

Humility as the Path to a Happy Marriage in *Pride and Prejudice*

(This article is the reworking of a paper I wrote in graduate school at Hood College)

Incline us, oh God! To think humbly of ourselves, to be severe only in the examination of our own conduct, to consider our fellow-creatures with kindness, and to judge of all they say and do with that charity which we would desire from them ourselves.
(from the prayers of Jane Austen)

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Jane Austen is best known as a writer of novels, full of satiric mischief and insightful characterization. Her six completed novels which were penned during the Georgian-Regency period in England have translated well into the film genre of the past 20 years because Austen's keen observations and insight into human nature make her stories and characters timeless. Running subtly underneath the plots of her novels is an affirmation of the traditional Christian values that Jane imbibed growing up as the daughter of a country clergyman (Rector of Steventon). Leeds University Scholar Park Honan says of her, "A stoical Christian faith underlies all of Jane Austen's comedies and gives them their moral confidence, a severity and certainty, which in turn allow her comic talent to flourish lightly" (Honan 275). Three prayers that Jane wrote for private family devotions have survived and are available through the Jane Austen society as well as on-line, and these prayers affirm those values: values such as truthfulness, charity and humility. Elizabeth Bennet and Fitzwilliam Darcy, creations of Austen's from her best-known novel *Pride and Prejudice* (1813), realize epiphanies, and in a striking use of character growth, Jane Austen makes the profound observation that humility is the path to a happy marriage.

To say that Elizabeth and Darcy's relationship gets off on the wrong foot is an understatement. She is quickly prejudiced against him when, at a public ball in Meryton, she overhears Darcy's response when Bingley suggests he dance with Elizabeth:

"She is tolerable; but not handsome enough to tempt *me*; and I am in no humour at present to give consequence to young ladies who are slighted by other men" (7). We are first told that "Elizabeth remained with no very cordial feelings towards him", but the next day when they look back on the ball, she tells her mother that "I may safely promise you never to dance with him," and she tells Charlotte Lucas, "I could easily forgive his pride, if he had not mortified mine" (13). She has understandingly been offended, and this offense informs her conduct for the first half of the novel.

One of the effects of that prejudice is that it leaves Elizabeth vulnerable to listening to slander-- and it leaves her vulnerable to become the object of choice by a young man whom we find out is reckless and immoral. George Wickham wends his way to Meryton like a snake in a garden, but unlike a snake "his appearance was greatly in his favour; he had all the best part of beauty, a good figure, and a very pleasing address" (53). What Elizabeth first notices is how coldly he is treated by Darcy, and at the first opportunity to talk alone, Wickham stealthily explores Elizabeth's feelings.

“You may be well be surprised, Miss Bennet, at such an assertion, after seeing, as you probably might, the very cold manner of our meeting yesterday.-- Are you much acquainted with Mr. Darcy?” (56)

During the conversation he slowly brings Elizabeth under his influence, Cassius-like, and because of her initial offense, she becomes a true convert. Her offended pride has blinded her to the kind of man Wickham is. The next day she relates the whole of her conversation to her elder sister Jane, who is suspicious of Wickham and asks Elizabeth to be wary of slander. Elizabeth replies,

“I can much more easily believe Mr. Bingley’s being imposed on, than that Mr. Wickham should invent such a history of himself as he gave me last night; names, facts, every thing mentioned without ceremony.- If it not be so, let Mr. Darcy contradict it. Besides, there was truth in his looks.” (63)

As the months pass and Elizabeth has more opportunities to interact with Darcy, Austen lets us know that he is beginning to soften towards her, but she is downright rude to him. Her prejudice against him, due to her hurt pride, has both caused her to listen to slander and be shamelessly rude.

