

A painting of a woman with dark hair, wearing a white lace-trimmed blouse and a necklace with a large brooch. She is seated, leaning forward over an open book, with her left hand resting against her forehead in a thoughtful or weary pose. The background is dark and indistinct.

NORA BARTLETT
EDITED BY JANE STABLER

JANE AUSTEN
Reflections of a Reader



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1. Reading *Pride and Prejudice* over Fifty Years

I gave another talk about *Pride and Prejudice* earlier this year to the student literary society we have at St Andrews, and in the discussion that followed one student said something very memorable; we were talking about the Keira Knightley film version and, as seems to be usual, almost everyone in the room except me hated Keira Knightley, which I find fascinating, but the comment the student made was even more fascinating: she mentioned the continual little smug smirk on Keira's face and said in some exasperation, 'when movies want to show that a girl is smart, the only thing they can think of is to have her sneer at everybody!' I thought that was very illuminating, and not only about the film but the book: Elizabeth Bennet is clever and she knows it. We don't all, automatically, like or identify with people who think they are clever.

I want to talk today about some of the techniques Jane Austen uses to enable readers to feel through, to feel with, to identify with, her characters. Identification within the novel can change over time, particularly over long periods of time. A few years ago, I realized that I had been reading *Pride and Prejudice* for fifty years, since I was six and found the book on my grandfather's bookshelf. What I actually understood I cannot of course remember, but it seemed to present no problems to my understanding. I was never bewildered. I read the novel in a state of high excitement, and then I read it again. This has been happening ever since, several times a year. I have had this novel as a companion through almost every stage of my life.

So, that is one part of what I would like to talk about today: the way in which one's reading changes at different stages of life. The other is the role which silence, and listening, play in Jane Austen's novels, even in this one, so famed for the brilliance of its dialogue. I am going to

try to interweave these two themes, and because my notion of stages of a reading life began as stages of a woman's reading life, I would like to weave in also a third strand, which is a question about whether the novel is seen as presupposing, or addressing, a female reader. This has been made more apparent to me recently by discovering David Miller's short, strange book, *Jane Austen, or the Secret of Style*, which interrogates that assumption by positing a young *male* reader and describing his predicament. In her reading, according to Miller, a young female reader, 'had done what a female not only would, but ought' but 'the same discovery that [...] made the girl a good girl, made the boy all wrong'.¹

Professor Miller is trying to assess the effects of what many seem to assume about the gender of the narrative voice in Jane Austen's novels: that is, though there is seldom the intrusion of an 'I' and never an invented, named narrator as there is in, say, the novels of Sir Walter Scott, somehow the voice that speaks is a female voice. Miller explores the possibility that the young boy who uses his own inner voice to speak the narrator's words in a Jane Austen novel is somehow 'getting himself into trouble'. This question came very pointedly into my mind when I recently gave a version of this paper to a student group in Scotland, a group I have addressed before on twentieth-century topics and therefore *know* includes both young men and young women, to find that for *Pride and Prejudice* I had drawn a larger audience than usual, but composed exclusively of young women. I am going to be talking about how the novel effects an identification between the reader and Elizabeth, but I would like to raise the question of how and whether the novel genders the reader as female, and does so through the narrative.²

This is related to a question which has been debated among writers on Jane Austen for at least a century, which is how completely the novel's narrative point of view is identified with that of its central figure. Some writers seem to see the novels as 'thought experiments' in the depiction of a single point-of-view of the sort that we find in, say, Virginia Woolf, in that departures from that viewpoint are read as lapses, to be found more often in the early novels, or in a novel like *Persuasion* that was not

1 D. A. Miller, *Jane Austen, or the Secret of Style* (Princeton and Oxford: Princeton University Press, 2003), p. 3.

2 For further discussion, see Joe Bray, *The Female Reader in the English Novel from Burney to Austen* (New York: Routledge, 2009), <https://doi.org/10.4324/9780203888674>

fully revised.³ My own sense—I want us to look at this—is that while the novels work to make you identify with the central figure (in *Pride and Prejudice* with Elizabeth), the narrative as a whole is not participating fully with that process, but is offering us a comment on it, is not even, as consistently as is often suggested, fully sympathetic with her viewpoint. I think it is a markedly cool eye that watches Elizabeth at the novel's very end, acting efficiently to exclude her mother from 'the comfort and elegance of their family party at Pemberley' (III xviii 426). I believe it is the late American feminist critic Carolyn Heilbrun who commented on this passage, 'Never trust a Daddy's girl'.⁴

