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The Revolution of *Civility* in *Pride and Prejudice*

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COURTEOUS: Having such manners as befit the court of a prince. (OED 1.)
CIVILITY: Conformity to the principles of social order, behaviour befitting a citizen; good citizenship. (OED 7.)

My favorite sentence in *Pride and Prejudice* is "I shall go distracted" (III.xvii.378).[1] It is Mrs. Bennet's peroration of her exclamations on the fate of her "sweetest Lizzy" who in marrying Darcy will have pin-money, jewels, carriages, a house in town, ten thousand a year—indeed, in a word, everything! Having shown that she is happily out of her mind, Mrs. Bennet exclaims, "I shall go distracted," not realizing that she's indubitably achieved that state already.

DISTRACTED comes from the Latin DIS + TRAHERE and means, literally, to be pulled away from something. Here Mrs. Bennet is pulled away from every dismal expectation for her least favorite daughter into a state of ecstasy that momentarily, at least, takes her out of her world of incessant complaint into a world of mercenary rapture. Unsettled in mind, she settles into exclamations! After reading the distracted Mrs. Bennet's expectation of going distracted, we can better understand Mr. Bennet's saying to his wife, "I have not the pleasure of understanding you" (I.xx.111).

But in taking up this point at such length, I demonstrate that I am myself distracted—pulled away from my subject. What I wanted to say immediately after quoting Mrs. Bennet saying "I shall go distracted" is that I have found a rival sentence in *Pride and Prejudice* for this one. It is the remark that Mrs. Bennet makes to Elizabeth immediately after Lady Catherine has come to Longbourn and brutalized Elizabeth by every means at her disposal.

> "She's a very fine-looking woman [mother tells daughter], and her calling here was prodigiously civil! for she only came, I suppose, to tell us the Collinses were well." (III.xiv.359)

Who but Mrs. Bennet could imagine Lady Catherine serving as a messenger? Who but Mrs. Bennet would describe a woman famous for her "dignified impertinence" as "prodigiously civil"? And as to Lady Catherine's having had nothing to say to Elizabeth, we as readers have just seen her insult Elizabeth by "every possible method" her "condescension" has taught her to use. Not the least of which was to insult her mother and her family in addition to Elizabeth's "upstart pretensions" themselves. Lady Catherine simply cannot imagine Elizabeth—without "family, connections or fortune"—thinking of marrying *her* nephew, Fitzwilliam Darcy (356).

This particular visit gives Lady Catherine no claim to the badge of CIVILITY which Mrs. Bennet pins on her. The word CIVILITY and the name DE BOURGH are contraries to the very end of this novel. For CIVILITY from its origins onward is associated with the gradual leveling of distinctions in society, and Lady Catherine, we are told had a manner that did not allow

visitors to Rosings "to forget their inferior rank" (II.vi.162). And Mr. Collins reminds Elizabeth that Lady Catherine "is the sort of woman whom one cannot regard with too much deference" (157). That's because Lady Catherine holds court at Rosings, and the conduct expected of visitors is that courtly conduct that is the origin of the word COURTESY. Norbert Elias points out in *The History of Manners* that COURTESY was the code of behavior expected of those who wanted to mingle together at the seat of power. COURTESY was practiced at least superficially by courtiers seeking the favor of their feudal lord or lady or the monarch himself or herself.[2]

The monarch in 1811, the calendar year inscribed in the events of *Pride and Prejudice*, was King George III, who was then totally insane. By the time the novel was published in 1813, the Prince Regent was reigning in his place. He did so from 6 February 1811 (though given fuller powers in 1812) to 1820, when the Regency Period ended.[3] The Prince of Wales then became George IV and reigned until his death in 1830. The Regency and the reign of George IV were noted for extravagance at court at a time when want was general among the population—when, in Roger Sales's words, the condition of "many of [the country's] poorer population resembled a debtors' prison" (81). George IV thus managed to make himself one of the most disliked sovereigns in British history. Jane Austen herself said that she hated him and determined to support his wife, Princess Caroline, when he accused her of adultery "because she is a Woman & because I hate her Husband."[4] When George IV died in 1830, *The Times* expressed nothing but contempt for him: "There never was an individual less regretted by his fellow-creatures than this deceased King. What eye has wept for him? What heart has heaved one sob of unmercenary sorrow?"[5] Thackeray added indignity to the memory of George IV by the pretense of not knowing what to make of him. He couldn't decide whether he was a mannikin or an animal. Allowing him to be no more than "pad[ding] and tailor's work," he forbore bringing him to bay. It was just too much trouble for man and beast: "I own I once used to think it would be good sport to pursue him, fasten on him, and pull him down. But now I am ashamed to mount [a horse] and lay good dogs on, to summon a full field and then to hunt poor game."[6] Thackeray can only think of the Prince Regent's invention of a new shoe buckle as worthy of praise.[7] His importation of French cooks, jockeys, tailors, buffoons, and gimcrack merchants at the time of the Napoleonic wars, from 1793 to 1815, Thackeray found typical of a "worn-out voluptuary" who associated only with "a very few select toadies" (76-77). Thackeray's George IV is thus a "fribble dancing in lace and spangles" and disgracing the Court of St. James. When George III had his first bout of madness of 1788, the first thing he tried to do was choke his son. Having failed in his efforts, the mindlessly dull life of his court gave way to the mindlessly frivolous life of his son's. So during Jane Austen's lifetime, the Court of St. James was no place for sane, industrious, intelligent, refined citizens with their wits about them. The closest Jane Austen got to the Court of St. James was a visit to Carlton House with James Stanier Clarke, the Prince Regent's librarian, who seems to have modelled himself on Mr.