But Elizabeth is about to come face to face with the truth. In the very center of the novel, with Austen’s mathematical precision ([Leithart 53](#)), Elizabeth is surprised when she receives a visit from Mr. Darcy (while she is visiting friends 50 miles from home) which proceeds with uncomfortable silence. The next day she is shocked when he returns and makes her an offer of marriage. When she refuses him, she mentions Wickham to him and asks him to explain himself. Darcy leaves, and the next day he gives her a letter, a long letter, explaining his side of the story. George Wickham almost ran away with Darcy’s beloved, innocent, inexperienced, and wealthy sister, almost ruining her reputation and her life. Wickham is a dissolute man of debauchery and sloth-- and Elizabeth had been drawn in by him. Elizabeth is confronted with her prejudice and found wanting. For proof of what he told her of Wickham, Darcy cites his cousin, Colonel Fitzwilliam, whom the reader knows is trustworthy. “For the truth of everything here related, I can appeal more particularly to the testimony of Colonel Fitzwilliam...” (148).

After reading this rebuke from Darcy and seeing the truth of his testimony about her wrong inclination to favor Wickham, Elizabeth is ashamed of herself and tries to push it out of her mind. “Astonishment, apprehension, and even horror oppressed her. She wished to discredit it entirely” (149). She plays over in her mind the first meeting with Wickham, and she sees with new eyes the perspective of what she has just learned from Darcy:

“She was now struck with the impropriety of such communication to a stranger, and wondered it had escaped her before. She saw the indelicacy of putting himself forward as he had done, and the inconsistency of his professions with his conduct. She remembered that he had boasted of having no fear of seeing Darcy...yet he had avoided the Netherfield ball the following week” (151).

With this new perspective, Elizabeth enters into a period of regret and loss. She has several months to consider exactly who Wickham is, and, more importantly, who Mr. Darcy is. She goes back home, sees Jane again, and passes spring quite alone with her family. One important detail of this section is that Elizabeth confides in Jane about what she has learned of Wickham. Do they tell their neighbors and warn them? Would that be slander? The neighbors already do not like Darcy, will they believe Elizabeth? Together, Jane and Elizabeth decide not to tell. This will come and bite them most painfully later on.

However, Austen gives Elizabeth a chance to redeem her relationship with Mr. Darcy. Summer comes, and Elizabeth prepares for a trip to the Lake Country with her dear Aunt and Uncle Gardner. But Mr. Gardner's business interferes, and they cannot go that far; instead they travel as far as Derbyshire, where Mrs. Gardner grew up, and, coincidentally, Darcy has his great estate, Pemberley. After a couple of days of drinking in the beautiful countryside, the Gardners convince Elizabeth to tour Pemberley. It was common in that time to visit grand estates, a custom modern American readers, I daresay, find awkward. Elizabeth also finds it awkward, but after learning that the family is away, she consents. As soon as she sees the grounds and the home itself, Elizabeth begins to warm to Darcy. The housekeeper has nothing but praise for Mr. Darcy, which Elizabeth finds intriguing. "He is the best landlord, and the best master... There is not one of his tenants or servants but will give him a good name" (180).

In the most awkward moment of the novel, Darcy appears out of nowhere; he is as astonished at finding Elizabeth on his property, as she is finding him there unexpectedly. But he seems changed: he is easy and kind. In the course of the next few days, Darcy and Elizabeth have several opportunities to see each other, and there is true warmth on both sides. "It was not often that she could turn her eyes on Mr. Darcy himself; but whenever she did catch a glimpse, she saw an expression of general complaisance, and in all that he had said, she heard an accent so far removed from hauteur or disdain of his companions" (190). Most importantly, Austen takes us into Elizabeth's thoughts which erase all doubt as to her feelings,

The respect created by the conviction of his valuable qualities, though at first unwillingly admitted, had for some time ceased to be repugnant to her feelings; and it was now heightened into somewhat of a friendlier nature, by the testimony so highly in his favor, and bringing forward his disposition in so amiable a light, which yesterday had produced. But above all, respect and esteem, there was a motive within her of good will, which could not be overlooked. It was gratitude. Gratitude for not merely having once loved her, but for loving her still well enough, to forgive all petulance and acrimony of her manner in rejecting him, and all the unjust accusations accompanying her rejection. (192)

Elizabeth's feelings have certainly warmed-- and it seems to us, if not to Elizabeth, that Mr. Darcy's are still inclined towards her. But this love is a dream that will have to die before it is resurrected-- but once it does, Elizabeth will know beyond a shadow of a doubt that Darcy truly loves her.

