## Critical Opinions on *Pride and Prejudice*

**Sandra M. Gilbert And Susan Gubar :** On Women in Austen

"Austen's propriety is most apparent in the overt lesson she sets out to teach in all of her mature novels. Aware that male superiority is far more than a fiction, she always defers to the economic, social, and political power of men as she dramatizes how and why female survival depends on gaining male approval and protection. All the heroines who reject inadequate fathers are engaged in a search for better, more sensitive men who are, nevertheless, still the representatives of authority."

"Dramatizing the necessity of female submission for female survival, Austen's story is especially flattering to male readers because it describes the taming not just of any woman but specifically of a rebellious, imaginative girl who is amorously mastered by a sensible man. No less than the blotter literally held over the manuscript on her writing desk, Austen's cover story of the necessity for silence and submission reinforces women's subordinate position in patriarchal culture"

"She describes both her own dilemma and, by extension, that of all women who experience themselves as divided, caught in the contradiction between their status as human beings and their vocation as females."

"*Pride and Prejudice* (1813) continues to associate the perils of the imagination with the pitfalls of selfhood, sexuality, and assertion. Elizabeth Bennet is her father's favorite daughter because she has inherited his wit. She is talkative, satirical, quick at interpreting appearances and articulating her judgments, and so she too is contrasted to a sensible silent sister, Jane, who is quiet, unwilling to express her needs or desires, supportive of all and critical of none. While moral Jane remains an invalid, captive at the Bingleys, her satirical sister Elizabeth walks two miles along muddy roads to help nurse her. While Jane visits the Gardiners only to remain inside their house waiting hopelessly for the visitors she wishes to receive, Elizabeth travels to the Collins' establishment where she visits Lady Catherine. While Jane remains at home, lovesick but uncomplaining, Elizabeth accompanies the Gardiners on a walking tour of

Derbyshire. Jane's docility, gentleness, and benevolence are remarkable, for she suffers silently throughout the entire plot, until she is finally set free by her Prince Charming."

**Tony Tanner:**

"Her society is secular and materialistic, and the terms need not be pejorative. It was a society which valued objects and the actual edifices which made up its unexamined piety towards the Unknown, but at its best it concentrated on how man and woman may best live in harmony with each other."

"All of this obviously influenced the notion of 'love' and its relationship to marriage. Mrs Gardiner complains to Elizabeth that 'that expression of "violently in love" is so hackneyed, so doubtful, so indefinite, that it gives me very little idea', and Elizabeth duly rephrases her reading of Bingley's attitude towards Jane as a 'promising inclination'".

"Lydia's elopement is seen as thoughtless and foolish and selfish, rather than a grande passion; while Mr Bennet's premature captivation by Mrs Bennet's youth and beauty is 'imprudence'. This is a key word. Mrs Gardiner warns Elizabeth against becoming involved with the impoverished Wickham, yet when it seems he will marry a Miss King for her money she describes him as 'mercenary'. As Elizabeth asks 'what is the difference in matrimonial affairs, between the mercenary motive and the prudent motive?' Elizabeth will simply not accept Charlotte's solution as a model of true 'prudence', nor will we. There must be something between that kind of prudence and her father's imprudence. And one of the things the book sets out to do is to define a rationally based 'mode of attachment'—something between the exclusively sexual and the entirely mercenary. Thus words such as 'gratitude' and 'esteem' are used to describe Elizabeth's growing feeling for Darcy. She comes to feel that their union would have been 'to the advantage of both: by her ease and liveliness, his mind might have softened, his manners improved; and from his judgement, information, and knowledge of the world, she must have received benefit of greater importance'. A word to note there is 'advantage': consciousness has penetrated so far into emotions that love follows calculations and reflections".

"Elizabeth loves for the best reasons, and there are always reasons for loving in Jane Austen's world. Consider this sentence from Tolstoy's Resurrection: 'Nekhludov's offer of marriage was based on generosity and knowledge of what had happened in the past, but Simonson loved her as he found her; he loved her simply because he loved her' (emphasis added). Tolstoy takes in a far wider world than Jane Austen, both socially and emotionally. He knew that there are feelings of such intensity, directness and tenacity that they reduce language to tautology when it attempts to evoke them. The kind of emotion pointed to in the remarkable clause I have emphasised—not to be confused with lust, for this is far from being a purely sexual attraction—is a kind of emotion which is not conceived of, or taken into account, in Jane Austen's world."

**Juliet McMaster on Mr. Bennet**

"Mr. Bennet is Jane Austen's Walter Shandy, a man with a set of hobby-horses, mental constructs that he has substituted for the reality that surrounds him. His feelings are seldom described, but his mental operations have the force of passions. His attitude is carefully accounted for. We are to suppose that since his emotional life has been a disaster, he has retreated to a cerebral irony, whereby all the troubles and disappointments of life are to be viewed as mere amusements. His "conjugal felicity," by the time we know the Bennets, has been reduced to the kind of satisfaction we see him deriving from his verbal barbs at his wife's expense in the first scene."