Collins. It seems to have been a grief to her to have to dedicate so glorious a novel as *Emma* to so loathed a prince as the Regent.

But the Court of St. James under George III was a court so dull that his daughters referred to it as "the Nunnery."[8] This dullest court imaginable is the favorite London haunt of Sir William Lucas's imagination, he having been in the place itself just once.

> Sir William Lucas had been formerly in trade in Meryton, where he had made a tolerable fortune and risen to the honour of knighthood by an address to the King, during his mayoralty. The distinction had perhaps been felt too strongly. . . . He had removed . . . to . . . Lucas Lodge, where he could think with pleasure of his own importance. . . . By nature inoffensive, friendly and obliging, his presentation at St. James's had made him courteous." (18)

Sir William is surprised to find that Darcy, who has a house in London, has never danced at the Court of St. James. Because he is "fond of superior society," as he tells Darcy, Sir William would like to be in town more often (26). But, of course, he can't afford it. Once Darcy and Elizabeth are engaged, Sir William expresses to him "his hopes of their all meeting frequently at St. James's." Darcy's response is to "shrug his shoulders" but not until "Sir William was out of sight" (III.xviii.384). The more one sees of Sir William Lucas the more one is likely to be convinced that George III knighted him during one of his many periods of insanity.

Without a house in town and easy access to court, Sir William is fortunate in having a daughter who has married a toady of Lady Catherine de Bourgh's. Sir William's first visit to Rosings is a knock-out occasion for him: "In spite of having been at St. James's, Sir William was so completely awed, by the grandeur surrounding him, that he had but just courage enough to make a very low bow, and take his seat without saying a word" (II.vi.162). When he recovers himself sufficiently, he manages "to echo whatever his son in law" says (163). When we remember that his son-in-law is Mr. Collins, we know that Jane Austen is telling us that Sir William is more stupefied than usual. Indeed, "Sir William did not say much. He was storing his memory with anecdotes and noble names" (166). Elizabeth wonders at first how Lady Catherine can bear so much obsequiousness (145). But she quickly realizes that Lady Catherine conducts herself as the monarch of her little domain, asking impertinent questions, deciding who may do what and where they may and may not do it, and even determining the weather for events to come. Lady Catherine de Bourgh, as she will have everyone know, is the absolute sovereign of Rosings, and all who come there are obliged to subject themselves to her rule. But Rosings is a throw-back to another age; thus, once out of its precincts, Lady Catherine is powerless over the surrounding world which runs on a very different *real politick*. As J. H. Plumb reminds us, "A new world, based on industrial power, was coming into being, throwing up a new, powerful, and aggressive body of men who demanded the leadership of their world as of right. These men had little use for the trappings of feudal society and no respect for those institutions of government whose incompetence was daily illustrated to them" (147).

Darcy, for instance, has befriended Bingley, whose fortune "had been acquired by trade" (I.iv.15). Upon his father's death, he inherited a hundred thousand pounds, and he now wants to have the trappings of a gentleman by buying an estate. The upward movement of the middle class into gentility, which we've already glimpsed in Sir William Lucas, is a fact of life that Bingley preeminently exemplifies. By the reckoning of the social historian, G. E. Mingay, by 1790 "the landed classes were closely connected through marriage with the wealthy merchants, members of the professions, the country-town tradesmen, and even in some instances with husbandmen and labourers."[9] Darcy's friendship with Bingley is one instance of this phenomenon, and Bingley's marriage to Jane Bennet is another. Darcy with an income of ten thousand pounds a year would be classified by Mingay with the "great landlords." They were "the owners of great estates, i.e., estates producing at least five or six thousand pounds a year at the end of the eighteenth century" (10). Mr. Bennet would be in the "category of lesser landlords" as someone "living primarily on the rents from estates worth less than £5,000 a year" (10). These lesser landlords were what we call the gentry. They mixed socially with classes above and below them.