I have been struggling for some time to find ways of characterizing Austen's narrative voice/voices, and gender is only one aspect of its elusiveness. There is moral ambiguity, as well. But here, in *Pride and Prejudice*, not the first novel published but often the first one read, is there a sense of its addressing the reader as female, possibly colluding, two females, together? Is that how we experience this famously understated, enigmatic, but also colourful and melodramatic narrative? My own reading was once a 'girl's' and is now a 'woman's', but also on multiple re-readings finds traces of a speaker who is eerily untethered and ungendered, like an angel un-voiced, like a countertenor. The unsatisfactory term critics have found for this is 'irony', but I would like to find another. Miller, whom I mentioned earlier, is worried we might need to use the term 'neuter', which he doesn't like, and I don't like either, since it reminds me of *lost* gender.⁵ Might it not be possible to look for something more thrilling, comparable to the cartwheeling exuberance about gender one finds in Shakespeare's comedies?⁶

3 For Austen and cognitive explorations, see Susan Morgan, *In the Meantime: Character and Perception in Jane Austen's Fiction* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1980); Alan Richardson, *British Romanticism and the Science of Mind* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2001), pp. 101–11.

4 Source unidentified. In a 1988 study, Heilbrun commented on the 'perfunctoriness' of the endings of Jane Austen's novels, including *Pride and Prejudice*: 'Elizabeth [...] says of Darcy at the end that he is not yet ready to be laughed at, or with, and there is no woman with whom to share laughter. Austen probably laughed a good deal with her sister and her nieces, but laughter did not mark the high point of any of her adventures or the adventures of her heroines'. See Carolyn G. Heilbrun, *Writing A Woman's Life* (London: The Woman's Press, 1989), pp. 129–30.

5 Miller, *Jane Austen*, pp. 33–38.

6 Something like this emerges in Claudia L. Johnson, *Equivocal Beings: Politics, Gender, and Sentimentality in the 1790s* (Chicago and London: University of Chicago Press,

I don't want you to let go of the sense that there is something stranger going on, and that Jane Austen's novels, read rightly, have something of an uncanny quality. We might want to think of Jane Austen as the author of a set of six strange novels that could be known under the collective title, *Being Female*—acknowledging the full complexity of the way that the first voice that spoke inside my head, when I began reading Jane Austen, was something like a woman's. Though her nieces and nephews read her novels and gave her advice about them while in their teens, I don't think she was herself producing 'early readers' in the manner of, say, Dr. Seuss, and at six I was younger than the reader Jane Austen had in mind. Nevertheless, I'm going to start by boldly suggesting that I was one kind of ideal reader at that very early age; I am suggesting that my youth and absolute inexperience was an odd kind of equipment for one sort of reading. Jane Austen acknowledged that she expected her readers to 'like' Elizabeth; I worshipped her, wanted to be her; I shared and accepted, as a reader with even a little experience could not, I think, the accuracy of her 'first impressions' of all the new people and places to which the novel's lively opening pages introduces her—and *First Impressions* was, of course, the novel's working title.

It has become a critical commonplace to suggest that almost all of Jane Austen's novels in some way enact 'the Cinderella theme with the fairy godmother omitted'.⁷ I think the fairy tale element gave a shape to my readings and re-readings throughout childhood: the two very beautiful and impoverished heroines, the rich and handsome heroes, pairs of wicked sisters, gnomes and trolls and wicked sprites, and even a bad fairy in the form of Lady Catherine de Bourgh. At age six, actual fairy tales made up much of my other reading, and this was but a gratifyingly longer fairy tale, a fairy tale with conversations in it, an important qualification, which I will talk about in a moment.

As a little girl and for a long time afterwards, I identified with Elizabeth Bennet. But the identification with Elizabeth which Jane Austen so skilfully engineers produces at this age and perhaps at any, or at most, *first* readings of the novel, some moments which can't be

1995), pp. 191–204.

⁷ D. W. Harding, 'Regulated Hatred: An Aspect of the Work of Jane Austen', *Scrutiny*, 8 (1939–40), 236–62; reprinted in *Jane Austen: Critical Assessments*, ed. by Ian Littlewood, 4 vols (Mountfield: Helm, 1998), II, p. 292.

reproduced at later readings. One important one, which no reader is likely to forget, is Elizabeth's wide-eyed, mesmerized acceptance of Mr. Wickham's life story, the story of how Mr. Darcy has, out of pure jealousy, ruined his boyhood companion's life and prospects. This takes place, all will recall, at an evening party at the house of well-meaning but vulgar Aunt Phillips (the frequent fate of older women is to lapse into vulgarity) where Mr. Wickham's inability to play whist has placed him, with a powerful foreshadowing of later events, between Elizabeth and Lydia. Earlier in the day, Elizabeth has seen a mysterious exchange of glances between the charming young officer and the hated Mr. Darcy; and she is curious. She leads Mr. Wickham to talk of their relationship, after—oddly impulsively, don't we think?—revealing to a complete stranger, her own dislike of the man. And Wickham, after a little coy hesitation, tells his tale of Mr. Darcy's vindictiveness and breach of promise to someone ““connected with his family [...] from [...] infancy”” (I xvi 86). Wickham is also, of course, talking to a complete stranger.

