



Jane Austen and Elizabeth Bennet: The Limits of Irony

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C RITICS HAVE OFTEN REMARKED on the ostensible link between Elizabeth Bennet and her creator (Brownstein 54; Liddell 36; Mudrick 94). Elizabeth's wit and playfulness, the argument goes, reflect Austen's own personality. But this observation, innocuous as it seems, devalues the artistry of the novel, implying as it does a lack of design on the author's part: Jane Austen merely looked in a psychic mirror and reported the thoughts of the charming Elizabeth.¹ Even a critic who does not identify Austen and her character still finds an odd link between them. Barbara Hardy characterizes the narrative voice of *Pride and Prejudice* as "dry, caustic and not playful" (174) and conjectures that "all the playfulness has gone into Elizabeth Bennet, leaving none over for the narrator" (174). I hope to show that Elizabeth is not a psychic vampire, sucking the wit out of her passive author, but a carefully crafted character.² Indeed, Austen does several things with the ironic wit of her main character. By blurring the distinction between Elizabeth's voice and that of the omniscient narrator, she controls the reader's point of view. Austen tempts the reader to accept Elizabeth's initial assessment of Wickham and Darcy because Elizabeth sounds so much like the third-person omniscient narrator. In this way, Austen forces the reader to experience the same errors that Elizabeth makes and to realize the difficulty of arriving at truth in a constantly shifting world. Elizabeth's ironic wit also defines nuances of her character in ways that make her stand out from the more one-dimensional women in the

novel: Caroline Bingley, Charlotte Lucas, Lydia, even Jane. And, ultimately, Elizabeth's wit defines theme as the novel develops a critique on the worth of an ironic worldview.

A. Walton Litz's comments are fairly typical of what critics say about point of view in the novel. Writing of an earlier experiment that heralds the style of *Pride and Prejudice*, he points out that Austen tells the story "from the point-of-view of one character while qualifying and expanding that viewpoint through dramatic irony and direct comment. Such a method . . . combines in a limited form the omniscience of third-person narration with the immediacy of first-person narrative . . ." (110). Although several critics have denied a distinctive authorial voice to the omniscient narrator (Hardy 66; Lascelles 173–174), I hope to show that both Austen and her character share the same ironic assumptions. Further, by associating the omniscient authorial voice with a detached ironic perspective, Austen leads the reader to accept Elizabeth's judgments. After all, she sounds like the omniscient narrator, so we expect of her the same reliability as that of her author. The narrative trick of the novel is that the omniscient author is not reliable. Several writers have pointed out that Austen attempts to deceive the reader into believing Elizabeth's judgments of Darcy (Babb 113; Liddell 43). What has not been noted is the extent to which her deception is based on a shared voice with Elizabeth.³ Commenting on the "general epistemological uncertainty" (454) of *Pride and Prejudice*, Tara Goshal Wallace notes that the reader must "puzzle out the truth from a mass of inconsistent data" (52). Interestingly, Robert Kellogg and Robert Scholes have shown that the decline of "full omniscience" (274) in the novel is linked to the rise of cosmic uncertainty:

The whole movement of mind in Western culture from the Renaissance to the present—the very movement which spawned the novel and elevated it to the position of the dominant literary form—has been a movement away from dogma, certainty, fixity and all absolutes in metaphysics, in ethics, and in epistemology. (276)

Using the conventions of omniscient narration, Austen shows how difficult true perception is by blurring the distinction between her authorial voice and that of her erring main character. Like the reader of "The Heart of Darkness" or "My Kinsman, Major Molineux," the reader of *Pride and Prejudice* is faced with the task of extracting truth from very ambiguous narrative clues.⁴

Austen's famous opening sentence establishes the ironic narrative voice, and it is one the reader hears throughout the novel. Austen attributes Charlotte's acceptance of Mr. Collins to a "pure and disinterested desire of an

establishment" (122); she refers to the "fire and independence" (121) of Mr. Collins in proposing to one woman the day after being rejected by another; she describes Mr. Bennet as a "true philosopher" (236) for making the best of an abysmal marriage by mocking his wife; and she refers to Mrs. Bennet's "gentle murmurs" (128) after Charlotte has accepted Mr. Collins. Clearly, Charlotte is not disinterested, Mr. Collins is hardly fiery, Mr. Bennet's so-called philosophy is based merely on his own amusement, and there is nothing gentle about Mrs. Bennet's complaints. Sometimes Austen's irony is a bit more indirect, leading to a generally wry tone. As she chronicles Elizabeth's feelings for Darcy, for example, she notes:

