimony was not exactly like her own," she had thought that "when called into action," Charlotte would rise above practical necessity, prize affection above status, and choose consensual admiration over social prudence (*P*, 155). Instead, to her dismay, she felt Charlotte "had sacrificed every better feeling to worldly advantage" (*P*, 155). She experienced sharply "the pang of a friend disgracing herself and sunk in her esteem" (*P*, 155). When Charlotte married a man whom no one could admire, she accordingly made herself into a woman that Elizabeth could not love. Because of Charlotte's disgraceful attitude toward marriage, "all the comfort of intimacy was over" for the two women (*P*, 174).

Charlotte Lucas does not play a large role in the formidable body of Austen scholarship. When she is invoked, it is usually as a humorous,

slightly pathetic, and anachronistic minor character, not as Elizabeth's former "intimate friend" (P, 56). Charlotte and Elizabeth's contrasting views are often translated by Austen critics into a narrative of cultural modernization. Ruth Perry characterizes Charlotte as a "vestigial figure," whose attitude toward marriage stands within Austen's novel for a receding premodern eighteenth century.[2] A relic "left over from an era of pragmatic rather than romantic matches," Charlotte Lucas Collins is divided from modernity by an "unbridgeable moral conflict over arranged or prudential marriages."[3] Charlotte's marriage, as the first of four in *Pride and Prejudice*, represents past norms whose modern irrelevance is made apparent through the progress of the novel toward a culmination in two affective, consensual unions. Charlotte's views seem "not sound" to Elizabeth because they are anachronistic to developing standards of mutual regard that govern modern heterosexuality. Charlotte becomes a register for normative change and her unfamiliar attitude toward conjugality—can we imagine sleeping with Mr. Collins?, Perry asks—a foil that allows its modern alternative, as embodied in Elizabeth Bennet, to come into focus. Alex Woloch calls this structure of comparative character development "the one versus the many."[4] Narratives have limited resources—formal development, narrative attention, and thematic social goods—that are unequally distributed between protagonists and minor characters. In the process of being "minored," the many clarify the one; in *Pride and Prejudice*, minor characters "contribut[e] to the development of Elizabeth's consciousness."[5] As Elizabeth's close friend and, in many ways, catalyst for her development, Charlotte is both a minor character *par excellence* and a register of the costs of such a system of individuation. For Woloch, Charlotte's story reflects "the dehumanization inherent to Austen's world," a dehumanization which stems from the economic inequalities of the Regency period and the narrative inequalities of realist fiction.[6] Through a formal, rather than historical, analysis of Charlotte and Elizabeth's relative development, Woloch reaches a similar conclusion to Perry: marginalized from the spotlight of narrative attention, Charlotte is also denied characterological depth and interiority. Since Woloch assumes that "human interiority should be the subject of literature," Charlotte embodies the precariousness of self-realization and well being in a world with limited goods.[7]

The disagreement between the two friends encapsulates a highly conflicted moral drama about the relationship between marriage and individual fulfillment. The terms of this disagreement are difficult for criticism to recover except according to the teleological narrative Perry

puts forward, in part because the romantic emplotment of the novel seems to bear out Elizabeth's desires. That Charlotte neither asks for nor receives the kind of marriage Elizabeth demands for herself makes Charlotte's attitude and the quality of personal fulfillment she experiences difficult to evaluate. The critical treatment of the conflict clarifies the deep appeal of Elizabeth's perspective: that modern sexuality is progressive, that it facilitates individual self-fulfillment, and that good partnership calls out the best in ourselves. Critics have seen as perfectly natural both Elizabeth's refusal to accept that "happiness in marriage is entirely a matter of chance" and her assumption that Charlotte's emotionally detached consent to the constraints and duties of marriage with an untalented and socially obsequious partner must prove a serious impediment to happiness and individual growth. Yet, Charlotte's stance is important to think through two hundred years later as a reminder of the multiplicity of attitudes toward intimacy, conjugality, and self-fulfillment in Austen's fiction. This multiplicity remains unstudied by a tradition of Austen criticism that too often remains bound, even in contemporary feminist forms, to the analytic and prescriptive parameters of liberal personhood as those are understood to have emerged at the end of the eighteenth century.[8]

My focus on Charlotte Lucas resonates with recent critical trends that depart from the assumption that the novel's *telos*, particularly as revealed in the courtship plot, is the representation of personhood through characterological depth and interiority. Among the critics who have begun to seek an alternative literary genealogy of modern subjectivity are Sandra Macpherson, whose reconceptualization of the individual as "matter in motion" displaces the psychologized person, and Anne-Lise François, whose study of the "literature of uncounted experience" substitutes characters who ask for little, or less than the Romantic heroes of *bildung* and self-expansion.[9] In Austen criticism, Charlotte Lucas says a lot about the difficulty that, with some important exceptions, feminist literary analysis continues to have in recovering late eighteenth-century female subjectivity whose personal fulfillment is not oriented toward freedom, growth, and improvement. I will argue that the agonistic relationship between Elizabeth and Charlotte exemplifies competing claims about the development of the person through conjugal intimacy. Ultimately, marriage in *Pride and Prejudice* becomes a divisive lens for imagining future selves as well as justifying current happiness. First, though, I will show how this dissension was lost to historical view by considering how the recurrent critical narrative of Charlotte's regrettable but inevitable "minor[ing]" has been

determined by recent feminist literary critics' efforts to revise the long history of Austen scholarship.

One persistent interpretive approach to Austen that has been extensively criticized by more recent critics was inaugurated in G. H. Lewes's watershed essay on Austen in *Blackwood's Magazine*, which argued that Austen's provincial focus and everyday style were the constraints through which she achieved her artistic accomplishment. Lewes's thesis—that Austen's artistic greatness went hand-in-hand with "the limitations of her genius"—was highly provocative for early feminist theorists and women writers' recovery projects that had to confront the conditions of success he designated for female artists.[10] For Lewes, Austen's genius was as much her willingness to work within the constraints of provincial settings, with the middling sorts of people and everyday action with which she was familiar, as it was her brilliant engagement with ordinary life. Austen limited herself to a muted palate of feelings and experiences and through her self-restraint, she honed her craft to masterful, diminutive perfection. That "she never stirs the deeper emotions, that she never fills the soul with a noble aspiration, or brightens it with a fine idea, but, at the utmost, only teaches us charity for the ordinary failings of ordinary people, and sympathy with their goodness" demotes Austen to a lower pantheon of artists who did not attempt to transcend themselves.[11]

Although Austen's less ambitious art downgrades her from the highest pantheon of artists, it engenders a unique job for the critic: to recognize and appreciate literary accomplishments on an unassuming scale. Her focus on the everyday and "the absence of breadth, picturesqueness, and passion," Lewes writes, will "limit the appreciating audience of Miss Austen to the small circle of cultivated minds."[12] Austen's style licenses the work of the critic because she benefits from the explanations that she is too modest to offer herself. That Austen particularly benefited from the practice of criticism is a claim that coincides nearly 150 years later with the critical agenda of Austen's feminist readers who "[concentrate] on giving voice to eighteenth-century women."[13]

Lewes's work describes a tradition of Austen interpretation that generated important traction for feminist literary criticism because his assessment made it impossible to extract what is praiseworthy from what is disappointing or even condemnable about Austen: her lack of ambition to transcend her constrained milieu.[14] The feminist mode of recovering Austen from early admirers such as Lewes, for whom her narrow subject matter and exquisitely restrained style disqualified her

from wide public appeal while endearing her to the professional reader, has been to emphasize Austen's overlooked expansive subtexts and allusions, her wide, even global appeal and relevance. Feminist critics of the past four decades posited that women novelists, especially during the radical period of the 1790s, not only addressed themselves to historically specific gender issues (like education, the rights of women, the duties of a good wife and daughter), but did so through the subversive and often covert reformulation of conservative cultural forms. Often following Lewes point for point, feminist critics revealed that a shift in interpretive emphasis could make what seemed normatively agreeable about Austen subversive: Austen exposed the patriarchal conditions of her historical moment and the way romantic conventions coded for power and wealth, while simultaneously using the constraints of her provincial and domestic settings to her advantage, demonstrating the duplicitous aptitude of romantic narratives to make those conditions visible. Eleanor Ty formulated the subversive possibility of domestic fiction for a generation of feminist scholars by declaring that women writers at the end of the eighteenth century "manipulated and changed the function and scope of the domestic novel in the process of challenging the patriarchal order."[15]