The staging of Elizabeth's responses here is worth our taking time to notice: when Wickham is talking about Mr. Darcy she finds ‘the interest of the subject increase’; she ‘listened with all her heart; but the delicacy of it prevented farther inquiry’ (I xvi 88). Her sense of delicacy, we note, extends only to her own behaviour and not, memorably, to any sense of Mr. Wickham's, who tells her—one imagines his look of conscious self-restraint, the bitten lip, the shake of his head as he says, ““Till I can forget his father, I can never defy or expose *him*”” (I xvi 89) Elizabeth does not seem to notice—not for many months, and until forced to by incontrovertible evidence—that he says these words *while* exposing Mr. Darcy. Aged six, I did not notice this, either; but Elizabeth is almost twenty. Neither does she notice that Wickham's story is a nest of cliché: Darcy's father ““was one of the best men that ever breathed and the truest friend I ever had””; he has been left with ““a thousand tender recollections”” of this dear friend (I xvi 88). Elizabeth, smart, well-read, but young, does not realize that his conversation combines the scandalous with the fatuous—he must be so good-looking! And so impenetrable. Miller suggests that it is impossible for the reader to see the action from Wickham's point of view, to get into the shoes of this young

soldier.⁸ One of *Mansfield Park*'s many experiments is an exploration of the inner world of a predatory male, but that is not allowed here.

What Jane Austen demonstrates instead here is the spellbinding power of a sexually opportunistic and very attractive man to produce this blinkered response in a young woman. A girl of high intelligence, but relatively little experience of men, responds to Wickham's gambit as naively as did I at six, a young child with absolutely no experience of much outside family life. The Cinderella story here is as full of power and danger as any true folk or fairy tale: Elizabeth, seated excitingly, as I have said, playing Lottery Tickets, with its prizes and forfeits, next to the entrancing Wickham, who has Lydia on his other side, Lydia, who 200 pages later will pay the ultimate forfeit to this heartless and dissolute charmer's desire for easy money, and easy sexual conquests. We might just note here that Lydia's flirtatiousness, and her being 'a most determined talker', almost prevented this private conversation; she is distracted from Wickham only by her absorption in the game (I xvi 86). We see her 'making bets and exclaiming after prizes'—how dangerous for a woman to have such excessive energy; how ambivalent Jane Austen is about it (I xvi 86). Lottery Tickets is a noisy 'round game', all luck and no skill—poor Lydia! And we might note how cool, how askance, is the narrative's composure while watching its beloved heroine responding over-excitedly to the man: 'Elizabeth honoured him for such feelings, and thought him handsomer than ever as he expressed them' (I xvi 89).

Cleverly selective, the novel does not give us much more in the way of demonstrations like this one of Wickham's charm. Little more of his conversation is presented in these early chapters; we are only told about his favourable effects on the Bennet parents, and on discerning Aunt Gardiner who likes him so much. His speech is not depicted again until many chapters later, until the much later scenes in Chapter xli in which he attempts to revive Lizzy's interest, and then, like the disenchanted Lizzy, we detect 'an affectation and a sameness to disgust and weary' (II xviii 258). Even in this early novel, drafted before the nineteenth century began, and 'lopt & cropt' ten years later, the balance of who talks, whose

8 This is a gloss on Miller's brief discussion of the cross-dressing episode in which Lydia Bennet helps to dress the young soldier, Chamberlayne, in women's clothes and the other men, including Wickham, 'did not know him in the least' (Miller, *Jane Austen*, p. 3).

dialogue is quoted and whose isn't, and when, is very important.⁹ Jane Austen's family read plays as well as novels aloud to each other after dinner, and before the family left her childhood home at Steventon parsonage, they put on plays themselves in a small way. Some of the pieces of Jane Austen's surviving juvenile writing are very short, very funny plays. She is interested in dialogue, good at it and knows when *not* to do it.¹⁰ Sometimes in re-reading Jane Austen you look for a bit of dialogue you think you remember and find it isn't there, it has only been suggested by the narrative and then re-imagined, as speech, by the reader: we speak in our heads lines she never wrote.