If gratitude and esteem are good foundations of affection, Elizabeth's change of sentiment will be neither improbable nor faulty. But if otherwise, if the regard springing from such sources is unreasonable or unnatural, in comparison of what is so often described as arising on a first interview with its object, and even before two words have been exchanged, nothing can be said in her defence, except that she had given somewhat of a trial to the latter method, in her partiality for Wickham and that its ill-success might perhaps authorise her to seek the other less interesting mode of attachment. (279)

Surely, the long clause beginning "if otherwise" is tongue-in-cheek since the novel at this point has effectively demonstrated the dangers of love at first sight. And the wonderful phrase "less interesting mode of attachment" casts ironic light on her initial attraction to Wickham.⁵

John F. Burrows has analyzed "disjunction as a source of [Austen's] comic energy" (171), and this energy is often ironic and linked to the authorial voice. Although his travels do not extend beyond his home, Austen tells us that Sir William Lucas is "civil to all the world" (18). Lady Catherine has the meteorological power of "determin[ing] what weather they were to have on the morrow" (166), just as she "scold[s] [the cottagers] into harmony and plenty" (169). Treating weather and economic prosperity as if both are simply a matter of willpower creates an ironic dislocation. As the novel ends, Austen tells the readers that "Happy for all her maternal feelings was the day on which Mrs. Bennet got rid of her two most deserving daughters" (385). The implied callousness of the verb ("got rid of") when applied to its direct object ("her two most deserving daughters") casts an ironic light on the "maternal feelings" which open the sentence.

Like her author, Elizabeth has a keen sense of irony. Sometimes she says

things she clearly does not mean; sometimes she juxtaposes words or phrases that produce absurdity. When Jane is discussing Bingley and his sisters' reluctance to accept her as a sister-in-law, Elizabeth says, "if upon mature deliberation, you find that the misery of disobliging his two sisters is more than equivalent to the happiness of being his wife, I advise you by all means to refuse him" (119), advice that is actually meant to eliminate Jane's scruples. The juxtaposition of emotionally charged language ("misery") with the more neutral "dissobliging" underscores the irony.⁶ Jane is clearly overreacting to the sisters, who will only be "dissobliged" by Bingley's marriage to Jane. Commenting on her sister's attempts to exonerate both Wickham and Darcy by attributing their misunderstanding to an unnamed third party, Elizabeth tells her "to clear *them* too, or we shall be obliged to think ill of somebody" (85). Of course, the point is that "somebody" must be responsible for the enmity between the men, although at this point Elizabeth is deceived about who should bear the blame. Nevertheless, she intends to show Jane that in the real world not everyone can be exonerated of wrongdoing. Jane's later measured acknowledgement of Caroline Bingley's falsity prompts Elizabeth to comment "That is the most unforgiving speech . . . that I ever heard you utter" (350). In one sense, Elizabeth merely speaks the truth—Jane is incapable of intense or prolonged anger—but her comment, by linking high emotion to Jane's temperate words, continues the light irony that Elizabeth so often uses.

By making absurd claims in a serious manner, Elizabeth often uses irony to make her point. After the Netherfield ball, Elizabeth responds to Jane's stated admiration for Bingley by saying, "He is also handsome . . . which a young man ought likewise to be, if he possibly can. His character is thereby complete" (14). Discussing a handsome appearance as if it were a matter of willpower—and linking it to moral stature—subtly undermines the superficial basis of many social attractions in the novel. This passage reminds one of Lady Catherine "determining" the weather and, again, links Elizabeth to the authorial voice. Later in the novel, as Elizabeth reveals the truth to Jane about Wickham and Darcy, her sister, typically, tries to believe well of both men. Elizabeth's humorous response equates virtue with a physical entity that can shift and is her ironic way of admitting her previous false perception and her recent insight into the true nature of the two men: "This will not do. . . . There is but such a quantity of merit between them; just enough to make one good sort of man; and of late it has been shifting about pretty much" (225).⁷

As if further to identify the omniscient narrator and Elizabeth, Austen early in the novel blurs their thoughts. When describing Jane's praise of the

Bingley sisters, Austen says “Elizabeth listened in silence, but was not convinced; their behaviour at the assembly had not been calculated to please in general; and with more quickness of observation and less pliancy of temper than her sister, and with a judgment too unassailed by any attention to herself, she was very little disposed to approve them” (15). Clearly, we are hearing Elizabeth’s thoughts. But the passage goes on to recount their education and fortune, things only the omniscient narrator could know, ending in the ironic conclusion that “they were therefore in every respect entitled to think well of themselves, and meanly of others” (15). This seamless blending of Elizabeth’s thoughts with Austen’s knowledge prepares the reader to accept Elizabeth’s views.