Critics following Ty and others identify a restive, sly, dissatisfied spirit to Austen's novels that is not quite contained by its generic complicity. It is a dynamic that Nina Auerbach diagnoses as that of freedom and constraint, under which Austen works "generat[e] capacious ambitions within her apparent modesty" (*R*, 4). Auerbach acknowledges Lewes's point that Austen's artistic world "calls insistent attention to its own limitations," but turns his observation on its head by claiming it is not "in the spirit of contented resignation" (*R*, 4). Rather, Auerbach answers Lewes, Austen's oppressive horizons "force the reader's awareness toward forbidden spaces, the 'worlds of passionate existence' that Lewes evokes and denies" (*R*, 4). Constraint cultivates a taste for freedom and oppression "forces all its subjects to invent themselves" (*R*, xviii). Attending closely to how freedom can be cagily disguised by domestic subservience, Auerbach shows how under a recuperative critical lens, "even her seemingly pallid Fanny Price can become a Romantic hero as well as a heroine of romance" (*R*, xviii).[16] Focusing on the dynamics of constraint and freedom, Auerbach develops an Austenian heroine who, in constantly testing patriarchal norms, represents a female subjectivity with relevance to contemporary feminism.

Like Lewes, Auerbach links her interpretation to her job as a critic. The latter is, she argues, to fulfill "the trespass that was always . . . the

heart of scholarship" and to rewrite critical norms through identifying the subversive potential of literature (*R*, xii). Through both analysis and prescription, paying attention to how women can take powerful stances, even from positions of weakness, she wants to catapult her women characters into "the larger world of fun and power" to which feminist critics should also aspire (*R*, xiv). The agency of the critic is exemplified in discovering and naming the overlooked agency of Austen's female subjects, who in themselves demonstrate Austen's attentiveness to the limits of patriarchal norms and her willingness to transgress. Auerbach's work is an explicit answer to criticism that saw Austen's reinscription, reinforcement, and preservation of essential forms of Englishness as lying at the foundation of her appeal.

Much feminist criticism, then, has been driven by the question—to what extent should the historical and cultural specifics of Jane Austen, such as they are recoverable, inform and limit the feminist politics of literary interpretation?[17] Marilyn Butler's groundbreaking work on women writers of the late eighteenth century established Austen's relevance to literary history, but not her credentials as a foremother of feminism. To consider Austen's satirical eye, trained with a sharp and sometimes unforgiving attentiveness on her own class, as critical of the conservative system as a whole, would, as Butler puts it, "be to get her emphasis quite wrong."[18] Butler characterized Austen's "typically conservative plot[s]" as normatively "defensive," "fearing subversion, advocating the values which in times past justifie[d] the role of the gentry."[19] Though Butler makes Austen historically nostalgic rather than progressive, her basic assumptions about the forms individual agency takes are similar to Auerbach's. Butler simply places Austen opposite writers like Maria Edgeworth, who believed individual agency could be transformative: "Edgeworth was optimistic about man and woman; wrote about, and even for, all classes of society; addressed herself on general issues to the public at large. Jane Austen did none of these things. The tendency of her fiction is to rebuke individual self-assertion."[20] Austen's novels were diagnostic of her social world and conservative in the sense that they offered social compromises rather than fractious challenges to the uncertain social future of her moment. In Butler's view, Austen valued individuals to the extent that they might affirm, shore up, heal, and exemplify social norms.[21] Though coming to opposite conclusions about Austen's political orientation, Butler and Auerbach both work within a dichotomous framework in which an individual responds to norms by either reinscribing or subverting them.

A focus on individuation and character has been long understood to be part of what made Austen "the inaugurator of the great tradition," as F. R. Leavis dubbed her, of the English novel.[22] In the tradition of feminist criticism I've been discussing, the Austenian heroine and her romantic choices are exemplary not only of the modern individual, but also the novel genre, so that the interaction between genre and individual agency unfolds through the marriage plot. For example, Clara Tuite also identifies reformist impulses in Austen, but grounds her observations of the reformist Austen in the context of generic change occurring at the end of the eighteenth century. Even Tuite's convincing narrative about Austen's contribution to the cultural consolidation of the novel tends to take on the basic assumptions about what kind of subject produces and is produced by the novel: "The primary generic concern within Austen's novels is to justify—or vindicate—the novel genre, and to vindicate the form of female subjectivity and interiority that is associated with the novel."[23] In Tuite's argument, Austen's social partiality is more obvious than it is to Butler or Auerbach, but it is also cover for aesthetic commitments. Austen's approval of the upward socioeconomic mobility of the landless gentry codes for her more serious efforts to consolidate the novel genre and its specifically gendered potential. For Tuite, Austen's bourgeois interests are primarily in "female-identified writing and reading culture" and this is the element of the petty gentry that she wants to export to the paternalist, aristocratic class.[24] Austen develops heroines like Elizabeth Bennet to be ambassadors for novelistic generic acceptance at the same time that they are agents of social reform. The marriage plot is the exemplary union of both, carried forward by Elizabeth Bennet as the upwardly mobile bourgeois female subject who becomes responsible for the modernization of aristocratic culture into which she is accepted. Tuite's work is instructive for how deeply it relies on the assumptions of a vein of novel theory that finds the best way to make an historical case for the importance of women to the development of modern subjectivity is to argue that rather than being marginalized from a public sphere where rational, communicative subjectivity developed, they were exemplary private, inner-directed subjects.[25] Yet, grounding Austen's development of female subjectivity in novel studies has the unintended consequence of limiting the modes of female subjectivity recovered to those that fit the liberal paradigm of private, inner, autonomous selves screened off from (though foundational to) the public activities of communication, exercise of reason, and pursuit of freedom. This mode of proceeding makes subjects like Charlotte Lucas irrelevant and a hindrance to the consolidation of the novel form.

By focusing on Charlotte Lucas, I aim to show that heterogeneous ways of thinking and feeling about marriage, about the decisions of other people (and of women, especially) are not only imaginable, but of interest to Austen. The feminist context of recovering Austen's work within, or even making it central and foundational to, a literary history of the development of modern subjectivity, where the modern subject is assumed to be oriented toward freedom and inner-directed action, overlooks some of the most intriguing aspects of disagreements among women in Austen's novels and foregoes an opportunity, which becomes more pertinent to feminists every day, to make the novel relevant to subjects and especially to female subjectivities whose self-cultivation takes the form of perseverance, self-discipline, and the daily practice of living in accordance with social practices that do not appear germane to liberation. Charlotte Lucas presents conceptual challenges to feminist theorists and gender analysts because her expectations do not fit those of a romantic plot. Like the characters François has studied who seek existence in its most modest form, not minding that the work of living can leave little trace behind, Charlotte Lucas offers a compelling point of departure for bringing the critical perspective of "multiple [/] modernities" into eighteenth-century novel studies.[26] Often sedimented into a critical interconnection between the history of literary representation and liberalism, Austen's work might instead be interpreted as the scene of agonistic coexistence in which the discussions between Elizabeth and Charlotte and the deterioration of their friendship animate competing conceptions of self, moral agency, and modes of affective living.

°°°°°°

About midway through Austen's novel, Elizabeth Bennet discusses two distressing events with her sister. First, the news that her closest friend Charlotte Lucas has married a "conceited, pompous, narrow-minded, silly man" with, it appears, "general satisfaction" (*P*, 165). And second, her sister's seemingly sincere beau, Mr. Bingley, has disappeared to London with no clear plan to return. Elizabeth feels, exactly as her sister warns her not to, "intentionally injured" (*P*, 165). That Elizabeth forges a link between the two incidents is curious, for though both revolve around marrying (or not marrying), they otherwise bear no overt resemblance. The connection has to do with assumptions that Elizabeth Bennett continually makes about the proper relationship between desire and action. Her ethic of holding people responsible for

their actions, especially for the formation and maintenance of affective relationships, contributes to her disappointment with Charlotte. As an irreversible expression of inner desire, marriage for Elizabeth is a public practice of self-making that gives good evidence for a judgment about character.