The exchanges we *do* hear in *Pride and Prejudice*, and famously, are those between Elizabeth and Darcy—erotically charged, but also sharp and convincing, and I would like to look at one exchange to demonstrate the character of some of these conversations, the 'light & bright & sparkling' surface that, like the fairy-tale plot, provokes delight in the reader.¹¹ We might just pause, first, though, to look at the way in which Mr. Darcy, in Volume I of the novel, is becoming more and more attracted to Elizabeth. The direction this attraction takes him in is interesting, and we might want to note that, having boorishly described her as “tolerable; but not handsome enough to tempt *me*” in Chapter iii, he finds it ‘mortifying’ in Chapter vi to find himself finding her ‘pleasing’ (I iii 12; I vi 26). He is watching her; his next move is, intriguingly, to *listen*: ‘as a step towards conversing with her himself, [he] attended to her conversation with others’ (I vi 26). Elizabeth notices this: “What does Mr. Darcy mean,” said she to Charlotte, “by listening to my conversation with Colonel Forster?” (I vi 26). Keep this listening in mind; we want to be thinking, as we read Jane Austen, not only about who is talking and what they are saying but about who might be listening.

The next passage of dialogue I have chosen, from Chapter xxxi, is interesting in this regard, for it is set at Rosings, the home of Lady Catherine de Bourgh, the daughter and sister of an Earl, who ought, technically at least, to be the arbiter of taste and breeding her chaplain Mr. Collins thinks her, but who proves herself with every speech and

9 *Letters*, p. 202.

10 For further discussion, see *The Talk in Jane Austen*, ed. by Bruce Stovel and Lynn Weinloss Gregg (Edmonton: University of Alberta Press, 2002).

11 *Letters*, p. 203.

every action to be ill-bred and ill-mannered. The scene takes place after dinner; Lady Catherine and the parsonage party are at a little distance. If this were a play they would be ‘upstage right’, and Mr. Darcy and his cousin Colonel Fitzwilliam have drifted ‘downstage left’ to hear Elizabeth play the piano. Darcy, having been separated from Elizabeth for more than ten chapters, is clearly beginning to warm himself again in the pleasure of her company, to remember what he feels like when he is with her. Elizabeth tells him and his cousin that she has information to give about him that will “‘shock your relations’”, toying inwardly with what she *thinks* she *does* know about him, his wrongs to Wickham, but nevertheless behaving in such an ‘arch’ way as unwittingly to attract him: “‘I am not afraid of you,’” he says, ‘smilingly’ and almost affectionately (II viii 195–96). His cousin is told that he refused to dance at the Meryton Assembly but not that Elizabeth was the woman with whom he did not dance. There is some inconsequential, rather intimate, banter. “‘Well, Colonel Fitzwilliam, what do I play next?’” she asks: “‘My fingers wait your orders.’” (II viii 196). Diffidently, but with the obstinacy which Mrs. Gardiner will eventually locate as his defining characteristic, Darcy interrupts: he is still responding to her teasing accusation. “‘Perhaps,’” said Darcy, “‘I should have judged better, had I sought an introduction, but I am ill-qualified to recommend myself to strangers.’” (II viii 196). Note the grammar here: the conditional predominates—‘perhaps I should [...] had I sought’, closing with the apparently shy but perhaps proud or reserved admission: ‘I am ill qualified’.

Elizabeth’s response, interestingly, does not cue the reader to her inner state. There is no lead-up to her swift and smart rejoinder, which apparently comes from a sudden confidence. “‘Shall we’”, she begins—*we*, to the son of an Earl whom she has known for a day or two (it is worth noting that the Austen family had a wide acquaintance among the gentry and counted many baronets among their associates, but had little contact with the nobility)—“‘Shall we ask your cousin the reason of this?’” said Elizabeth, still addressing Colonel Fitzwilliam. “‘Shall we ask him why a man of sense and education, and who has lived in the world, is ill-qualified to recommend himself to strangers?’” (II viii 196). *Shall we*, she brightly suggests. As readers, we remember that Lizzy has been described from the story’s opening as having ‘wit’. “‘Lizzy has

something more of quickness than her sisters'', her intelligent father has said, to her far less intelligent mother (I i 5).

But perhaps the smoothly confident, witty address to the Colonel would not be equally smooth if made to the object of her witticism? Elizabeth presents herself here as if she were being straightforward and direct; she lightly characterizes Darcy as hidden, reserved. But she is using indirection herself here, by addressing Fitzwilliam. Here we see both potential lovers, one unsuspecting, one beginning to be certain of his fate, simultaneously tongue-tied, bashful, both, in the mode of lovers, in that he speaks hesitantly, and she addresses a third party, and yet both are warmly competent at self-revelation.

'I certainly have not the talent which some people possess,' said Darcy, 'of conversing easily with those I have never seen before. I cannot catch their tone of conversation, or appear interested in their concerns, as I often see done.'

'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 would not take the trouble of practising. It is not that I do not believe *my* fingers as capable as any other woman's of superior execution.'

