

# MANNERS AND MANNER IN *PRIDE AND PREJUDICE*

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Note the title of the novel first (1). It refers to moral qualities and shows us that the story will illustrate some general moral theme, as well as detailed incidents. It will have a significance beyond the particular events which are to be described.

Both 'pride' and 'prejudice' are normally condemned. We can therefore expect some adverse judgment on the people in the story. With this title it could be a gloomy condemnation or a satire. In fact we shall discover that the tone is light, the characters in general are delightful, and that once pride and prejudice have been overcome there is a happy ending. Nevertheless the story has a moral depth. It is not trivial. The combination of charm, comedy and liveliness with underlying seriousness and goodness is particularly attractive. In the same way the style combines lively detail with social and moral generalisation.

We find the blend of sharp satirical social observation with generalisation in the famous first sentence.

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

This sentence does several things. The conclusion in its commonplace detail contrasts with the dignity of the beginning, and since the truth of the final proposition is by no means necessarily universal, an

air of light-hearted mockery is immediately established. The beginning is 'sententious' in the good sense of that unfashionable quality, but the rest of the sentence shows a certain conscious wariness of such grand generalisations, simply because it may well not be necessarily true. The sentence also shows that we shall be concerned with a love-story. The reference to 'a good fortune' shows that we shall be reading about the upper-middle class level of society. It is also the kind of observation more likely to be made by a woman and more especially in a society where there are mothers with marriageable daughters. The assumption made about the man marks him out as both eligible on a purely materialistic plane — it tells us nothing about his character — and establishes him as one to be sought after especially by parents of marriageable daughters. The necessary material base of marriage is the only quality mentioned, and leaves other qualities, such as good nature, reliability, honesty, etc., or their reverse, to be discovered. The sentence opens up 'the whole area' of family domestic drama, and the title has warned us that there are strong personal difficulties, not particularly concerned with money, which will be encountered. Further on in the story we shall learn how important are matters of manners. Manners are primarily a matter of style, both literary and personal, but we shall learn their wider implications as determined by social class, morals, feminine dependence and independence.

We may reflect that the man is considered to be in want of a wife because unmarried women in that particular society are for good economic and social reasons more urgently in want of a husband. When the unmarried woman is without a 'good fortune' her precarious situation gives an urgency to her need. On the other hand, by convention and probably general human nature, it is the man who in polite society must seek his wife. The woman must remain passive and wait

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to be asked. But her passivity may also be positive, a bold independence of mind, as we shall see.

It will be remembered that the heroine, Elizabeth Bennett, is the second of five daughters of a silly woman and an intelligent but withdrawn father. Parent-figures are always at fault in the novels of Jane Austen, and so are many of the relations and friends of the young heroines. Only one of Elizabeth Bennet's four sisters, Jane, is truly sympathetic to her. Jane Austen's heroines are always to some extent isolated Cinderella figures (2). But although they are very independent-minded, they always do their duty, which is both social and religious, in honouring their fathers and mothers. Part of the moral tension of the books comes from the dutifulness of the heroines towards those who do not deserve their obedience. This ambiguous attitude towards parents is usual in ordinary life and common in folktale as well as romance, but Jane Austen makes peculiarly effective comic yet significant play with it.

The Bennett family live in a large house on a moderate estate so that their father is of independent means and does not have to work for a living. In other words, he is a gentleman, and as such he and his family are the social equals of all other gentry, which includes in some senses the nobility. From this point of view England had only two classes of society, gentry and nongentry. There are some gradations within these classes, and among the gentry wealth and a title, whether of knight (called 'Sir') or lord, some difference, but not a complete break. There is also a large marginal class of professional men, like lawyers, or successful merchants, who may be gentry, or if rich enough, aspire to being gentry. For Jane Austen true gentility always implies not only wealth but high moral standards and good social manners towards high and low: pride and vanity are serious faults.

Although the Bennett family are not poor, they are not rich. The estate is 'entailed' on 'heirs male', that is, can only be inherited by the nearest male relative to the father, however remote his relationship may be to the family of the current occupant, who has no power, either in life or by testament, to dispose of his estate otherwise. The arrangement was made generations ago and was perfectly legal though Mrs Bennett cannot understand it and not without reason, we may think, complains constantly about it. But it is no part of Jane Austen's purpose in the novel to question such legal and social arrangements... But it is a given factor that means that when Mr Bennett dies neither his wife nor his daughters will have either a home or money. They will have had no training, and no prospects. Mr Bennett is intelligent but irresponsible and has saved nothing. In consequence the family could easily fall quite rapidly into serious poverty when Mr Bennett died. Marriage is not only natural but is socially and economically a dire necessity. Under the calm domestic surface there is real cause for anxiety, as the three eldest daughters come of marriageable age, though apart from Mrs Bennett no one feels it. The core of the story of *Pride and Prejudice* is the proposals that Elizabeth will receive, together with some ancillary marriages to friend and sister.