The multiple styles of making judgments in *Pride and Prejudice* are filtered through conjugality because marriage is action with the highest stakes. Knowing Elizabeth's habit to link characterological judgment to action, Jane advises Elizabeth that to think about others' actions as intentionally injurious will "ruin [her] happiness" as well as her ability to tolerate others (*P*, 166). Jane is particularly sensitive to the possibilities of optimistic thinking; when confronted with two difficult options, she is often teased for trying to "make them both good" (*P*, 241). She would prefer to consider herself mistaken in the facts of a situation than to be convinced that others have ungenerous intentions. "Having been mistaken" in interpreting Bingley's flirtatious behavior as indicative of his serious intentions "is slight, it is nothing in comparison of what [she] should feel in thinking ill of him or his sisters" (*P*, 166). Making a clear distinction between her having misinterpreted and his having been misleading is important for Jane because she still loves her former suitor. Jane's willingness to construe everyone's actions so as to think well of them is a narrative resource that Austen wields adeptly; who better to narrate with absolute surprise Lydia's elopement and the revelation of Wickham's character ("'A gamester!' she cried. 'This is wholly unexpected. I had not an idea of it'") (*P*, 305). Yet, Jane's willfully generous interpretive habits are more than comic; they contrast with the tendencies of other more sharp-tongued, detached critics whose predictive accuracy, it turns out, is not more reliable.

Austen's novel compares styles of judgment, with the often surprising suggestion that a critical reading of others' behavior is not necessarily more incisive—especially because detachment is difficult to maintain with regard to marriage. The narrative's most memorable correction of a confident witty judge is, of course, Elizabeth's own realization that she is not the incisive judge of character she had hoped. The same point about being ethically implicated in the judgments one makes is also more humorously phrased by a less expected source. Mrs. Bennet chides her husband that he should not judge his daughters as though they were just any young women. When Mr. Bennet concludes that "[f]rom all that I can collect by your manner of talking, you must be two of the silliest girls in the country," (*P*, 66) his wife is aghast that he could dispassionately judge his own children: "I am astonished,

my dear," she says, "that you should be so ready to think your own children silly. If I wished to think slightingly of any body's children, it should not be of my own however" (*P*, 67). Mrs. Bennet's point is borne out in the novel, not so much in the kind of children she (and Mr. Bennet) have—they remain very silly—but instead in the way that cool, detached judgment cripples the ethical responsibility that parents should have for their children. So when Jane asks her sister, "Let me take it, in the best light it may be understood," she is not only warning Elizabeth that interpreting action as intention involves quite a bit of circumstantial squinting, but that making claims about injury also involves taking responsibility for one's own interpretive position—a mandate, as we shall see, it is not clear Elizabeth fulfills when she judges Charlotte (*P*, 167). (That Elizabeth's intentionalist thinking has irreparable consequences for her regard for Charlotte is anomalous in a narrative about misjudgment and repentance. Elizabeth eventually forgives Darcy's highhandedness and Bingley's weak will; she comes to terms with Lydia's debauchery and lives with Kitty's benign small-mindedness. Yet, Elizabeth's intimacy with Charlotte is unrecoverable by the end of the novel.) Mr. Bennet makes a similar request of Elizabeth when, having failed to bring his eloped youngest daughter back to the family, the notion of judging Lydia's behavior or character falls away in the face of feeling his responsibility as a father. He asks Elizabeth to "let [him] once in my life feel how much [he has] been to blame" (*P*, 308).

Elizabeth's condemnation of Bingley gathers momentum from how she construes him as an absolutely free actor. When Bingley leaves Netherfield for London, she gauges his decision to leave (or to return) as a free manifestation of his own desire because "she could not for a moment suppose that [the wishes of his friends], however openly or artfully spoken, could influence a young man so totally independent of every one" (*P*, 151). Her conversation with her aunt Mrs. Gardiner pivots on the same assumption: "We do not suffer by accident. It does not often happen that the interference of friends will persuade a young man of independent fortune to think no more of a girl" (*P*, 169). Elizabeth's confidence that "independent" young men with "independent" fortunes always act freely is undercut at several points by the sly Austenian voice, who lauds "the fire and independence of [Mr. Collins's] character" (*P*, 152) and points out how Elizabeth, more forgiving of a mercenary marriage in Wickham's "case than in Charlotte's, does not quarrel with him for his wish of independence" (*P*, 177).[27] Her assumptions about Bingley's character are ones that Bingley himself

both supports (he tells her all his actions follow spontaneously from what is uppermost in his mind) and denies (he admits he is an utterly persuadable fellow). With Bingley's departure, Elizabeth is forced to reevaluate either his sincere feelings for Jane or his independence. Her own loyalty to her sister leads her to jettison her theory about his character: "That he was really fond of Jane, she doubted no more than she had ever done; and much as she had always been disposed to like him, she could not think without anger, hardly without contempt, on that easiness of temper, that want of proper resolution which now made him the slave of his designing friends" (*P*, 164). Once supposed to be a free actor, Bingley reveals himself as a slave. The extremity of the reversal—from independence to subjugation—strangely does not weaken Elizabeth's claim to be "intentionally injured," which she repeats in a curious plural formation to her aunt, but shifts its cause from choice to circumstance of having persuasive friends. Identifying her own suffering with Jane's, she tells Mrs. Gardiner, "We do not suffer by accident," by which she expresses how Bingley's abandonment and Charlotte's betrayal painfully revealed to her that persons whom she had thought were "independent" were in fact "slave[s]" to material comfort, the opinions of friends, or the easiest social path.

Feeling intentionally injured by marriage means denying its ubiquity, another characteristically Austenian insight about how sentimentality is both trite and sincere, infinitely repeated and passionately felt. The way an Austen heroine says, like Emma, with full feeling "just what she ought, of course," at the conclusions of her novels is well known.[28] Mrs. Gardener objects to Elizabeth's characterization of the events not by offering insight into Bingley's or Charlotte's motives, but by pointing out that the personal intensity with which Elizabeth feels "the two instances" distorts her analysis of ordinary life (*P*, 165). "[T]hese things happen so often!" the older woman reminds Elizabeth, that to call such ubiquitous events injurious is to place mistaken emphasis on what is merely ordinary (*P*, 169). Mr. Bingley, she suggests, might have acted intentionally, but also arbitrarily: "How common is it to hear such a story," she remarks to Elizabeth: "A young man, such as [Elizabeth] describe[s] Mr. Bingley, so easily falls in love with a pretty girl for a few weeks, and when accident separates them so easily forgets her, that these sort of inconstancies are very frequent" (*P*, 169). That the young lady in question might suffer, Mrs. Gardiner implies, would not be accidental; but that the young lady would be Jane is purely so. Mr. Bennet treats the matter similarly, telling Elizabeth that "your sister has been crossed in love, I find. I congratulate her. Next to being

married, a girl likes to be crossed a little in love now and then. It is something to think of, and it gives her a sort of distinction among her companions. When is your turn to come?" (*P*, 167). Elizabeth, thinking that she might have lost her chance to marry Mr. Darcy, is in no mood to hear about the repeatability of love. But it is not simply that Elizabeth's narcissism makes her humorless; rather, Elizabeth's discontent stems from the way that she grafts individual choice onto social forms. Marriage, for Elizabeth, should not be defined by its being an omnipresent social form; it should be made meaningful by the intentions behind it. Thinking of oneself as a bit player in a syndicated drama is "an excellent consolation in its way," Elizabeth tells her aunt, "but it will not do for us" (*P*, 169).