The identification of Elizabeth with the third-person narrator also appears in Austen’s free indirect speech. This stylistic device occurs when the reader hears the character’s thoughts, not in the style of the omniscient narrator, but in the idiom of the character being described. In other words, it is a character’s thoughts, a prerogative of the omniscient author, but in the speaking style of the character. Dorrit Cohn notes that Austen was the “first extensive English practitioner” of this technique (108). But what is striking about *Pride and Prejudice* is that Austen and her character (Elizabeth) have essentially the same idiom. When, for example, Elizabeth is in agony over her aunt’s slow pace at Pemberley and her embarrassment at having to make conversation with Darcy, the reader seems in Elizabeth’s mind. But when the reader learns that “time and her aunt moved slowly” (257), the wryness could be Austen’s or Elizabeth’s. In fact, the reader has already heard Elizabeth equate virtue with a package that can “shift.” This same linking of an intangible quality (“time”) with a physical being (“aunt”) therefore sounds as much like Elizabeth’s style as Austen’s third-person commentary. Earlier in this same chapter, when Elizabeth and the Gardiners meet Darcy, Elizabeth fears for his composure when he learns of their family relationship to her. The reader is told, however, that “he sustained it . . . with fortitude” (255). Once again, language is being used comically as a quasi-militaristic noun (“fortitude”) is used to describe a social situation. And, once again, the voice could be Austen’s or Elizabeth’s as filtered through free indirect speech. The reader has no way of knowing. Similarly, Elizabeth’s later regrets about misjudging Darcy and rejecting his proposal are phrased in lightly ironic language as she thinks “no such happy marriage could now teach the admiring multitude what connubial felicity really was” (312). The self-mockery of the word choice (“admiring multitude”) reveals Elizabeth’s own mocking self-criticism, but,

once again, the distinction between Austen's voice and Elizabeth's thoughts is blurred.

In addition to using irony to identify her character with narrative omniscience, Austen also uses irony as a sensitive barometer of Elizabeth's feelings. Elizabeth's irony (or lack of it) reflects a complex web of speaker, audience, purpose, and situation. She is not simply uniformly ironic. For instance, she is rarely ironic to certain characters: her mother, Lydia, Mr. Collins, Lady Catherine. The first two are so silly that irony would be wasted on them, and she is not especially close to either. Often she saves her irony for where it will do the most good: helping Jane to a better understanding of the world, for example. With Lady Catherine and Mr. Collins, she is usually trying to quell the impertinent queries of the former and to fend off the advances of the latter; irony would be out of place in accomplishing either goal. Thus, Elizabeth's irony differs from that of her father, whose ironic gibes—whether to his wife or daughters—only serve to reinforce his own sense of superiority and distance him still further from his family.

Barbara Hardy has compared Elizabeth and Darcy to Beatrice and Benedick in *Much Ado about Nothing* (55) but, unlike Benedick, Darcy is initially too haughty and then too smitten with Elizabeth to do verbal battle with the woman who attracts him. Elizabeth, however, shows a blend of flippancy and vulnerability that closely resembles that of Beatrice. Her irony clearly shows her complex emotional state. When talking to Colonel Fitzwilliam at Rosings, she warns him to prepare to hear something “‘very dreadful’” (175) about his cousin. This melodramatic opening leads to ironic deflation: Darcy has refused to dance at the Netherfield ball even though several women lacked partners. Elizabeth's irony accomplishes several things. It tweaks Darcy and thereby shows her independence. Being one of the women with whom he refused to dance, she shows how little she cares about his slight. It also allows her to lecture Darcy briefly on his aloofness and thus to hint that he would do well to examine his own character. Lastly, by turning the conversation to a mutual experience, she forces him to acknowledge a social relationship with her. Her playful jesting is thus a sign of her vulnerability, her attraction, and her determination not to assume a submissive role in whatever their relationship may become.