The first proposal is heralded when the man who will inherit the property appears. He is a bachelor, an impeccably respectable clergyman, and therefore a gentleman. He is to that extent eligible as a husband and could save the family when Mr Bennett died if he has married one of the daughters. But he is a conceited, pompous, snobbish fool, as Jane Austen makes clear. In Chapter 19 he makes his proposal to the lively, intelligent Elizabeth. We hear at once his long-winded style and see the mother's embarrassing eagerness to encourage him.

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Mr Collins is not only comically unpassionate, he is totally selfish and comically as well as degradingly deferential to his patroness even in referring to her. He lacks proper pride in this case. The way he supposes that the highspirited Elizabeth will defer to Lady Catherine de Burgh is absurd in itself, as is his refusal to believe Elizabeth's refusal. It was conventional for ladies not to take the initiative in a proposal. It was part of an ancient complex of feelings which you can find for example as early as Chaucer for a woman to refuse a man's first offer of himself, and with good biological and social reason. A woman should not be cheap: there's an old saying 'easy come, easy go'. But the whole point here is that Elizabeth is not being conventional. She speaks from mind and heart. Mr Collins cannot believe he is refused and repeats his conceited intention to speak again. A splendid speech of reply is given to Elizabeth when she says 'I do assure you, Sir, that I have no pretension whatever to that kind of elegance which consists in tormenting a respectable man'. Here Jane Austen cuts through convention. She concludes most rationally by saying 'Do not consider me now as an elegant female intending to plague you but as a rational creature speaking the truth from her heart' (p.91). A claim is made here to value the fully independent-minded woman as a 'rational creature equal to a man', while the sentence, and indeed the whole episode, gently satirises social affectations of the day and proclaims the value of sincerity. We are amused by the dilemma Elizabeth is in, confronting a stupid man who will not take no for an answer. Beneath it all lies a sense of the vulnerability of women, which indeed Mr Collins points out when remarking on her relative poverty, while he himself is mercilessly mocked by Jane Austen in the representation of his pomposity, snobbery, conceit and stupidity. The authorial control of the tone, Elizabeth's genuine courage, the feeling we derive from the general tone

of the style of the book from its very beginning that there will be a happy ending for Elizabeth, save us and her from feeling that Mr Collins poses a real threat; but the threat over the family's future would in actual life be real enough. Mrs Bennett's dismay is well founded, though her misplaced self-pity is comical.

In the following chapter comes the height of comic genius when Mrs Bennett insists that Elizabeth accept Mr Collins. They go to her father and an almost farcical climax comes when he says,

An unhappy alternative is before you, Elizabeth: From this day you must be a stranger to one of your parents — Your mother will never see you again if you do not marry Mr Collins, and I will never see you again if you do.

Elizabeth could not but smile at such a conclusion of such a beginning ... (p.94)

Here Jane Austen in a sense comments on her own style. The beginning is solemn, the ending a farcical contrast. Of course it mocks Mrs Bennett's extravagance with Mr Bennett's own. The parallelism of manner and contrast of matter are very typical of Jane Austen's style which is sententious without heaviness, an internal contrast which is the source of comedy. In the end we are on Mr Bennett's side because he is on Elizabeth's, and his sardonic humour at the expense of his silly wife is sympathetic. Elizabeth's own amusement assures us that she is not distressed and so we are not. This same sententious style is parodied in the final speech of Mr Collins in this chapter (and indeed is parodied elsewhere in the speeches of the youngest sister Kitty).

More light is shed on the general situation of the need for the young women of the gentry to marry when Charlotte Lucas, friend of Elizabeth, accepts Mr Collins' offer of marriage. The reasons she gives

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are sensible, but the marriage falls far short of the ideal marriage. For centuries English culture, as we see from medieval romances onwards, had attempted to bring together the ideals of romantic sexual love, of friendly companionship, and of matrimony with all its implications including the Christian ones, and with virtually no option of divorce. By tradition sexual love was slower to arise in the woman than the man, but it was felt it must arise; there must also be in Shakespeare's words the marriage of true minds that is part of a life-long unalterable love; but practical considerations of matrimony was the base and Charlotte settles for that alone. There must be a material base of sufficient wealth for matrimony, and Jane Austen in this as other novels leaves us in no doubt that this base is necessary.

Elizabeth later receives a second proposal that is almost as bad as that of Mr Collins in its pride, but with the significant difference that it is driven by passionate love which humbles the pride. This occurs in Chapter 56.

Before we come to that, however, we have seen the elopement of Elizabeth's foolish sister Lydia with the charming but weak and dissolute Wickham, where there is only sexual love, or at least attraction, no intellectual quality and no money. Lydia's elopement is a serious emphasis on what is at stake. If Wickham does not marry her she is lost in both a worldly and a religious sense.