Darcy smiled and said, 'You are perfectly right. You have employed your time much better. No one admitted to the privilege of hearing you, can think anything wanting. We neither of us perform to strangers.' (II viii 197)

It seems important for the surface sparkle that we do *not* see Elizabeth searching through the confusion she often feels in Darcy's presence for the right words here. She is fluent, almost without the slight hesitation that would be produced by commas. And Darcy picks up some of that fluency, that confidence. They have both, briefly, the right words, they have mastered the sort of exchange in which their capacity for intimacy is revealed through their simultaneous recognition of, and reserve about, one another. I don't intend to endlessly quote witty dialogue. In recent re-readings of the novel I am struck more by how often, between Elizabeth and Darcy, there is a *failure* to be witty, an appealing failure, a sense of mutual difficulty, of conversation being blunted or even utterly scuppered by an undertow of real emotion neither is prepared to acknowledge.

As a sort of background to this discussion, here is a short passage from *Evelina* by Fanny Burney, one of Jane Austen's favourite novelists. The title character is describing her first adult ball and her first dance with a man:

He seemed very desirous of entering into conversation with me; but I was seized with such a panic, that I could hardly speak a word, and nothing but the shame of so soon changing my mind prevented my returning to my seat, and declining to dance at all.

He appeared to be surprised at my terror, which I believe was but too apparent: however, he asked no questions, though I fear he must think it very odd, for I did not choose to tell him it was owing to my never before dancing but with a school-girl.

His conversation was sensible and spirited; his air, and address were open and noble; his manners gentle, attentive, and infinitely engaging; his person is all elegance, and his countenance the most animated and expressive I have ever seen...¹²

When she wishes simply to sit down, she is urged, ““But you must speak to your partner first.”” Evelina confesses: ““However, I had not sufficient courage to address him; and so away we all three tript, and seated ourselves at another end of the room.””¹³

This novel, written in 1778, published, like Jane Austen's first novel, 'by a lady', is an obvious influence not only on Jane Austen but on most nineteenth-century novels about women. 'The History of a Young Lady's Entrance into the World', it is filled to the brim with uncouth and unwanted admirers, ill-bred older women, and of decent, loyal (and rich, and well-born) suitors. It is a novel full of embarrassment, which is a topic I would like to address in a minute. But I would like to move on via tongue-tiedness. The *Evelina* passage is excruciating because, though Lord Orville, her lovely dancing partner, makes every courteous effort to speak, unlike Mr. Darcy, Evelina, unlike Lizzy, cannot say *anything* at all. Nothing. Not a word. We know that Jane Austen found this scene very funny; and I think we see an intriguing rewriting of it at the ball at Netherfield, where Elizabeth and Darcy finally—indeed, for the only time in the novel—dance.

12 Fanny Burney, *Evelina: Or the History of a Young Lady's Entrance into the World*, ed. by Edward A. Bloom (Oxford and New York: Oxford University Press, 1968; repr. 1990), p. 30.

13 Ibid.

This is back in Chapter xviii. We will all remember that the ball at Netherfield is a kind of turning point. The next day, the Netherfield party decamp to London and Jane is left, for a time, deserted by Bingley, and the novel is left without the stimulation of the growing Darcy-Elizabeth relationship. Though there are compensations: the next chapter opens with Mr. Collins's proposal. At the Netherfield ball, Elizabeth, who has earlier promised her mother never to dance with Mr. Darcy, is taken by surprise and forced to accept him as a partner. Elizabeth is at first determined to share Mr. Darcy's silence, then decides that 'to oblige him to talk' will be to torture him even more (I xviii 102). They discuss the dance itself, the equivalent of talking about the weather. They discuss, in a way that embarrasses both of them, Wickham. They are disastrously interrupted by Sir William Lucas with his blundering remarks about the approaching marriage between Bingley and Jane. And they discuss each other. While still in a state of some self-possession Elizabeth has said, with deliberate preposterousness, that she has "always seen a great similarity in the turn of our minds" and Mr. Darcy has mumbled something back (I xviii 103). Later on, when they are both trying to get back on to their conversational feet after Sir William's interruption, things get even more hopeless. They stagger along, saying things they do not mean, trying to follow one another through a mire of almost *non sequiturs*. Elizabeth tries to converse, for convention's sake—they are in public, they barely know each other, they are turning each other through space in time to music, after all, so touching one another, if barely, and they have to behave themselves. She tries to 'shake off her gravity' and *keep talking* (I xviii 105). Darcy also determinedly struggles on as they weave and wind through oceans of unacknowledged feeling:

'What think you of books?' said he, smiling.

'Books—Oh! No.—I am sure we never read the same, or not with the same feelings.'

'I am sorry you think so; but if that be the case, there can at least be no want of subject.—We may compare our different opinions.'

'No—I cannot talk of books in a ball-room; my head is always full of something else.'

'The *present* always occupies you in such scenes—does it?' said he, with a look of doubt.