That Elizabeth considers herself to be intentionally injured by Charlotte and Bingley has to do with her policing throughout the novel of a "proper way of thinking" with regard to actions in general and marriage in particular (*P*, 165). Elizabeth does not regard, as Charlotte will, marriage as an external form whose plot is essentially repeatable. Interpreting action as intention means Charlotte's marriage and Bingley's abandonment can only be the expression of condemnable desires or uncertain personalities bending to changeable circumstance. Elizabeth's idea of how "proper" modes of thinking are translated into action requires understanding one's public behavior as being under the strict self-control of inner motives, morals, and desires (*P*, 165). Understanding social forms as the moral fabric created by so many individual participants helps explain how Elizabeth can imagine herself personally affected by actions not directed at her.[29] Actions must be sincerely felt so that social norms, like marriage, can be naturalized as self-expression. She would like Charlotte to feel secretly repulsed by her marriage or to discover that her friend's equanimity disguised feeling oppressed by the circumstances that cornered her into marrying without love. It is Charlotte's equanimity in the face of marrying Mr. Collins that most disturbs Elizabeth and helps her clarify her own expectation that a woman's internal well-being should be either jeopardized or affirmed by marriage.[30]

Elizabeth regards herself as the subject of reform and marriage as an intimate process of self-improvement. She sees Charlotte "sacrifice every better feeling" for a protective establishment, erected like scaffolding around an emotional core that (Elizabeth wishes) would remain essentially critical of her husband (*P*, 155). Her disagreement with Charlotte helps Elizabeth articulate her own idea of a good marriage as "a union that must [be] to the advantage of both"

(*P*, 318). Tony Tanner approvingly notes that Elizabeth's "mental range and depth" come from her "questing" personality, which makes her an "isolated figure trapped in a constricting web of a small number of simple people" until she forges a frame-breaking marriage.[31] Elizabeth looks upon Darcy as a provider in more than a material sense. Their marriage promises personal transformation:

> She began now to comprehend that he was exactly the man, who, in disposition and talents, would most suit her. His understanding and temper, though unlike her own, would have answered all her wishes. It was a union that must have been to the advantage of both; by her ease and liveliness, his mind might have been softened, his manners improved, and from his judgment, information, and knowledge of the world, she must have received benefit of greater importance. (*P*, 318)

According to this mutualistic vision, Mr. Darcy is appealing precisely to the extent that he would be improved by Elizabeth's good qualities. An ideal man is an incomplete catalog of qualities waiting to be augmented, and in an ideal couple, each participant accrues from the partner precisely that which their relationship demonstrates each lacks alone. By this logic, falling in love catalyzes recognition of one's shortcomings, even as it promises to compensate for them. Good marriages are equal parts necessitous and progressive, creating a logical need for conjugality by demonstrating each partner's capacity to improve. Elizabeth sees her future married self with a halo of "greater importance" and marriage as a long process of betterment (*P*, 198).

Elizabeth's pursuit of open-ended self-expansion finds expression in her capacity to be wrong. The intensity and dogmatism with which Elizabeth discovers—and relishes—how wrong she was, how mistaken she is capable of being, shines with a characteristically Austenian comic effect. The mirror of self-scrutiny reveals to her not only that she misjudged Wickham and shortchanged Darcy, but, more pleasurably, a portrait of a woman who makes and moves past mistakes. She has "spirits [that] often lead [her] wrong" (*P*, 369). And they also catalyze transformative personal change, such that when Darcy proposes a second time, successfully, Elizabeth tells him "do not repeat what I then said" or "recollect" her past self whom she has outgrown (*P*, 367). Her strong emotion at being "so wrong" about Wickham gives her a measure for self-change. Elizabeth's discovery of how wrong, how "wretchedly blind," how ignorantly self-satisfied she has been rises to a pitch of shrill excitement, unmatched in the novel, when she exclaims: "How despicably have I acted! . . . How humiliating is this

discovery!—Yet, how just a humiliation!" (*P*, 226–27). She had "prided [herself] on [her] discernment" and "valued [herself] on [her] abilities!" only to discover, "I never knew myself" (*P*, 227). The long revisionary period between Elizabeth's initial spirited refusal of Mr. Darcy's offer of marriage and her later chastened acceptance tracks a recalibration of desire and self-knowledge. Her sincere pleasure in knowing herself to have been wrong and to be capable of self-transcendence is rewarded with a man perfectly suited to her, whose best quality is his promise to be improved by her.[32]

Elizabeth's process of self-realization through discovering how wrong she was is consistent with her more general practice of negatively inhabiting social expectations. Her course of self-affirmation through negation is opposite to that of Charlotte Lucas, who, despite her age and appearance, surprises and overjoys her family by doing just what young ladies are supposed to do and what everyone supposed she would fail to do: marry. Darcy observes that Collins did better for himself than expected because Charlotte is all a man could hope for in a helpmeet. In fact, she fulfills both her housewife duties and the profile Lady Catherine de Bourgh had given to her clergyman as the best possible wife: "Mr. Collins, you must marry. . . . Chuse properly, chuse a gentlewoman for *my* sake; and for your *own*, let her be an active, useful sort of person, not brought up high, but able to make a small income go a good way" (*P*, 137). Lady Catherine tells him to "find such a woman as soon as you can, bring her to Hunsford, and I will visit her" (*P*, 137). And, in fact, despite Elizabeth's refusal, that is exactly what he does. By doing just what she ought, Charlotte falls short of what Elizabeth would have a self-respecting woman do: surpass expectations by getting the more pedestrian ones wrong. She later gets Darcy to admit that his attraction flourished under her practice of not trying to please. Much of the flirtation between Darcy and Elizabeth draws on a mutual desire not to meet expectations. Though they both might have the potential for excellence, Darcy cannot "trouble himself" to be a polite man and Elizabeth defends her mediocrity as an active practice of self-definition:

> "My fingers," said Elizabeth, "do not move over this instrument in the masterly manner which I see so many women's do. They have not the same force or rapidity, and do not produce the same expression. But then I have always supposed it to be my own fault—because I will not take the trouble of practicing. It is not that I do not believe *my* fingers as capable as any other woman's of superior execution." (*P*, 199)

Elizabeth describes self-making as not performing well. Mastery might be laudable, as "so many women" have proven, but Elizabeth presents herself as praiseworthy for her lack of mastery and for her candid admission that it is all her own fault; she would have been a master if she had practiced like other women, but then she would be like other women (*P*, 199). Darcy correctly understands her desire to be praised for not playing well when he says, "You are perfectly right. You have employed your time much better. No one admitted to the privilege of hearing you can think anything wanting" (*P*, 200). Darcy has relinquished his earlier stance of defending an imposing list of female accomplishments tackled by every truly admirable woman to come around to Elizabeth's perspective, in which no woman has mastered such a list and imperfection, not accomplishment, is a marriageable quality. The recognition of mediocrity exchanged by two characters, whom nineteenth-century readers recognized as "of superior order" to common novel characters, transfigures their self-consciously lacking public performances—his bad manners, her mediocre piano playing—into performances of intimacy, rather than class allegiance or simple dilettantism.[33] As Darcy says, "We neither of us perform to strangers" (*P*, 487). Elizabeth's conspicuous failure at some social graces is an effort to maintain self-awareness, to not be overawed into social subservience that causes one to forget oneself. For a woman who forecasts future improvement, scrupulously accounting for her faults (as a capacity to be better than she is) allows Elizabeth to track herself through time and change.

The transition from courtship to engagement to married life is more fully imagined at the end of *Pride and Prejudice* than in many of Austen's novels even though Elizabeth's fantasies are about a life that is elegantly empty. After her engagement to Darcy, Elizabeth does her best to "shield him from the frequent notice" of her family's more embarrassing members (*P*, 382). The effort means that the most pleasurable thing about their courtship is knowing its finitude. The work that goes into sheltering Darcy from her family (efforts previously directed at protecting them from Darcy) produces a vision of their future defined by solitude:

> Though the uncomfortable feelings arising from all this took from the season of courtship much of its pleasure, it added to the hope of the future; and she looked forward with delight to the time when they should be removed from society so little pleasing to either, to all the comfort and elegance of their family party at Pemberley. (*P*, 382)

Elizabeth looks forward to an austere future, characterized by "all the comfort and elegance of [a] family party" to which none of the impertinent Bennets is invited. Her future life is spare, emptied of intrusion and structured by tasteful seclusion. Defending her future against the claims of the present (her embarrassing family, her disappointing friend), means that the future expands, freed of its current burdens, to accommodate a future self who will have grown with "greater importance" and a future couple whose mutual progress demands a marital space purified of all intrusions. In naturalizing successful marriage to self-growth and complementary improvement, Elizabeth has also imagined conjugality as unconstraint. Elizabeth's hope for the future might fulfill a perfect liberal dream of negative freedom: unmortified, unbothered and disburdened of uncomfortable feelings as she progresses toward what Julia Prewitt Brown has identified as Austen's ideal of an "inner-directed society."[34] Elizabeth envisions an empty future scrubbed of the oppressive daily clutter of Longbourn or Rosings. Her expectations that individual flourishing takes the form of unconstraint form a striking contrast to the role that self-discipline and the repetitious practices of everyday existence promise to play in Charlotte's married life.