The same dynamic emerges when they finally do dance together. By treating the dance as if it is a game with rigid rules (“‘It is *your* turn to say something now, Mr. Darcy.—*I* talked about the dance, and *you* ought to make some kind of remark on the size of the room, or the number of couples’” [91]),

she shows him that she does not see his dancing with her as a great mark of condescension. Thus, she reserves her surface independence. Her response also masks her emotional vulnerability—he has, after all, refused to dance with her earlier—by using wit to camouflage potential awkwardness. And it teases him into further conversation, thus promoting their relationship while affecting nonchalance about it. Although at this point in the novel Elizabeth is still deceived about Darcy's character, thinking "Attention, forbearance, patience with Darcy, was injury to Wickham" (89), her witty repartee reveals an underlying attraction of which her conscious mind is unaware.

Elizabeth's occasional irony to other characters also defines her inner life. After her trip to Rosings, Wickham asks if Darcy has improved "in essentials" (234). She replies, "Oh, no! . . . In essentials, I believe, he is very much what he ever was" (234). This is a potentially awkward encounter. Elizabeth wants him to know that she now realizes that Darcy was always the superior man, yet she does not want to cause a scene on the very day that Wickham's regiment is decamping. The indirect irony of her comment allows her to maintain an amicable relationship with him while alerting him to her recent knowledge. Her irony hits home since "Wickham looked as if scarcely knowing whether to rejoice over her words, or to distrust their meaning" (234).⁸ When Jane asks her later in the novel when she began to love Darcy, she answers, "I believe I must date it from my first seeing his beautiful grounds at Pemberley" (373). Her humorous assumption of materialistic motives dismisses with a laugh Jane's serious question. And when one considers how superior Elizabeth has felt to Jane throughout the novel and how she constantly tried to mold Jane's thinking to her own, one can understand why she treats her change of heart so lightly. The embarrassment of having to admit her own mistakes—even to someone as kind as her sister—is covered by her humor. And, to give Elizabeth her due, after the initial awkwardness of the question has passed, she reassures Jane how much she respects her husband-to-be.

Finally, Elizabeth's ironic voice raises thematic concerns about intellectual detachment and emotional engagement in the world. For when Elizabeth believes she is most detached and objective in judging Darcy, she is actually allowing her emotional reactions—to her sister's abandonment by Bingley and her own slighted sense of self-worth—to lead her astray. The recurring question in Austen criticism, whether she has a larger vision beyond marrying her heroines off happily,⁹ actually posits a false dichotomy between wisdom and happy endings since happiness in marriage is not, as Charlotte

believes, a “matter of chance” (23), but depends on an accurate assessment of self and others. Surely, this is the basis of most philosophical systems. As Tony Tanner has noted, *Pride and Prejudice* embodies the universal theme of recognition found in the “great tradition of Western tragedy—*Oedipus Rex*, *King Lear*, *Phedre*—albeit the drama has now shifted to the comic mode, as is fitting in a book which is not about the finality of the individual death but the ongoingness of social life” (105). Only when Elizabeth’s distanced ironic view is balanced with her esteem for Darcy’s true character does she become a whole person. Irony is thus an efficient tool in developing theme as well as portraying—to use Austen’s word—one of the most “delightful” characters in literature.

NOTES

1. Austen’s identification with Elizabeth is, of course, reinforced by the comment she made about her novel’s main character: “I must confess that I find her as delightful a creature as ever appeared in print, and how I shall be able to tolerate those who do not like *her* at least I do not know” (Tanner 105). But aside from Austen’s partiality toward Elizabeth, the identification of the author with her characters seems part of a larger critical failure to judge Austen by the same standards as her male contemporaries. For an excellent overview of the way criticism has patronized Austen while claiming to celebrate her, see Claudia L. Johnson (xvi–xvii). And, although Elizabeth Bennet is the character most often discussed as Austen’s surrogate, she is by no means the only one. Writing of Elinor’s partially sympathetic response to Willoughby’s narrative in *Sense and Sensibility*, Marvin Mudrick calls it a “Flagrant inconsistency,” revealing “Jane Austen herself . . . in a posture of yearning for the impossible and lost, the passionate and beautiful hero, the absolute lover” (85). Rather than seeing Elinor’s sympathy as an element of her compassionate albeit principled nature, Mudrick paints Austen as the stereotypical frustrated spinster. In a less dismissive way, Sandra M. Gilbert and Susan Gubar see Emma as an “avatar of Austen the artist” (159), arranging marriages and generally treating her acquaintances the way an author treats his or her characters. While I am not arguing against the idea of Emma as a sort of author, I do question whether her presence shows “Austen’s ambivalence about her imaginative powers” (158). Time and again, Austen criticism discusses her novels as extensions of the author’s personality, not as autonomous works of art.