The Gardiners are above the Bennets financially but below them socially; nevertheless, they mingle happily together. The Gardiners and the Bingleys and the Lucases represent a class of merchants whom Mingay describes as making fortunes, if not in industry, then "in the colonial entrepôt trade, and in trade with Europe and the East, and through lucrative war contracts." They became "an expanding body of commercial plutocrats who married into landed families and bought up the estates of impoverished gentry" (12-13).

The Bingleys and the Gardiners in *Pride and Prejudice* may play second fiddle to Darcy and Elizabeth's first violin, but without them the orchestration of the novel would be thin indeed because throughout the eighteenth century trade orchestrated a prospering British economy as well as the *Pax Britannia*, that period of relative peace from the Treaty of Utrecht in 1713, ending French dominance on the continent and giving an impetus to British imperialism in the East and West Indies as well as in India and North America. As Howard Weinbrot has shown definitively in *Britannia's Issue*, British politicians and writers saw trade as a civilizing force that brought British goods and manners to far-flung places and the riches of those lands to England. "Trade"—wrote Austen's favorite poet, Cowper—"Trade is the golden girdle of the globe."[10] Charles Molloy saw that British merchant sailors brought "the Poles [of the Earth] to kiss each other." Troping this figure of speech with another, Weinbrot concludes that "the kissing cousins of humanity" are "unified by a common circulatory system" (264). Furthermore, trade produces wealth, political liberty, support of the arts and learning. Thus Samuel Johnson gladly rejected patronage by asserting that "learning itself is a trade" (263).

When one sees that trade requires an intermingling of peoples of different nations and of different classes within a nation and when one sees that trade in England is identified with peace, prosperity, liberty, the arts, and learning, one sees, consequently, that Lady Catherine de Bourgh's objection

to Darcy's marrying Elizabeth and associating with the Gardiners is hopelessly anachronistic—indeed, it is feudal in its harking back to an exclusive form of courtly manners that attempt not to enlarge civilization but to preserve the power and privilege of an aristocratic few.

The civilizing process that is emphasized by trade is one that had long been evolving as centers of power and wealth shifted away from the court and into the hands of great landlords like Darcy, men of substantial inheritance like Bingley, and successful businessmen like Mr. Gardiner. The code of conduct that made amicable relationships possible in this new civic order was a code of manners that was broadly termed CIVILITY. The emerging middle class was expected to treat those above and below them politely and expected in turn to be treated politely too. CIVILITY became associated with a national self-image so that as manners became codified and more widely spread, one could talk of one's country as CIVILIZED—indeed, as a CIVILIZATION. The manners of the feudal courts were superseded as those courts lost their power and as their manners were modified to suit a country where kings grew weaker and parliaments stronger. In feudal times those seeking favor at court were advised to follow certain rules of conduct. To wit:

> Do not clean your teeth with your knife. Do not spit on or over the table. Do not ask for more from a dish that has already been taken away. Do not let yourself go at table. . . . Wipe your lips before you drink. Say nothing disparaging about the meal nor anything that might irritate others. If you have dipped your bread into the wine, drink it up or pour the rest away. Do not clean your teeth with the tablecloth. Do not offer others the remainder of your soup or the bread you have already bitten into. Do not blow your nose too noisily. Do not fall asleep at table. And so on. (Elias 65-66)

With the progress of civilization, this and a great deal more were expected of a civilized person—especially a nice balance between passion and feeling and the way they were expressed; and, generally, the less they were expressed the better. As Elias says, "Socially undesirable expressions of instinct and pleasure are threatened and punished with measures that generate and reinforce displeasure and anxiety" (204). When Lady Catherine brags about herself as someone known for her frankness of character—"My character has ever been celebrated for its sincerity and frankness" (III.xiv.353)—she gives herself license to cross the "threshold of repugnance" (Elias, 204) and to savage whomever she feels like whenever she feels like. The monarch of all she surveys at Rosings—where Darcy imitates her in the ungentlemanlike conduct of his first proposal to Elizabeth—she even embarrasses him with her bad manners: "Mr. Darcy looked a little ashamed of his aunt's ill breeding," we are told (II.viii.173). She insults Elizabeth there by classing her with the servants—she can play the piano in Mrs. Jenkinson's room—and she abuses Elizabeth mercilessly at Longbourn. Although she may put Elizabeth's piano-playing in a corner at Rosings, she cannot stop her from dancing with Darcy elsewhere. And "to be fond of dancing," we remember, "was a certain step towards falling in love" (I.iii.9). So Lady Catherine is powerless outside the boundaries of her domain. Elizabeth tells her so without mincing words:

> "I do not pretend to possess equal frankness with your ladyship. *You* may ask questions, which *I* shall not choose to answer."
>
> "This is not to be borne. Miss Bennet, I insist on being satisfied. Has he, has my nephew, made you an offer of marriage?"
>
> "Your ladyship has declared it to be impossible."
>
> "It ought to be so; it must be so, while he retains the use of his reason. But *your* arts and allurements may, in a moment of infatuation, have made him forget what he owes to himself and to all his family. You may have drawn him in."
>
> "If I have, I shall be the last person to confess it." (III.xiv.354)

As Lady Catherine rants and raves, asserting her rights and privileges, Elizabeth wins the day with the most civilized of virtues—logic, applied in a devastatingly cool manner on her own turf. Where Lady Catherine talks privilege, Elizabeth talks equality. Where Lady Catherine tries to intimidate by rank, Elizabeth rises above her by intelligence. The savage is routed by civility and drives away in a huff. Elizabeth emerges from the confrontation as a new model for the civilized woman. It is women like Elizabeth who are the hope for a civilization that in the course of a century will supersede women like Lady Catherine de Bourgh. In the language of modern theory, Jane Austen gives us in Elizabeth Bennet a new construction of femininity. Elizabeth defeats Lady Catherine, drives Mrs. Bennet to distraction, shocks the Bingley sisters, instructs Jane on their hypocrisy, and surprises Georgiana by taking Darcy less than seriously every moment of the day. Only Mrs. Gardiner is her equal; and she too, of course, is a new woman—a totally civilized woman.

One final reflection on this confrontation between Lady Catherine and Elizabeth may be in order. When Lady Catherine claims "frankness" as a characteristic and Elizabeth disclaims it, we are reminded that de Bourgh is a Norman name and that "frankness" derives from the French word *franc*. As my colleague Howard Weinbrot reminds me, "British constitutional theory throughout the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries holds that the Normans introduced absolutism and the Anglo-Saxons introduced what would become proper British limited government [into England]. Elizabeth of course is the archetypal name of the greatest of English queens, a Welsh, hence native British monarch."[11] The Tudors, of course, were of Welsh descent. While I refuse to read *Pride and Prejudice* as a political allegory, I find this comment particularly intriguing. For the French word *franc* means "unconstrained" and "unrestrained" as Lady Catherine uses it as well as "free" and "independent; not confined, or enslaved" as Elizabeth uses it. When we remember how carefully Jane Austen chose Frank Churchills' Christian name and how she insists on Mr. Knightley's identifying him with Frenchified manners, we might be justified here in seeing Lady Catherine's unrestrained Norman "frankness" being turned into Elizabeth's Anglo-Saxon freedom of action. So the triumph of civility in the encounter between Lady Catherine and Elizabeth mirrors the civilizing process in England itself.[12] In a word, 1066 and all that plays out differently at Longbourn from the way it once did at Hastings.

When we think of *Pride and Prejudice*, then, we should remember that in the second half of the novel the action, moved by the logic of civility, changes from Rosings to Pemberley to Longbourn. That is, it moves from the domain where Lady Catherine is queen and Mr. Collins and Sir William Lucas are her only proper courtiers; it moves from there to Pemberley, where Darcy receives the Gardiners and Elizabeth as equals, having purged himself of the condescension of his proposal at Rosings; and it moves from there to Longbourn, where the conflict between courtly privilege and civilized equality is enacted between Lady Catherine and Elizabeth before Darcy returns to propose to a gentleman's daughter in a gentleman-like manner. Elizabeth having accepted Darcy's proposal, Jane Austen quickly and succinctly recapitulates her themes of courtesy and civility in the masterful coda to her composition:

> [Lady Catherine] condescended to wait on [Elizabeth and Darcy] at Pemberley, in spite of that pollution which its woods had received, not merely from the presence of such a mistress, but the visits of her uncle and aunt from the city.
>
> With the Gardiners, they were always on the most intimate terms. Darcy as well as Elizabeth, really loved them; and they were both ever sensible of the warmest gratitude towards the persons who, by bringing her into Derbyshire, had been the means of uniting them. (III.xix.388)

NOTES

[1] Jane Austen, *Pride and Prejudice*, ed. R. W. Chapman, 3rd ed. (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1932). All references are to this edition.