******

Homely and 27, Charlotte is neither expected to be ambitious nor opinionated about marriage. When she engrosses Mr. Collins's attentions for a two-day stretch, her friends thank her as a disinterested martyr. When she engages herself to a man her friends consider "pompous, narrowminded, [and] silly," she is called desperate ("make allowances for situation," one friend says on her behalf) (*P*, 165). Charlotte does not express resignation, but, on the contrary, feels "convinced that [her] chance of happiness with him [is] fair," in part because Charlotte understands marriage and happiness to be only accidentally related (*P*, 155). Her complacency about a husband for whom she has no romantic feeling follows from her overall views about marriage, which she volunteers to Elizabeth as the pair watches Jane undergo a cautious courtship:

> Happiness in marriage is entirely a matter of chance. If the dispositions of the parties are ever so well known to each other or ever so similar beforehand, it does not advance their felicity in the least. They always continue to grow sufficiently unlike afterwards to have their share of vexation; and it is better to know as little as possible of the defects of the person with whom you are to pass your life. (*P*, 61)

Charlotte detaches marriage from a timeline of improvement. She has no easy hopefulness about marriage and progress, couples adapting together, happiness augmenting in time, or self-growth and marriage working in tandem. Charlotte's short speech is punctuated with terms of finality—"entirely," "in the least," "always"—even as it loosely follows a couple from "beforehand," through marriage, to the horizon of having "passed your life." She severs the moral and conceptual bonds linking marriage to progress, conjugal harmony to personal growth, and future happiness to the judgment of character, all of which Elizabeth teaches herself throughout the novel to see as natural and necessary.

That Charlotte does not envision individual growth keeping pace with marital intimacy allows her to be hopeful about her own happiness in marrying Mr. Collins. Ending up in a bad marriage does not entail giving up on personal happiness; even volunteering for a bad marriage does not inhibit individual fulfillment, at least not necessarily. From Charlotte's perspective, personal fulfillment, growth, and happiness progress (or regress) with equal precariousness inside or outside the couple, and a loving marriage appears to her as an external, only occasionally relevant condition of her future internal well-being. Marriage is a tolerable constraint within which her flourishing does not have to be seriously curtailed. The novel's plot unfolds to reveal that the drawbacks of Charlotte's future domestic life are significant: an overbearing patron invades every cranny of her house, even the closets, and she must exchange the best sitting room for a smaller space to have some solitude and silence. Eve Tavor Bannet has argued that women writers of the late eighteenth century were either "Egalitarians," seeking to enter into public and professional life equally with men, or "Matriarchs," entering into the constraints of the domestic sphere, so that they could rule the household absolutely.[35] By this measure, Charlotte seems to inhabit the worst of both worlds; even in the domestic sphere her movements, conversation, and enjoyment are all checked. Nevertheless, even anticipating how she will have to discipline her life to these interferences, Charlotte looks on her married future with composure.

In spite of viewing marriage as having only an accidental association with happiness, Charlotte makes no secret that "marriage has always been [her] object" (*P*, 152). More paradoxically still, by Elizabeth's standards, she admits that "without thinking highly either of men or of matrimony," she had pursued marriage (*P*, 152). Her certainty that marriage should be a formative part of her life stands apart from holding a positive opinion about it. It is "the only honourable provision

for well-educated young women of small fortune, and however uncertain of giving happiness, [it] must be their pleasantest preservative from want" (*P*, 152). Charlotte regards marriage as an external goal, a condition she was bound to inhabit if it was in her power to do so. Explaining her steady opinion about the impersonal necessity of marriage as a means of reconciling Elizabeth to her engagement, Charlotte tells her: "I am not romantic you know" (*P*, 154). Austen's position among or alongside the Romantics has been much written upon, and we can take Charlotte's offhand self-identification as "not [a] romantic" as a confident joke on Austen's part. But, Charlotte's cathexis of marriage as an institution stands in striking comparison to Elizabeth's acute surprise at her own hidden internal depths and her sudden discovery of a change of heart about the object of her affection. Charlotte does not experience a sudden change of heart, nor does she acknowledge that fear of approaching middle age prompted her sudden engagement, since I think we are supposed to believe her (Elizabeth certainly does), when she reveals "marriage has *always* been [her] object." Charlotte's firm goal of marrying intersects with Mr. Collins's chance arrival. It is bad luck for the Bennet sisters that Longbourn is entailed on Mr. Collins (and worse luck still that the Bennets had five daughters and no son to inherit the estate), but a sign of Charlotte's willingness to submit herself to fortune that she angles to marry one of the few eligible men whom she comes across. Given the low odds that another two men of fortune visit their immediate neighborhood, Jane and Elizabeth might call themselves similarly lucky, but that is not the attitude Elizabeth takes when she tells her sister that happiness is a matter of character: "I never could be so happy as you. Till I have your disposition, your goodness, I never can have your happiness" (*P*, 352). That she jokes, "No, no, let me shift for myself; and, perhaps, if I have very good luck, I may meet with another Mr. Collins in time," indicates that she would precisely prefer not to depend on "good luck" (*P*, 352). Given the luxury of two proposals from the man "who would most suit her," Elizabeth can consider herself not lucky so much as fortunate in her own worth.

That Charlotte's marriage is a matter of circumstance, not self-discovery is not, the novel suggests, necessarily a cause for self-doubt. From the beginning of the novel, Charlotte knows her views and states them without ambiguity, rendering Austen's great formal innovation, free indirect speech, notably irrelevant. This plain spokenness makes it difficult to fit Charlotte into critical narratives about the development of Austen's technique and its mediation of the modern subject. Jenny

Davidson has argued that free indirect speech translates the internal contradictions of Austen's characters to her readers.[36] Charlotte is granted by Austen that formal device which critics have long agreed mediates the complexity of her characters at other moments—when her motives shift from relieving Elizabeth of Mr. Collins's irksome companionship to thinking about the benefits of securing him as her own husband, for example—but here, when Charlotte wants to make clear to her friend that she has not chosen an unhappy life, she is articulately straightforward. Charlotte's mode of communication only adds to Elizabeth's discomfort about her friend's attitude toward intimacy.

Much of Elizabeth's disapproval of Charlotte's marriage has to do with how clearly she can already imagine the Collins's future married life. Elizabeth's initial prediction is that it will be "impossible for [her] friend to be tolerably happy in the lot she had chosen" (*P*, 155). Later, seeing Charlotte's home and gardens, sharing her married home for six weeks, Elizabeth concedes with palpable disbelief that Charlotte "seems perfectly happy" (*P*, 202). As Elizabeth imagined it, Charlotte's future life was already scripted with domestic tasks; it was thus sure to be devoid of the sudden, surprising leaps forward in self-knowledge and world wisdom that characterized Elizabeth's own transition from disliking Mr. Darcy to "comprehend[ing] that he was exactly the man, who, in disposition and talents, would most suit her." And should Charlotte tire of the domestic and the everyday, her life would be already too full to allow the unexpected surprises and unchecked growth Elizabeth wants for a fulfilling future. Elizabeth frames domesticity as a dwindling compensation for Charlotte's calamitous mistake: "Her home and her housekeeping, her parish and her poultry, and all their dependent concerns, had not yet lost their charms" (*P*, 233). Time was full for Charlotte, though "not yet" weighing on her, while Elizabeth imagines her own as promisingly empty.