A few days after Darcy and Elizabeth have reconnected in Derbyshire, Elizabeth receives two letters from home. They are from Jane, who tells her some alarming news: Lydia is missing-- and apparently has run away with Wickham. In 2017 we cannot appreciate how shocking and alarming this news would have been in the culture of the Regency period-- a culture where propriety and manners dictated conduct and were based on a shared Christian faith that stresses chastity before marriage.

Elizabeth is filled with concern and sorrow, but these feelings are mixed with the knowledge that with Darcy's background and past communication of the importance of propriety, her hope of a renewed relationship is gone forever. When he appears shortly after she has read Jane's letter, Elizabeth interprets his hasty leave-taking as their final good-bye, "Her power was sinking-- everything must sink under such proof of family weakness, such assurance of the deepest disgrace" (201). When Darcy finally speaks, it is to say, "This unfortunate affair will, I fear, prevent my sister's having the pleasure of seeing you at Pemberley today" (201). As he leaves, she thinks that it is certain that they will never see each other again.

But Darcy has become of man of quiet humility, and when Elizabeth learns that he has made arrangements to save Lydia's reputation--and the family's-- he turns up for a visit. Elizabeth is now ready for marriage, as is Darcy himself. But *he* needed to go through a journey too-- one that takes him from arrogance and self-satisfaction to that same place of humility.

When we first meet Darcy our narrator tells us that he is arrogant. She backs this up with behavior and dialogue that support this assertion. All the people at the public ball have come to the same conclusion. "He was the proudest, most disagreeable man in the world" (7). For Elizabeth his arrogance is personal, for he rejects the idea of dancing with her because she is not "pretty enough to tempt" him. Adding unkindness to his other faults makes us all dislike Darcy. It is not long, however, that he begins to change towards Elizabeth, and he begins to think she is pretty. When they meet at his Aunt Catherine's regal home, the narrator gives us a hint as to his true feelings through a comment by Darcy's cousin, Colonel Fitzwilliam. Elizabeth asks him if he is to leave Kent on Saturday, and he replies, "Yes--if Darcy does not put it off again" (135). Why does Darcy keep putting off leaving? Is it to spend more time getting to know Elizabeth?

In one of the most memorable scenes in the novel, again, juxtaposed with his confrontation to her (by letter) directly in the middle of the novel, Darcy drops by the Collins home to visit Elizabeth. His timing is very bad, because Colonel Fitzwilliam has just informed Elizabeth that Darcy broke up the coupling of her sister Jane with Mr. Bingley. Elizabeth could not hate Darcy more than at this moment--and in he comes to propose marriage to her! Austen's sense of both dramatic and situational irony is unsurpassed. His proposal is fraught with evidence of his continuing arrogance, "Nor am I ashamed of the feelings I related. They were natural and just. Could you expect me to rejoice in the inferiority of your connections? To congratulate myself on the hope of relations, whose condition in life is so decidedly beneath my own?" (142). Elizabeth, unwavering, does not miss a beat and tells him,

“From the very beginning, from the first moment I may almost say, of my acquaintance with you, your manners impressing me with the fullest belief of your arrogance, your conceit, and your selfish disdain of the feelings of others, were such as to form that ground-work of disapprobation, on which succeeding events have built so immovable a dislike; and I had not known you a month before I felt you were the last man in the world whom I could ever be prevailed upon to marry.” (143)

Has a man ever been refused thus? But strong arrogance requires a strong rebuke.

And so Darcy writes her the letter discussed above, defending himself regarding his part in separating Jane and Mr. Bingley (he mistakenly thought Jane was not interested in Bingley), and he defends himself regarding his dealings with Wickham and tells her the whole truth about Wickham’s character. Lastly, he wishes her well in the strongest way possible: “God bless you.” But he leaves the letter in her hand believing that he will never see her again.