[2] Norbert Elias, *The History of Manners: The Civilizing Process: Volume I*. Trans. Edmund Jephcott. (New York: Pantheon, 1978). Elias writes: "The concept epitomizing aristocratic self-consciousness and socially acceptable behavior appeared in French as *courtoisie*, in English 'courtesy,' in Italian *cortezia*, along with other related terms, often in divergent forms. . . . All these concepts refer quite directly (and far more overtly than later ones with the same function) to a particular place in society. They say: That is how people behave at court. By these terms certain leading groups in the secular upper stratum, which does not mean the knightly class as a whole, but primarily the courtly circles around the great feudal lords, designated what distinguished them in their own eyes, namely the specific code of behavior that had first formed at the great feudal courts, then spread to rather broader strata . . ." (62-63).

[3] See Roger Sales, *Jane Austen and Representations of Regency England* (London: Routledge, 1994): 58-59.

[4] Jane Austen, *Letters 1796-1817*. Sel. and ed. R. W. Chapman (1955; London: Oxford UP, 1971): 137. Roger Sales reminds us of another connection that Jane Austen had with the princess: "She had been conveyed to England by Frank Austen's squadron" (Sales 66).

[5] David Thompson, *England in the Nineteenth Century 1815-1914* (1950; Harmondsworth: Penguin, 1972): 170.

[6] *The Four Georges: Sketches of Manners, Morals, Court and Town Life* in *Roundabout Papers*. Imperial Edition (Chicago: Hooper, Clarke, n.d.): 73.

[7] Historians do not have much to say in praise of George IV either as Prince Regent or as King. J. H. Plumb does nonetheless remind us of his keen aesthetic sense and what England owes to it in *The First Four Georges* (1956; London and Glasgow: Fontana/Collins, 1972). "George IV decided to repair the omissions of his ancestors. The result was Carlton House, the Pavilion at Brighton, the Royal Lodge at Windsor, the virtual rebuilding of Buckingham Palace, and finally, the restoration on an impressive and grand scale of Windsor Castle. To

this must be added the brilliant and beautiful additions to London: Regent's Park, the Nash terraces, the now despoiled Regent Street, and the splendid sweep of Carlton House Terrace, still happily unvandalised. This is a monumental achievement in both senses of the word—the greatest contribution ever made by an English monarch to the enduring beauty of his country" (162). "He was an excellent judge of art, making a superb collection of seventeenth-century Dutch paintings, and he persuaded his government when King to purchase for £300,000 the collection of Angerstein which became the nucleus of the National Gallery. . . . His taste in furniture showed the same admirable judgement. With the skilful advice of the Marquess of Hertford he bought up some of the most beautiful examples of eighteenth-century French furniture, so that now the royal collection is unrivalled" (163). "George IV never lost completely his interest in either literature or verbal repartee (after Charles II he has claims to greater wit than any other English sovereign). He read Jane Austen's novels with pleasure and invited her to view the Royal Library, and he remained addicted to the prose and poetry of Sir Walter Scott until the end of his life. Indeed, no sovereign in modern times has equalled his artistic and intellectual interests; and it is not possible to reiterate too often the fact that he possessed these desirable and amiable qualities" (165).

[8] George III "was a devoted father, so devoted that he could only bring himself with difficulty to allow his daughter to marry, and they forlornly addressed their letters to their brothers from 'the Nunnery'" (Plumb 137).

[9] G. E. Mingay, *English Landed Society in the Eighteenth Century* (London: Routledge and Kegan Paul, 1963): 9.

[10] Howard Weinbrot, *Britannia's Issue: The Rise of British Literature from Dryden to Ossian* (Cambridge: Cambridge UP, 1993): 148.

[11] This in a letter to me dated 25 October [1994] as a comment on my paper.

[12] There is an argument against the position stated in this paragraph. It is this. The name "Bennet" is also an Anglo-Norman name. Therefore, in making the argument that I do, the emphasis has to be on Elizabeth's Christian name and on her repudiation of Lady Catherine's version of "frankness." On the Norman origin of English names, see *The Norman People and Their Descendants in the British Dominions and the United States of America* (London, 1974; rpt. Baltimore: Genealogical Publishing Co., 1975). For more on the de Bourghs, the Fitzwilliams, and the Darcys, see Donald Greene's classic article, "Jane Austen and the Peerage," in Ian Watt, ed. *Jane Austen: A Collection of Critical Essays* (Englewood Cliffs, N.J.: Prentice-Hall, 1964): 154-65.