Mr Darcy is not only immensely rich. He has a strong sense of what is owed to his social position, and his aunt is no less than the amazingly snobbish titled lady, Lady Catherine de Burgh, the patroness before whom Mr Collins grovels. What, as a great gentleman, he conceals from Elizabeth, is that it is he who has rescued Lydia, payed Wickham's debts and allowed them to marry.

We come then to Mr Darcy's first proposal to Elizabeth in Chapter

34, which is an amusing partial parallel to Mr Collins's. Mr Darcy is very grand, well-educated, highly moral, supercilious, and proud. Despite his superiority his proposal comically parallels Mr Collins's in some ways; that is to say, he expresses his sense of what a favour he is doing her. He repeats how inferior he feels her social position to be, and what a disadvantage her family is. It is worth recalling here that a more frequent pattern is for the lady to be in a superior social position, while the suitor, if really in love, at least feels himself to be unworthy of her. Not so Mr Darcy. But the great and original difference is that he represents himself as being so much in love that his own good sense is overcome. Again this is an amusingly unattractive way of representing one's love to a lady, sincere as it is, and because it is sincere. What are common to both Mr Darcy and Mr Collins are both the pride and the prejudice of the title of the book. Elizabeth's spirited and eloquent rejection of him is based partly on a proper condemnation of his pride, but also on a certain prejudice on her part, after her feelings have been wounded by overhearing his supercilious criticism of her at their first encounter. Now, when he proposes what on a material base would be a most satisfactory marriage for her, he also accuses her of pride in refusing him; but in this case hers is a proper pride and self-respect. Her crucial accusation against him, though based on a misunderstanding on her part, is that he has not behaved 'in a more gentleman-like manner'. This is what wounds him and forces him to explain his behaviour in attempting to dissuade his friend Bingley from loving and marrying Elizabeth's sister Jane.

The concept of 'the gentleman', which derived ultimately from the medieval chivalric ideal, became of great importance as a socially constructed character from the sixteenth to the mid-twentieth century. You will not find it in modern English literature and only traces of it,



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I am afraid, in modern English life, but it has had enormous influence. Outside Jane Austen's subject matter, but still implicit, it was a military ideal involving bravery and self-sacrifice. In civilian life it implied absolute honesty, absolute truth, and loyalty both to those who are higher and those who are lower in rank. The king himself, it was said, can be no more than a gentleman. It implied absolute courtesy to ladies. It relied on an economic base; because ideally a gentleman did not have to work for a living, which is why professional lawyers like Elizabeth's uncle Mr Gardiner, or even Mr Bingley, whose fortune though inherited, came from trade, had to prove they were gentlemen by their upright characters and socially polished manners.

The ideal is complex, and its relation to actual life as lived even more so, but I leave it there to turn to the visit of Lady Catherine de Burgh to Elizabeth when she hears that Mr Darcy has proposed marriage to her.

The social status of a lady is equal to that of a gentleman, though in the end the status of women in a pre-industrial society is almost inevitably dependent ultimately on the men in their families. But Lady Catherine has the independence of a widow. She is rich and has a title. The joke, and the satire, consist in her extreme snobbishness and rudeness which are the opposite of ladylike, and are parodies of a proper self-respect. Her arrogance is the bad side of being a lady, and leads her to behave very badly, to our amusement. There is strong social satire here. When Lady Catherine pays her an unexpected visit, Mrs Bennett is ridiculously respectful. Elizabeth is very cold. She is both polite and sarcastic when she refers to the 'honour' of receiving Lady Catherine in her house (p.285). Lady Catherine boasts of her own rudeness as sincerity and frankness (p.285), and speaks with indelicate bluntness. Polite conversation would be more tentative, less direct —

would in fact have more care for the feelings of the person spoken to.

But Elizabeth is both too polite and too clever for her. If Lady Catherine thought it truly incredible that Mr Darcy should propose to her, why, Elizabeth asks, should Lady Catherine bother to come? Elizabeth neatly points out that Lady Catherine's coming tends rather to confirm than deny any rumour of Mr Darcy's proposal.

Lady Catherine then asks bluntly is there any foundation for the rumour of Mr Darcy's proposal. This is a grossly impertinent personal question, and here it may be useful to recall Dr Johnson's remark that 'Questioning is not a mode of conversation among gentlemen'. We may add, amongst ladies too. Again we see that Lady Catherine has only the external appearance of a lady. Her true inner self is that of a vulgar bully.

So the reader is delighted when the bully is resisted and Elizabeth boldly says 'You may ask questions, which I shall not choose to answer' (p.285). This is a key sentence in the comedy, the satire, and the whole plot. Elizabeth continues to defeat Lady Catherine with calm logic, and every exchange has its amusing contrast.