Now we can look at his surprise meeting at Pemberley from his point of view. He has months to consider if there is any truth in her rebuke and to mend his ways, although with Bingley removed from her neighborhood, he has no hope of having a second chance with Elizabeth. At the novel’s end we get a taste of what he went through:

“What did you say of me, that I did not deserve...my behavior to you at the time, had merited the severest rebuke...Your reproof. So well applied, I shall never forget: ‘had you behaved in a more gentlemanlike manner.’ Those were your words. You know not, you can scarcely conceive, how they have tortured me;--though it was some time, I confess, before I was reasonable enough to allow their justice.” (267)

We can infer how happy Darcy is to have this second chance with Elizabeth, and he truly does act like a different man. He warmly welcomes Mr. and Mrs. Gardner to Pemberley, even though Mr. Gardner is “in trade” and not a gentleman as he is. But we can also infer that the news of Lydia running off with Wickham tested his renewed affection for Elizabeth, as well as his character. Because he felt partially to blame, since he did not let the truth of Wickham’s lack of character, he resolves to do the right thing by forcing Wickham to marry Lydia (Our modern sensibility says, ‘What! The right thing to do is for Lydia to marry a scoundrel?’ But in Austen’s time, saving her reputation by marrying Wickham is the lesser of two evils). However, should Darcy now marry Elizabeth? Have Wickham as a brother-in-law, in addition to the other factors that initially irked him?

But truly he is a different man, and his love for Elizabeth is sincere. He not only arranges Wickham’s finances, (secretly, which also shows humility) but he comes to Longbourn to visit Elizabeth, much to her surprise. He is willing to pay court to her, even with the scandal of the Wickhams. However, there is one more test. Throughout the novel Mrs. Bennet has been an embarrassment to her family and rude to Mr. Darcy. She has shown a lack of good breeding; she has been ridiculous and, at times, strident. When Darcy begins visiting Longbourn, Mrs. Bennet

is cold and uncivil to him. This mortifies Elizabeth who knows what Darcy has done for the family. Why should he continue to pursue her with such a mother?

But Darcy is truly humble--and truly ready to marry. He loves Elizabeth; he sincerely tells her that he now has respect for her family. If Darcy had been allowed to wallow in the arrogance that he had in the beginning of the novel, he would be destined to become the male version of Lady Catherine- and he would have been as unhappy as she.

Elizabeth also shows the long-term proof of her humility. Towards the end of the novel, Lady Catherine pays a visit to Elizabeth and insults her in a way that is cruel and shows the hypocrisy of her so-called good breeding. However, in the novel's penultimate paragraph, we learn that Elizabeth persuades Darcy to "overlook the offense and seek reconciliation" (282). Elizabeth could have stewed in her thoughts and nursed her own resentment, but she will not make the same mistake twice.

On the last page of *Pride and Prejudice* Austen shows us a happily-ever-after ending, contrary to the asinine fan-fiction that has since sprung up as the weeds of popular fiction. Darcy's beloved sister, Georgiana, makes her home with Darcy and Elizabeth, Bingley and Jane frequently visit, and the Gardners, truly kind, loving people, are their best friends.

With the Gardners, 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. (282)

Many couples in *Pride and Prejudice* are on display for comparison--and all of them except the Gardners have relationships that no one would want for themselves: the Bennets are totally incompatible. She is silly and shallow; he is intelligent and thoughtful. The Collinses are the inverse of that: he is silly and she is intelligent. How lonely Mr. Bennet and Mrs. Collins must be. Lydia and Wickham are a pathetic couple. He will be a philandering husband- and no doubt, they will not even speak to each other in the future. Even the Bingleys are not likely to have the depth of friendship that the Darcys will have: Mr. Bingley is *not* a reader. But the Darcys will have an enviable deep, rich and affectionate marriage. They are both readers, they are both charitable, and they truly love each other.

A well-known proverb, and one that Jane Austen was certainly familiar with as the daughter of a clergyman, says, "Faithful are the wounds of a friend" (Proverbs 27:3, ESV). It takes a very special friend to hold up the mirror of confrontation. Even when the original motive for reproof is not one of love, hearing the truth proves to be not only helpful, but life-changing for Darcy and Elizabeth. Elizabeth's hard words of rebuke are more helpful to Darcy than Caroline Bingley's flattering words. Darcy's truthful words reveal to Elizabeth how she was blinded by Wickham's smooth, seductive talk. After coming face to face with their faults, Elizabeth and Darcy work to overcome them. For a time, it hurt, but the result was improvement in their character and readiness for marriage--for a *good* marriage.

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