'Yes, always,' she replied, without knowing what she said, for her thoughts had wandered far from the subject, as soon afterwards

appeared by her suddenly exclaiming, 'I remember hearing you once say, Mr. Darcy, that you hardly ever forgave, that your resentment once created was unappeasable. You are very cautious, I suppose, as to its *being created?*'

'I am,' said he, with a firm voice.

'And never allow yourself to be blinded by prejudice?'

'I hope not.'

Here it seems to me that one of the perfections of the novel is in this very imperfect, mutually unsatisfactory, mutually embarrassing exchange, which, if it leaves Elizabeth's mind (we don't know) stays in Darcy's. For months.

Something I think is very important here—I note it in *Persuasion* also—is that though Jane Austen's novels do feature both witty, and comically witless, speakers (Mr. and Mrs. Bennet immediately leap to mind), very often, and easy to miss, characters' wits fail them in the dialogue. They are, like Evelina, tongue-tied. Think of Darcy and Elizabeth outside Pemberley in Chapter xlivi, talking 'with great perseverance' about Matlock and Dove Dale (III i 284). But these presented failures are framed, in the narrative, by such rhythmic prose that the sense of sparkle and vibrancy is maintained. There are pauses that are like pauses in music. There is a wonderful one in *Pride and Prejudice* where, having demanded some professions of envy and admiration of his lifestyle from the departing Elizabeth, Mr. Collins walks about the room 'while Elizabeth tried to unite civility and truth in a few short sentences' (II xv 239).

From Mr. Collins it is but a short step to the social embarrassment that many critics have noted is *Pride and Prejudice*'s great theme. David Miller describes the second-order awkwardness, for the young male reader, of such profound identification with a young woman, 'enjoying, or imagining enjoying, the happy ending of a plot that, except in this mode of writing, one never could perform'.¹⁴ For the young girl, the awkwardnesses presented even in this 'light & bright & sparkling' text were increasingly highlighted for me as a reader as I grew older and continued to reread the novel, and naturally reached their peak during the period of life when embarrassment seems to be the most crucial of human experiences. Adolescence is the period when the reader of *Pride*

14 Miller, *Jane Austen*, p. 34.

and Prejudice is approaching the same age as that of her heroines, which I think of as sort of ‘Stage II’ of reading Jane Austen. In this stage there is more suffering for the reader whatever his or her sex.

Jane Austen is sometimes spoken about as if she were not a very ‘physical’ novelist, as if she did not attend much to physical sensation in her characters.¹⁵ I would dispute this in general, but surely even those who hold that mistaken view must agree that she is the Poet Laureate of the blush—that physical sensation so well known to children and adolescents, rarer in adults.¹⁶ It would be interesting to count the blushes in *Pride and Prejudice*, not only Lizzy’s, but Jane’s, of course, and Charlotte Lucas’s, and then of course to count the blushes that do *not* occur. Lydia and Wickham in their triumphant return to Longbourn as young marrieds do not blush, though they cause blushes and the other ritual responses of embarrassment and chagrin: the eyes lifted heavenwards, the shudders and shrugs. Here it is siblings and their spouses who cause the embarrassment, but more often, in keeping with the spirit of adolescence, it is parents and parent-figures. Many adults are ludicrous in the novel—Sir William Lucas, Lady Catherine and, of course, Mr. Collins, who, though young, seems from his profession and his pomposity to belong to an older generation—but it is Elizabeth’s parents and particularly her mother who exhibit, in Mr. Darcy’s wounding phrase, ‘that total want of propriety so frequently, so almost uniformly betrayed by herself’ (II xii 220).

The reader knows all about this from the beginning, of course. Mrs. Bennet’s foolish, embarrassing obsession with marrying her daughters, which is, of course, shared by the novel, and does, of course, prove in the end to be appropriate to the situation and the tale. It is the basis on which we become acquainted with the family. But the people of Meryton and of the Bennets’ part of Hertfordshire are probably used to Mrs. Bennet’s silliness. It is in contact with the newcomers at Netherfield that her improprieties cause her daughter the full agonies of embarrassment. In Chapter ix when Jane, with her fateful cold, and Elizabeth as her

15 For a full-length study devoted to countering to this view, see John Wiltshire, *Jane Austen and the Body* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1992; repr. 2004).

16 See K. Halsey, ‘The Blush of Modesty or the Blush of Shame? Reading Jane Austen’s Blushes’, *Forum for Modern Language Studies*, 42 (2006), 226–38, <https://doi.org/10.1093/fmls/cql015>

nurse, have been for some days at Netherfield, they receive a morning visit from Mrs. Bennet and the three younger girls, and Mrs. Bennet, mistaking Caroline Bingley's 'cold civility' for real friendliness, speaks of her gratitude, and Jane's beauty, at too-great length (I ix 46). When Lizzy and the gallant Bingley attempt to turn the conversation, she, Mrs. Bennet, wonderfully, fears that *Lizzy* is behaving embarrassingly: "do not run on," she cries noisily, "in the wild manner that you are suffered to do at home." (I ix 46). Then begins a wonderfully loyal display of comradeship from Bingley and even from Darcy, in an attempt to quiet Mrs. Bennet:

'I did not know before,' continued Bingley immediately, 'that you were a studier of character. It must be an amusing study.'