Lady Catherine invokes 'honour, decorum, prudence, nay interest', and says that the family of Mr Darcy will despise Elizabeth if she marries Mr Darcy. Again Elizabeth replies with a sarcasm that is almost pert, that to be married to Mr Darcy would give such happiness that such 'heavy misfortunes' as being ignored by Lady Catherine would give her 'upon the whole' 'no cause to repine' (p.286).

Lady Catherine emphasises social rank and again we have a key sentence when Elizabeth replies, of Mr Darcy, 'He is a gentleman; I am a gentleman's daughter; so far we are equal' (p.287).

Elizabeth continues with remorseless logic and bold spirit to refute Lady Catherine's angry demands. Then when Lady Catherine really

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insults her it is Elizabeth the younger person who terminates, always very politely, the interview. Their final exchange concerns 'duty, honour and gratitude' and while these do not affect the present case such moral concepts are the bedrock of Jane Austen's novels. In this case Lady Catherine, if anyone, violates duty, honour and gratitude, and is condemned by the standards she only pretends to act by, for she is a selfish liar in implying that her daughter is already promised to Mr Darcy.

The clash between Lady Catherine and Elizabeth is a splendid scene for its social comedy, its moral depth, and vindication of what might be called the rights of woman in Mary Wollstonecraft's phrase, with the paradox that the attack on those rights is carried out by an older woman, who is one of those parent-figures who show up so badly in Jane Austen's novels. Perhaps we ought to talk, in her case, about the 'vindication of the rights of young women'.

Following this visit comes an entertaining chapter recording more of Mr Collins's pompous utterance, and a little amusement at Elizabeth's expense at her mortification by her father's assumption that Mr Darcy could not possibly love her. Parents are always uncomprehending. By a splendidly ironical turn of the plot, it is this very visit by Lady Catherine, and Elizabeth's refusal to deny she might marry Mr Darcy, which both clears her own mind and makes Darcy realise that she may indeed love him. When Mr Darcy makes his second proposal the scene is told indirectly and rapidly. Elizabeth forces herself to speak and 'immediately, though not very fluently, gave him to understand that her sentiments had undergone so material a change, since the period to which he alluded, as to make her receive with gratitude and pleasure, his present assurances. The happiness which this reply produced, was such as he had probably never felt before...' (p.295). This is wonder-

fully underplayed, in calm generalisations. There is no comedy, no sex. We are not even told if they embrace and kiss. This may disappoint the more carnally minded but it is fully in tone with the powerful but unsentimental moral force that underlines the book. As a comic contrast one might refer to Dickens's account of the no longer young Mr Tupman's proposal to the somewhat elderly spinster aunt in *Pickwick Papers*. He shows the male lover's proper humility and she shows the lady's proper reluctance to be easily won, though both are exaggerated. However, the lady rapidly yields. Mr Tupman then clasps her in his arms and overwhelms her with kisses, which she is happy to receive. There is nothing like this physical action, serious or comic, in Jane Austen's novels.

In many ways Jane Austen's *Pride and Prejudice* is a conventional romance, even a conventional fairy tale. Cinderella marries the prince, and does not need a fairy godmother — indeed she is helped we may almost say, by a wicked godmother in the person of Lady Catherine. As is the way in fairy-tales she is hindered by her own silly mother and not helped by her weak and irresponsible father. That pattern is very satisfactory in itself. It is a story about growing up, about maturation. It expresses the necessary achieved independence of youth. In such tales, which have so long a history in European literature, from medieval romance to Shakespearean comedy to the nineteenth-century romantic novel, a loving marriage symbolises maturity, acceptance into adult society, stability, harmony, and continuity. Although that is not how life always turns out, it is no bad model of what life can try to be, because the happy ending is itself not achieved without stress and distress. The particular model offered by *Pride and Prejudice* is a witty entertaining extraordinarily well-constructed narrative. Its greatness is due to its artistic qualities, the sharp observation of

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manners and characters, and an extraordinarily witty, pregnant style, but also to the firm underlying moral structure, which owes no small part of its power to the underlying structure of fairytale. Manner and matter are perfectly matched.

**Notes.**

1. The text used is the excellent edition in Penguin Classics, edited with a good modernist introduction by Vivien Jones, 1993 (CHECK). It refers chiefly to the political, economic and social situation contemporary with Jane Austen.
2. I have elaborated this point and the underlying schematisation, using fairytales as a stylised example, in my *Symbolic Stories* (Cambridge, 1980, repr. London 1984).

**Editor's Note:**

Professor Brewer visited Baiko Women's University and lectured on Jane Austen at the meeting of our English Literary Society in the autumn of 1997. We asked Professor Brewer to contribute his lecture to our Bulletin as a paper. The paper arrived in the spring of 1998 but the circumstances did not allow us to print it immediately. We now publish it here with deep gratitude and with an apology for the delay.