The significance of provincial and domestic pursuits in all of Austen's novels presents her readers with a challenge. This is Emma looking out on Highbury:

> Emma went to the door for amusement. —Much could not be hoped from the traffic of even the busiest part of Highbury;—Mr. Perry walking hastily by, Mr. William Cox letting himself in at the office-door, Mr. Cole's carriage-horses returning from exercise, or a stray letter-boy on an obstinate mule, were the liveliest objects she could presume to expect; and when her eyes fell only on the butcher with his tray, a tidy old woman travelling homewards from shop with her full basket, two curs quarrelling over a dirty bone, and a string of dawdling children

> round the baker's little bow-window eyeing the gingerbread, she knew she had no reason to complain, and was amused enough; quite enough still to stand at the door. A mind lively and at ease, can do with seeing nothing, and can see nothing that does not answer.[37]

Are these scenes meant to be savored or overcome? They might be evidence of Austen's "zest for the small concerns," as R. W. Chapman put it in his preface to the first edition of Austen's collected letters.[38] Chapman cautions that Austen fans would discover a "devotion to minutiae" in her daily reflections that would be off-putting to some.[39] Chapman equivocates about how a reader should encounter these rolling sentences of everyday banality, what Auerbach calls the "horror of encroaching littleness" (*R*, 12). As Austen later makes explicit in *Emma* and *Mansfield Park* (1814) with two newly wed heroines who continue on in the places they lived as single women, a happy married future can hold more of the same, not the wholesale change Elizabeth anticipates. Chapman's "Preface" deflates the unstated hope of many readers of Austen's letters, by saying that Cassandra's infamous destruction of "the greater part" of the sisters' correspondence would not have materially changed the focus of the letters, which allowed Austen to write with lively humor, but all apparent sincerity to Cassandra: "You know how interesting the purchase of a spongecake is to me." [40] For Chapman, the uncritical observation of everyday banality played a significant role in how Austen engaged with the world. But he fears that for readers unable to come to terms with this aspect of Austen's archive, or who "do not find these qualities [engaging], the letters may appear not merely trivial, but hard and cold."[41]

These neglected critical discussions of the presence in Austen's work of a "lively" mind that "see[s] nothing that does not answer" is one way of opening up to analysis Austen's representation of a plurality of modes of subjectivity. Emma might not be entirely serious that her active brain is absorbed by whatever happens in Highbury's main street and her hubristic claim faintly echoes the Miltonian suggestion that "the mind is its own place."[42] However, Chapman's certainty that more of Austen's letters would contain a greater "devotion to minutiae," not a departure from it, makes it easier to take Emma's entertainment at face value. I suspect that Emma's claim is that the limitations of a provincial scene are the form that a lively mind willingly takes, maybe even needs. Those readers who are waiting for something different and instead find Austen's letters "trivial . . . hard and cold" take a similar perspective to Elizabeth when she waits for Charlotte to admit to more feeling than she ever does. Charlotte's future is not

less meaningful because she is limited to performing well within her chosen constrained environment. Charlotte's performance as a wife, registered in "rationally soften[ing]" her husband's public behavior, is praised by Mr. Darcy, in spite of what he thinks about her husband. By portraying Charlotte as a superior helpmeet who is more than Mr. Collins deserves, Austen hints that the distinction Elizabeth makes between full, scripted banality and empty, untrammelled elegance is a false one. The crowded, annoying environment in which Charlotte acts gives her opportunity to perform well—better than anyone could expect, as Mr. Darcy says—and with a humorous flexibility that Austen's letters suggest ordinary life demands.

Though Charlotte largely disappears from the narrative after her marriage to Collins—she is barely mentioned during Elizabeth's visit to her house at Hunsford—she appears occasionally in relief: being not as bothered as Elizabeth that Lady Catherine interferes with the Collins's housekeeping, maneuvering Elizabeth into playing the piano for company, encouraging Mr. Collins to go for walks and inflexibly directing what is good for his health, her comfort, and their marriage. Mostly, though, throughout Elizabeth's visit, her actions and her state of mind are opaque to Austen's reader because they go unplumbed by Elizabeth. This is the process that Woloch calls "minor[ing]"—though it is striking that as she moves to the background, Charlotte appears to comparative advantage, doing the most with whatever is to hand, like Emma. Rather than "effectuat[ing] the growth of Elizabeth's mind," as Woloch has it, Charlotte's marginalization highlights the limitations that Elizabeth's views about intimacy place on her emotional and intellectual curiosity.[43] Austen reminds us of the lack of communication between the two former friends by having Elizabeth hypothesize at the end of her visit that she knows Charlotte's real feelings, though they go unvoiced: "Poor Charlotte!—it was melancholy to leave her to such society!—But she had chosen it with her eyes open; and though evidently regretting that her visitors were to go, she did not seem to ask for compassion" (*P*, 233). Though Woloch argues that Elizabeth, by this point in the novel (after visiting Rosings and having read Darcy's revealing letter) "has become the consciousness around which the novel—as a totality—is oriented," Elizabeth's parting interpretation of Charlotte's inner life offers another example of Elizabeth reading social situations aslant: she is confident Charlotte is "evidently regretting" her departure, but perplexed that not only does Charlotte not ask for compassion, but she does not even seem to.[44] Finally, not knowing what to think about her friend who must—but does not—register the

misery of her marriage, Elizabeth turns away from such a difficult interpretative situation.

Charlotte's marriage, and the ensuing break between the two female friends, demonstrates how ideas about good marriage and individual flourishing are inextricable for Elizabeth, leading her to make an ethical commitment that she "shall not defend her, though it is Charlotte Lucas" (*P*, 165). Elizabeth, as we have seen, understands marriage as progressive, parallel to and inextricable from internal growth; Charlotte, by contrast, regards her internal narrative of growth and her social life as a single and then married woman as two separate strands: people are as likely to grow apart as grow together. The divergence of these views is marked out over the course of the novel, in which Austen shows more clearly than anywhere else how attitudes toward marriage render women unintelligible and unsympathetic to each other. Elizabeth treats Charlotte's marriage as a form of moral deviancy: "The woman who marries [Mr. Collins], cannot have a proper way of thinking" (*P*, 165). Even for a friend, Elizabeth tells her sister, one cannot distort "for the sake of one individual, the meaning of principle and integrity, nor endeavour to persuade yourself or me, that selfishness is prudence, and insensibility of danger, security for happiness" (*P*, 165). The tension between circumstance and principle is bluntly posed by Austen; the only clearer division is that which her heroine willingly makes between universal morals and Charlotte's decision. (Jane, of course, urges her to allow for "difference of situation and temper," to "consider Mr. Collins's respectability, and Charlotte's prudent, steady character," and "remember that she is one of a large family" [*P*, 165].)

In Elizabeth's view, marriage and the self form an ethically continuous standard that also has repercussions for other intimate relationships, like friendship. Consequently, Elizabeth empties the ritualistic forms of her friendship with Charlotte of real feeling: "[T]hough determined not to slacken as a correspondent, it was for the sake of what had been, rather than what was" that she continues to communicate with her (*P*, 174). To Elizabeth, Charlotte's attitude toward marriage reveals something significant about her friend that makes Elizabeth depressed about intimacy in general: "There are few people whom I really love, and still fewer of whom I think well. The more I see of the world, the more am I dissatisfied with it; and every day confirms my belief of the inconsistency of all human characters, and of the little dependence that can be placed on the appearance of either merit or sense" (*P*, 165). (Patricia Meyer Spacks nails it when she says Elizabeth "struggles with her narcissism."[45]) Charlotte's

marriage is "unaccountable!" to Elizabeth, and yet also confirms her worst suspicions about the inner lives of her peers (*P*, 165).

One of the most powerful effects of Austen's novel is to show how attitudes toward marriage provide overriding norms that dictate forms of intimacy outside those cultivated within the conjugal couple. Charlotte Lucas's marriage irreparably damages the intimacy she shared with her closest female friend. To align the narrative with the changes in Elizabeth's and Charlotte's friendship is to recognize that it involves loss and, from Elizabeth's perspective, the devaluation of a friend from a person of merit and sense to a woman who pawns her freedom for a prudent marriage. The keen feeling of hazard and loss that attends Elizabeth's point of view—the caution Jane gives her that Elizabeth's habit of interpretation will "ruin [her] happiness"—is lost in a critical interpretation that celebrates her character as a representative of either social progress, cultural conservation or aesthetic consolidation. While "distress[ed by] the conviction that it was impossible for [her] friend to be tolerably happy," Elizabeth also concludes that she "could never address her without feeling that all the comfort of intimacy was over" (*P*, 174). Though the certainty of Charlotte's future happiness was far from clear, her consensual marriage to a man like Mr. Collins demonstrated to Elizabeth an inassimilable difference between their ideas on how to pursue a good life. While the varieties of couples and companions demonstrate Austen's interest in multiple modes of intimacy, for Elizabeth, Charlotte's deviancy from "proper" intimacy in one area of her life disqualifies her in another.