'Yes; but intricate characters are the *most* amusing. They have at least that advantage.'

'The country,' said Darcy, 'can in general supply but few subjects for such a study. In a country neighbourhood you move in a very confined and unvarying society.'

'But people themselves alter so much, that there is something new to be observed in them for ever.'

'Yes, indeed,' cried Mrs. Bennet, offended by his manner of mentioning a country neighbourhood. 'I assure you there is quite as much of *that* going on in the country as in town.'

Every body was surprised; and Darcy, after looking at her for a moment, turned silently away. Mrs. Bennet, who fancied she had gained a complete victory over him, continued her triumph.

'I cannot see that London has any great advantage over the country for my part, except the shops and public places. The country is a vast deal pleasanter, is not it, Mr. Bingley?'

'When I am in the country,' he replied, 'I never wish to leave it; and when I am in town it is pretty much the same. They have each their advantages, and I can be equally happy in either.'

'Aye—that is because you have the right disposition. But that gentleman,' looking at Darcy, 'seemed to think the country was nothing at all.'

'Indeed, Mama, you are mistaken,' said Elizabeth, blushing for her mother. 'You quite mistook Mr. Darcy. He only meant that there were not such a variety of people to be met with in the country as in town, which you must acknowledge to be true.'

'Certainly, my dear, nobody said there were; but as to not meeting with many people in this neighbourhood, I believe there are few

neighbourhoods larger. I know we dine with four and twenty families.' (I ix 47–48)

The *rate* at which the young people speak to silence their elder, their attempt to create a small, young-adult, civilized space—a linguistic community—which will exclude the old, and the teenaged, Bennet hoydens fails; it costs Elizabeth a blush, and, interestingly, a defence of the enemy, Mr. Darcy. But her mother's rigorously adhered-to stubbornness and stupidity carries the day. Even kindly Bingley has to stifle a laugh, and his sister's conspiratorial glance at Darcy does not escape Elizabeth.

At this point we realize the impossibility of counting blushes: they are too many to count. And the chapter closes with an early demonstration from Lydia, who is here first described—'a stout, well-grown girl of fifteen' with 'high animal spirits'—demanding the ball which will so definitively close the first part of the novel (I ix 49). As her mother and sisters leave, Elizabeth escapes also, back to her sister, but in her attendance on Jane's sickbed she is probably accompanied by a thousand embarrassing recollections, those sickening after-blushes so familiar to adolescents.

We've seen Elizabeth embarrassed early on, of course, and crucially, when she overhears Mr. Darcy's famous comment on her looks and her wallflower status at the Assembly in Meryton in Chapter iii where they meet; and there we see her defence against embarrassment, which is to turn it into comedy: 'She told the story however with great spirit among her friends' (I iii 12). This defence she has learned no doubt from her father, who has used it for a quarter of a century as a protection against the shame of living with her mother. I quote from Chapter xlii: 'to his wife he was very little otherwise indebted, than as her ignorance and folly had contributed to his amusement.' (II xix 262). Mr. Bennet's sense of humour has probably saved his marriage—if it has been saved—and his sanity. He has bequeathed that sense of humour to Elizabeth in particular. This shared sense of humour provides the father-daughter pair with many delicious moments: at dinner with Mr. Collins in Chapter xiv, Mr. Bennet needs nothing more than 'an occasional glance at Elizabeth' to augment his enjoyment of Mr. Collins's absurdity (I xiv 76). And nothing demonstrates their affectionate complicity more than his mock-serious treatment of her Chapter xix proposal from her

ridiculous cousin: ““From this day forward you will be a stranger to one of your parents...”” (I xx 125). Even in the moment, in front of her howling Mama, Elizabeth cannot help smiling.¹⁷

And yet. When young, with living parents and ludicrous suitors of one’s own, one might sit as a reader squarely with Elizabeth and her father. Mrs. Bennet is impossible. She is even immoral, in her lack of care for Lydia’s fortnight as Wickham’s common-law wife. She has no judgement; she prefers Lydia to Elizabeth! But look back over that scene again not as a Stage II reader, but with the perspective of a later stage, of a reader many years older than Elizabeth, or older than Mrs. Bennet, who cannot be more than forty-five or -six. Examine the prelude to the scene: in Chapter xix Mr. Collins proposes. In Chapter xx a distraught Mrs. Bennet invades her husband’s library to beg for his support:

‘Oh! Mr. Bennet, you are wanted immediately; we are all in an uproar. You must come and make Lizzy marry Mr. Collins, for she vows she will not have him, and if you do not make haste he will change his mind and not have *her*.’