"Mr. Bennet's wit and acuity as a kind of obtuseness. When he tries to share a joke about the rumour of Darcy's courtship with Elizabeth, even she, his disciple, is unable to participate: "It was necessary to laugh, when she would rather have cried. Her father had most cruelly mortified her, ... and she could do nothing but wonder at such a want of penetration""

"The judgement on Mr. Bennet for neglecting his responsibilities as husband and father is clear enough, but the reader is very ready to forgive him. For it is in large measure the sins of Mr. Bennet and his favourite daughter, their overweening intelligence and relish for the absurd, that make Pride and Prejudice such delightful reading. He in particular is our on-stage spectator and critic, articulating and sometimes creating for us our delight in the people and incidents around him. Mr. Collins in himself is a fine creation, but it is Mr. Collins as savoured and drawn out by Mr. Bennet who becomes immortal."

**Juliet McMaster on Elizabeth**

"In fact, so far as she is one of the Quixotes in Jane Austen's novels, she behaves not so much according to the model of romance as according to the model set by her father. It is because she wants to live up to her position as his favourite daughter that she means to be clever. After she has read and absorbed Darcy's letter, and so come to know herself, she is able to recognize the exact nature of her failing."

"Like her father, she is a vehicle for much of the reader's appreciation in taking on the examination and elucidation of character, as she does of Bingley's and Darcy's during her stay at Netherfield. She also becomes the critic and exponent of her own character (not always a reliable one), and the traits she chooses to emphasise bear perhaps more relation to a model derived from her father than to the truth."

"Elizabeth's misjudgement of the relative merits of Darcy and Wickham is in large measure a result of her aesthetic stance."

**E.M. Halliday:** On Narrative structure

"Consider the famous opening sentence of *Pride and Prejudice*: "It is a truth universally acknowledged, that a single man in possession of a good fortune must be in want of a wife." The narrator seems to be standing outside the story, not yet observing the characters but gazing off into the middle distance for some reflections on life in general. But this impression does not last. As Mr. Bennet and "his lady" begin their dialogue, it rapidly becomes clear that the storyteller had them both in view when that opening generalization was made. It is an opinion, we find, that Mrs. Bennet would greet with a clapping of hands and little cries of joy—and one Mr. Bennet would send flying to the paradise of foolish ideas with a shaft of ridicule. The narrator ostensibly takes the responsibility for the opinion; but we see from the beginning that her observations are likely to bear an ironic relation to the views, and points of view, of her characters. This is our introduction to the quality of tough yet gentle irony that will control every page of the novel, making us feel a wonderful balance between sense and sensibility."

"The title gives no clue, and Elizabeth is not the storyteller. The opening pages make it clear that the matrimonial prospects of the Bennet daughters will direct the action—but there are five daughters. True, three of them look far from promising: Mary is a pedantic bore; Lydia is an emptyheaded flirt; Kitty is just empty-headed. But both Jane and Elizabeth are attractive and accomplished, and for several chapters it looks as if Jane's chances with Bingley will bring the central action into focus, with Elizabeth playing some subsidiary role. How is it, then, that by the time we are quarterway through the, novel—say by the time Mr. Collins makes his celebrated proposal to Elizabeth—it has become perfectly clear that Elizabeth is the heroine of Pride and Prejudice, and that Jane is only a secondary character? Partly, this is revealed by the sheer amount of attention the storyteller pays to Elizabeth, which increases rapidly as we move through the first eighteen chapters. This, of course, is itself a function of point of view. The storyteller chooses to gaze upon Elizabeth more and more often, and for longer and longer stretches of time. But the interesting fact is that this deliberate restriction of the narrator's privilege of gazing anywhere and everywhere is most stringently applied when the mechanics of the plot call, quite on the contrary, for attention to Jane. In chapter vii, Jane goes to visit Caroline Bingley at Netherfield. Mrs. Bennet's most sanguine hopes are fulfilled when Jane catches a bad cold on the way, and therefore has to spend several days with the Bingleys. But note that this is reported by letter; for when Jane leaves for Netherfield we do not go with her."

"The narrative perspective remains focused on the Bennet household, and particularly on Elizabeth; and it is not until Elizabeth decides to put sisterhood above gentility, and walks three miles across muddy fields, that we make our first entry into the Bingley household. Moreover, we see nothing of Jane until Elizabeth goes upstairs to nurse her; and even then we get a scanty glimpse, since Jane evidently is too sick to talk. By this time it begins to be obvious that the narrator is only slightly more interested in Jane than is the feline Miss Bingley, who tolerates her chiefly for the sake of Bingley's interest. Jane's relation to Bingley will be important in the plot, but much less for itself than as a necessary device to help build up Elizabeth's prejudice against Darcy."

"Much of *Pride and Prejudice* moves at the pace of life itself: the action is rendered with a degree of detail and fullness of dialogue that gives a highly developed dramatic illusion. But note how fast the storyteller can shift to drastic synopsis when it seems desirable to step up the action and move on to a scene essential to the plot. When Elizabeth is waiting at Longbourn for the Gardiners to come and take her on a tour of the Lake district, she is disappointed by a letter saying that they cannot start until two weeks later than planned, and consquently cannot go so far on their trip. Our shrewd narrator, however, has no intention of making us impatient without a purpose, and disposes of a whole month in two swift sentences: "Four weeks were to pass away before her uncle and aunt's arrival. But they did pass away, and Mr. and Mrs. Gardiner with their four children did at length appear at Longbourn." Geographical setting is dealt with just as jauntily: "It is not the object of this work," we are told a few lines further, "to give a description of Derbyshire, nor of any of the remarkable places through which their route thither lay. Oxford, Blenheim, Warwick, Kenilworth, Birmingham, etc., are sufficiently known." And just two pages later we are treading the plush carpets at Pemberley, ready for the next encounter between Elizabeth and Darcy."