°°°°°°

Most Austen criticism in recent decades has been powered and fraught by its relationship to feminist criticism. The Jane Austen of first-wave feminism sat on the conservative side of the Jacobin/anti-Jacobin debates of the late eighteenth century. Following the work of Butler, Gary Kelly, and Mary Poovey to establish a genealogy of women's writing within which Austen had a particular relevance, second-wave feminists worked toward radicalizing the initial, essentially conservative portrait of Austen. The feminist recovery of Jane Austen reframed, reread, and cracked open texts that seemed conciliatory to and supportive of patriarchy in order to find moments of subversive action and freedom. In so doing, feminist critics tended to work within a liberal framework for evaluating individual agency as the pursuit of freedom.

Paying close attention to Charlotte Lucas in the way that we have allows us to reframe *Pride and Prejudice* as a confrontation between alternative modes of female subjectivity, some of which, like Charlotte's, suggest the possibility of an alternative genealogy for Austen's relevance to contemporary feminists. By reading Charlotte's and Elizabeth's disagreement as a serious debate, rather than a pro forma narrative of modernity's development, we can see that the subjective orientation toward freedom, progress, and self-growth that is so clearly formative for Elizabeth Bennet is not taken for granted by Austen as normative for all women. Charlotte Lucas marries Mr. Collins *and* expects to live a fulfilling life with him. Conscious of Elizabeth's differing views, Charlotte anticipates being hurt by her friend's disapprobation, but makes no excuses for her marriage as an act martyrdom or of submission to crushing necessity.

The confrontation between feminist literary critics and texts like *Pride and Prejudice* that present a plurality of styles of female subjectivity in a non-teleological manner is an uncomfortable one. Lisa Wood, whose study of the late eighteenth-century novel demonstrated the political capaciousness of the form and its adaptability to both radical and anti-Jacobin ends, recounts the alienating experience of reading seriously some of the more conservative texts: "My first encounter with Hannah More's *Strictures on the Modern System of Female Education*, which struck me initially as antifeminist to the point of misogyny, challenged me to confront my own ideology of femininity, which assumed a 'natural' connection between being female and being feminist."[46] More recently, some feminist criticism has turned away from describing female subjectivity as normatively governed by a will to resist. In looking to describe modes of female subjectivity outside a subversion/complicity duality and identify how women attached significance to inhabiting norms, as Charlotte Lucas did, this critical approach broadens our understanding of the multiple forms that subjectivity and agency take in the early novel.[47]

One advantage of reconsidering the disagreement between Charlotte and Elizabeth as an unresolved one is that it allows us to resituate Austen critically. Rather than placing her at the head of a genealogy of great English novelists or in a line of literary foremothers, we can see her as a producer of globally circulating texts. This "Jane Austen," the author of a body of texts that circulated across four continents within decades of their publication in England, has a less obvious relationship to the western ideal of the liberal autonomous individual. As recent work by Deirdre Lynch, Katie Trumpener, and others has shown,

Austen's fictions circulated and accrued meaning outside Britain and America, including in Australian and Indian contexts where it was read in contexts quite distinct from those of social and cultural origin.[48]

In her work on illiberal forms of female agency in Islamic societies, anthropologist Saba Mahmoud writes that "the terms people use to organize their lives are not simply a gloss for universally shared assumptions about the world and one's place in it, but are actually constitutive of different forms of personhood, knowledge, and experience."[49] Charlotte Lucas poses this question to Austen studies and to a liberal feminist critical agenda: what if you choose less, choose safety, and choose constraint; choose, in Elizabeth Bennet's words, a "humiliating picture" for yourself but nonetheless expect to be happy? Charlotte is largely overlooked in Austen criticism except to shadow Elizabeth Bennet, the "most modern and liberated" of Austen's characters.[50] Charlotte models a form of subjectivity that thus far has been temporalized into a version of the premodern that Austen was eager to transcend. Yet the relevance that she has for feminism today is acute, as we expand our focus to a global context that encompasses modes of female agency and fulfillment that are not oriented toward resistance or autonomy. Taking the relationship between Charlotte and Elizabeth not as a dynamic of oppression and liberation, but as an agonistic exchange that produces multiple forms of female subjectivity allows Austen's fiction to become a richer and more productive site for imagining feminism's multiplicity. Charlotte and Elizabeth's differing expectations about conjugal intimacy suggest the multiplicity of roles marriage can have in mediating between self and society. In particular, Charlotte's long overlooked perspective points toward the possibility of human flourishing in situations of restraint and of attaching significance to self-discipline and to submission to social expectations. We can recognize the significance of Charlotte's presence in Austen's narrative and her own claim "to be . . . happy" only when we no longer assume that emancipatory self-expansion exhausts the possibilities of empowered conjugality.

Yale University

NOTES

[1] Jane Austen, *Pride and Prejudice*, ed. Robert Irvine (Peterborough: Broadview Press, 2002), 152. Hereafter abbreviated *P* and cited parenthetically by page number.

[2] Ruth Perry, "Sleeping with Mr. Collins," *Persuasions: The Jane Austen Journal* 22 (2000): 120–1.

[3] Perry, 120–1. While reminding us how intimacy is historically-constituted, Perry also recapitulates a narrative about the eighteenth century that charts a shift from patriarchal marriage to conjugal marriage characterized by affective mutual attachment. See Lawrence Stone, *The Family, Sex and Marriage in England, 1500–1800* (Peregrine Books, 1977); Anna Clark, *Struggle for the Breeches* (Berkeley: Univ. of California Press, 1995); Leonore Davidoff and Catherine Hall, *Family Fortunes* (London: Hutchinson, 1987); and Anthony Giddens, *The Transformation of Intimacy* (Stanford: Stanford Univ. Press, 1992). Perry's argument works in two directions. She describes how Charlotte Lucas gives a jolt of defamiliarization to contemporary readers who view Austen's understanding of conjugality as similar to our own. She also separates the unfamiliar (pre-modern) aspects of Charlotte's marriage to Mr. Collins from the more recognizable affective union between Elizabeth and Darcy, which has the ultimate effect of re-naturalizing aspects of Austen's understanding of intimacy.

[4] Alex Woloch, *The One vs. the Many: Minor Characters and the Space of the Protagonist in the Novel* (Princeton: Princeton Univ. Press, 2003), 56.

[5] Woloch, 92.

[6] Woloch, 97.

[7] Woloch, 54

[8] For exemplary theories of the novel in this vein, see Nancy Armstrong, *Desire and Domestic Fiction* (New York: Oxford Univ. Press, 1987); Gillian Brown, *The Consent of the Governed: The Lockean Legacy in Early American Culture* (Cambridge: Harvard Univ. Press, 2001); Elizabeth Maddock Dillon, *The Gender of Freedom: Fictions of Liberalism and the Literary Public Sphere* (Stanford: Stanford Univ. Press, 2004); and Wendy S. Jones, *Consensual Fictions: Women, Liberalism, and the English Novel* (Toronto: Univ. of Toronto Press, 2005).

[9] Sandra Macpherson, *Harm's Way: Tragic Responsibility and the Novel Form* (Baltimore: Johns Hopkins Univ. Press, 2010), 23; Anne-Lise François, *Open Secrets: The Literature of Uncounted Experience* (Stanford: Stanford Univ. Press, 2008).

[10] G. H. Lewes, "The Novels of Jane Austen," *Blackwood's Edinburgh Magazine* 86 (1859): 112.

[11] Lewes, 113.

[12] Lewes, 107.

[13] Eleanor Ty, *Unsex'd Revolutionaries: Five Women Novelists of the 1790s* (Toronto: Univ. of Toronto Press, 1993), xiii.

[14] Nina Auerbach points out how this view survives in twentieth-century criticism as the theorization of limitation in, for example, Stuart Tave's "Limitations and Definitions." See Tave, "Limitations and Definitions" in Jane Austen, *Pride and Prejudice,* ed. Donald Gray (New York: Norton, 2001), 315–19; and Auerbach, *Romantic Imprisonment* (New York: Columbia Univ. Press, 1985), xiv. Hereafter abbreviated *R* and cited parenthetically by page number.

[15] Ty, xi.