Mr. Bennet raised his eyes from his book as she entered, and fixed them on her face with a calm unconcern which was not in the least altered by her communication.

‘I have not the pleasure of understanding you,’ said he, when she had finished her speech. ‘Of what are you talking?’

‘Of Mr. Collins and Lizzy. Lizzy declares she will not have Mr. Collins, and Mr. Collins begins to say that he will not have Lizzy.’

‘And what am I to do on the occasion?—It seems an hopeless business.’

No one can read his words of ‘calm unconcern’ without smiling, and he has had, as we are often reminded, twenty-five years of Mrs. Bennet’s flutterings and palpitations, her ‘nerves’. But for ‘calm unconcern’ here, read also ‘heartless indifference’. The entail of his estate which makes the early marrying off of daughters such a frantic concern is not Mr. Bennet’s fault, but his improvidence, the family’s ‘living up to its income’ at least partly is. The literary historian Alistair Duckworth has shown

17 The original passage reads ““From this day you must be a stranger to one of your parents””. In her quotation, Nora has interwoven the phrasing from the marriage service in the Book of Common Prayer: ‘To have and to hold from this day forward, for better for worse, for richer, for poorer, in sickness and in health, to love and to cherish, till death us do part’.

compellingly how very little money the widow and five unmarried daughters will have to live on should he die: the interest of five thousand pounds, at best at the time about £50 per annum for each daughter.¹⁸ For the impoverished and homeless Bennets, had not the older girls made those good marriages, real destitution would have followed Mr. Bennet's early death. But Mr. Bennet, whatever he may experience on the occasions when as he later puts it, he allows himself to feel "how much I have been to blame", treats this very serious situation as a joke. Mrs. Bennet treats it, in her way, seriously, but her way is treated by the novel as a joke (III vi 330).

There is no doubt that we are kept at a distance from Mrs. Bennet. But we are, less consistently, distanced from Mr. Bennet also. Many chapters later, at a point where Mr. Bennet is unwittingly wounding Elizabeth's feelings by suggesting that Mr. Darcy is indifferent to her, he asks, "For what do we live, but to make sport for our neighbours, and to laugh at them in our turn?" (III xv 403). Elizabeth does not demur, but she may recall, as the reader may also, that those unlovable Bingley sisters were described early in the novel as having 'considerable' powers of conversation, which included the capacity to 'laugh at their acquaintance with spirit' (I xi 59). It is not an admiring description. Whatever fun she has with her father—and remember that Lydia has fun with her mother—Elizabeth's predicament with regard to both parents is not an enviable one.

It is notable that, as female readers and critics of Jane Austen age, they become less dismissive of Mrs. Bennet and of what a great early critic, Mary Lascelles, called 'stupid middle-aged women'.¹⁹ The narrative, in some ways so unequivocal about Mrs. Bennet—the first chapter states near its close, 'She was a woman of mean understanding, little information and uncertain temper'—begins to seem, in its ready sneering, to be pointing at its own insufficiency (I i 5). The withdrawal of sympathy seems, on rereading, too drastic not to be, perhaps, a gesture we are meant to notice. I have referred already to the chilly tone of the close, and its apparent removal of Mrs. Bennet from the

18 Alistair M. Duckworth, *The Improvement of the Estate: A Study of Jane Austen's Novels* (Baltimore: Johns Hopkins Press, 1971), pp. 3–4n.

19 Mary Lascelles, *Jane Austen and Her Art* (Oxford and New York: Oxford University Press, 1939; repr. 1983), p. 150.

guest list at Pemberley. The older reader regards young Elizabeth with a motherly solicitude, then stiffens and wonders, is this how mothers are treated in this world? Once the marriages are made, are those who insist on their making to be brushed aside and abandoned? And since the novel itself has been busy fulfilling Mrs. Bennet's wishes, that is, 'the business of her life was to get her daughters married', and Jane Austen cheerfully commented to her nieces that the other sisters, too, eventually married, does this not further complicate the narrative's—and the reader's—distance from/and closeness to that 'stupid woman'? (I i 5). The closeness we *feel*, of course, is to that clever girl, who presents us, over and over, with the vertiginous pleasures of that happy ending, in which both heroine and hero's complete happiness is presented as an undoubted and permanent fact: "I am the happiest creature in the world"" (III xviii 424). So, while it may be the case that, as Marilyn Butler suggests, older women characters get a rough deal from Jane Austen, who sadly did not live to be very old, to older readers she is really very generous.²⁰

20 Marilyn Butler, *Jane Austen* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2007), p. 69: 'Certainly her family would have conceded that Jane, like Emma, had a dutiful regard for the parish's old ladies'.