2. I am not concerned with whether Austen’s art is consciously crafted or arises from her intuitive shaping of her materials. In either case, Elizabeth exists in a complex web of verbal, narrative, and thematic ambiguities.

3. Rachel M. Brownstein remarks on Elizabeth’s resemblance to “the witty narrator” (54) but does not explore the way this resemblance tricks the reader. Mark M. Hennelly states that the readers “like Elizabeth herself, are constantly asked willingly to suspend . . . disbelief, to reserve judgment and sympathy while [they] sort through all the visible evidence” (203). I contend that Austen makes it difficult for us to be distanced by forcing the reader to identify the narrative voice with that of Elizabeth.

4. Austen can be very direct and unambiguous: “Mr. Collins was not a sensible man” (70). The importance of this comment is not the information it conveys—no reader could mistake Mr. Collins for being sensible—but the implicit promise that the omniscient author will guide the reader through the novel. When no such guidance is given about Darcy and Wickham, the reader is left to rely on Elizabeth who, after all, sounds like the author. Early in the work, Austen has established her authorial role as guide in her assessment of Mrs. Bennet at the end of Chapter One: “She was a woman of mean understanding, little information, and uncertain temper. When she was discontented she fancied herself nervous. The business of her life was to get her

daughters married; its solace was visiting and news" (5). Once again, the assessment is less important than its promise of authorial judgment.

5. In *Sense and Sensibility*, Austen uses the same wry tone to describe Willoughby, the mysterious rescuer of Marianna. As he leaves the Dashwood house in suitably ominous weather, Austen notes that "he departed to make himself still more interesting, in the midst of an heavy rain" (42).

6. Although Darcy's voice is muted, he is capable of the same sort of ironic dislocation. When Caroline Bingley repeatedly interrupts his letter-writing with messages to his sister, Darcy asks "leave to defer your raptures" (48) over Georgiana's design for a table. The legalistic verb ("defer") and the emotionally charged noun ("raptures") underscore Darcy's irony.

7. One is reminded of Pope's address to Queen Anne in Canto iii of "The Rape of the Lock": "Here Thou, Great *Annal* whom three realms obey,/Dost sometimes Counsel take—and sometimes *Ted*" (7–8). Putting tea and counsel on the same plane of reality as comestibles is much like Elizabeth's equating virtue with a physical package. In fact, John F. Burrows has discussed this pattern in an early Austen work (172). Augustan wit is often woven into the narrative texture of *Pride and Prejudice*. See, for example, Brower's comment that Austen's prose often achieves the "formal balance of the heroic couplet" and combines the "traditions of poetic satire with those of the sentimental novel" (62). And Kenneth L. Moler has noticed that Austen, Elizabeth, and Darcy all share the same reasonable speech patterns, using balanced phrases and abstract nouns. Such verbal similarities not only show Austen's debt to the Augustans but also reinforce the identification of Elizabeth and the omniscient narrator. And they underscore the compatibility of Elizabeth and Darcy: quite literally, they speak the same language.

8. Like Elizabeth, Darcy can also use irony to discompose others. When Miss Bingley attempts to discredit Elizabeth by referring to her supposed strategies for succeeding with men, Darcy feigns agreement while letting her know that he sees through her own artifice: "Undoubtedly . . . there is meanness in *all* the arts which lades sometimes condescend to employ for captivation. Whatever bears affinity to cunning is despicable" (40). Like Elizabeth's barbed response to Wickham, Darcy's answer disconcerts his listener: "Miss Bingley was not so entirely satisfied with this reply as to continue the subject" (40).

9. Fortunately, Austen criticism is passing beyond the need to be defensive about the marriages at the end of her works. In fact, recent critics have focused on the ways Austen manages to exist in her time as well as go beyond it. As Jan Fergus notes, the novel can be read as a "Cinderella story" or as an "attack on romantic expectations" (86). Claudia L. Johnson has shown that Austen uses patriarchal conservative myths to question their very validity (91). And Oliver MacDonagh (35) points out that she allows many views of marriage to make their case in her works.

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