[16] Interpretations of *Mansfield Park* provide a good example of the shift from a "conservative" to a "radical" Austen. Once read as the most conservative of Austen's novels, it is now often turned inside out to be a novel of liberation. For example, Tony Tanner's position that the novel endorsed "deference and obedience" was countered by Katie Trumpener's argument that the novel was invested in reforming the practices of landowners at home and plantation owners abroad, so that its paternalistic attitude was put under lively scrutiny if not outright skepticism (Tanner, *Jane Austen* [Cambridge: Harvard Univ. Press, 1986], 17). Trumpener's argument provides a strong version of

the radicalization of Jane Austen, in which the discovery of radical tendencies does not make Austen a starkly polarized figure, but demonstrates how her overall politics evade the categories of "conservative" or "radical" (*Bardic Nationalism: The Romantic Novel and the British Empire* [Princeton: Princeton Univ. Press, 1997], 182). More recently, François has used concerns from ecocriticism to question how liberal subjectivity and sustainability coexist. She challenges the liberal lineage of female subjectivity by asking what if people (like Fanny) are conservative in their demands and seek out forms of living that make a small impact and few demands on its environment.

[17] Critics such as Marilyn Butler and Mary Poovey have argued that Austen's relevance to literary history lies not only in her artistic accomplishment, but in how her work diagnoses the historical constraints imposed upon writers, especially women writers, who were required by norms of politeness to signal in every piece of writing their reluctance to enter the public sphere of communication. More recently, William Galperin has asked how the historical and cultural specificity that we can bring to bear on Austen's life and writings should inform interpretations of the politics and aesthetics of her work. He charts the orthogonal currents of comedy, realism, and romance to produce a heterogeneous Austen, who, while definitely conservative, is irreducibly so. At the same time, Clara Tuite, working in the wake of Edward Said, has carved out a middle ground for Austen as neither complicit nor a radical provocateur in the issues of sex, race, class, and national difference that simmer under her ostensibly domestic and provincial marriage plots. These more recent historicist and postcolonial formulations of Austen are informed by the legacy of criticism from the 1980s and '90s in which the conservative Austen preceded—and was never fully replaced by—later radical interpretations. See Butler, *Romantics, Rebels and Reactionaries: English Literature and its Background, 1760–1830* (New York: Oxford Univ. Press, 1982); Poovey, *The Proper Lady and the Woman Writer: Ideology as Style in the Works of Mary Wollstonecraft, Mary Shelley, and Jane Austen* (Chicago: Univ. of Chicago Press, 1984); Galperin, *The Historical Austen* (Philadelphia: Univ. of Pennsylvania Press, 2002); and Tuite, *Romantic Austen: Sexual Politics and the Literary Canon* (Cambridge: Cambridge Univ. Press, 2002).

[18] Butler, 108.

[19] Butler, 108.

[20] Butler, 97.

[21] Austen's novels are "fables," Butler says, that adapt the "*Pamela*, *Grandison*, or *Evelina* myth" in which "the heroine must find the best gentlemen to marry . . . [and] the point in each case is that the village community's leader is being sought, the true hereditary gentlemen," who can sustain paternalistic continuity through a time of social unrest (Butler, 105).

[22] F. R. Leavis, *The Great Tradition: George Elliot, Henry James, Joseph Conrad* (London: Faber and Faber, 2008), 16.

[23] Tuite, 11.

[24] Tuite, 10.

[25] For an important example of this interpretation of female subjectivity, see especially Dillon.

[26] See Michael Geyer and Charles Bright, "World History in a Global Age," *American Historical Review* 100 (1995), 1034–1060. Geyer and Bright argue that "at the end of the twentieth century, we encounter not a universalizing and single modernity but an integrated world of multiple and multiplying modernities" (1058). Adjacent to this critical orientation, Talal Asad and Charles Taylor have both developed and destabilized

the notion of modernity with regards to secularity as the defining feature of western modern culture. See Asad, *Formations of the Secular: Christianity, Islam, Modernity* (Stanford: Stanford Univ. Press, 2003); and Taylor, *A Secular Age* (Cambridge: Belknap Press, 2007). Asad has also argued that the seduction plot is both of a point of contact and fissure between western liberal and Islamic societies. See Asad, "Free Speech, Blasphemy, and Secular Criticism," in *Is Critique Secular?* (Berkeley: Univ. of California Press, 2009), 14–57.

[27] The term is deployed over confidently by Elizabeth to accuse Darcy of being unjust to Wickham: "You have deprived the best years of his life of that independence which was no less his due than his desert" (*P*, 214).

[28] Austen, *Emma*, ed. Stephen M. Parrish (New York: Norton, 2000), 283.

[29] For a critique of and utilitarian alternative to the interpretation of action as intention, see Frances Ferguson, *Pornography, the Theory: What Utilitarianism Did to Action* (Chicago: Univ. of Chicago Press, 2004). Macpherson's *Harm's Way* uses the same critical insight to show how eighteenth-century liability law describes ways of constructing the subject that attend to status, rather than intention.

[30] Niklas Luhmann calls this expectation of romantic love's constitutive relation to the self—which he traces to the end of the eighteenth century—the desire to "grow through love" (*Love as Passion: The Codification of Intimacy* [Oxford: Polity Press, 1986], 37).

[31] Tanner, 126.

[32] Austen revisits the comic and self-parodying potential of being delighted to discover one was wrong in *Emma*. D. A. Miller calls this Emma's "self-inflicted wound," which distinguishes her from the infallible (and inhuman) Austen narrator, and makes her a marriageable person (*Jane Austen, or, the Secret of Style* [Princeton: Princeton Univ. Press, 2003], 52).

[33] From *The Critical Review: or, Annals of Literature* 3:2 (1813), quoted in *P*, 483.

[34] Julia Prewitt Brown, *Jane Austen's Novels: Social Change and Literary Form* (Cambridge: Harvard Univ. Press, 1979), 19.

[35] Eve Tavor Bannet, *The Domestic Revolution: Enlightenment Feminisms and the Novel* (Baltimore: Johns Hopkins Univ. Press, 2000), 3.

[36] See Jenny Davidson, "Austen's Voices," in *Swift's Travels: Eighteenth-Century British Satire and Its Legacy*, ed. Nicholas Hudson and Aaron Santesso (Cambridge: Cambridge Univ. Press, 2008), 233–50.

[37] Austen, *Emma*, 151.

[38] R. W. Chapman, *Jane Austen's Letters to Her Sister Cassandra and Others* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1932), xi.

[39] Chapman, xi.

[40] This is the report of Austen's niece Caroline quoted in Deirdre Le Faye and W. and R. A. Austen-Leigh, *Jane Austen: A Family Record* (Cambridge: Cambridge Univ. Press, 1989), 243.

[41] Chapman, xii.

[42] John Milton, *Paradise Lost* (London: Oxford World Classics, 2008), book 1, line 254.

[43] Woloch, 92.

[44] Woloch, 101.

[45] Patricia Meyer Spacks, *The Female Imagination* (New York: Alfred A. Knopf, 1975), 116. Spacks goes on to argue that Elizabeth transcends her solipsism through her marriage to Darcy.

[46] Lisa Wood, *Modes of Discipline: Women, Conservatism, and the Novel after the French Revolution* (Lewisburg: Bucknell Univ. Press, 2003), 23.

[47] Toni Bowers looks for alternatives to "agency besides the model of male initiatory desire and subordinate female response, the latter limited to resistance 'or' consent," by recovering a model of "subordinate agency (almost always coded female)" that she calls "collusive resistance" and defines as "a paradoxical exercise of *resistance through submission*" (*Force or Fraud: British Seduction Stories and the Problem of Resistance, 1660–1760* [Oxford: Oxford Univ. Press, 2011], 4). Bowers's work forges a path for literary scholars to work around a limiting consent/no-consent dichotomy of Lockean agency, yet it nevertheless retains a liberal vocabulary of "resistance" for thinking about agency, which necessitates awkward formulations such as how Bowers frames subordinate agency as a "paradoxical exercise" (Bowers, 4.)

[48] See Deidre Lynch, *Janeites: Austen's Disciples and Devotees* (Princeton: Princeton Univ. Press, 2000); and Trumpener.

[49] Saba Mahmood, *Politics of Piety: The Islamic Revival and the Feminist Subject* (Princeton: Princeton Univ. Press, 2005), 16.

[50] This is Clifford Siskin's remark on the back of the *Pride and Prejudice* Broadview edition.