

Pride & Prejudice



by Jane Austen
adapted and directed
by Bonnie J. Monte

“Know the Show” Support Materials

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Pride and Prejudice: A Brief Introduction

Few other English novels can claim to be as widely and consistently read since the day they came into print as Jane Austen's *Pride and Prejudice* (1813), and to have been regarded by so many readers with passionate personal attachment. While other writers before and after her have come and gone from both popular culture and critical acclaim, Austen has remained a popular and critical favorite from her own day to this.

Jane Austen completed the first version of *Pride and Prejudice*—then titled *First Impressions*—in 1796, when she was just 21. Although she had never before been published, Jane had been writing short stories and novellas for the amusement of her family for years, and her father thought highly enough of *First Impressions* that he wrote to a major London publisher to inquire about the costs of publishing it. Unfortunately for Jane (and perhaps for the publishing house), the letter was returned, and the manuscript remained in the Austen household.

It would be another 15 years before Jane Austen achieved publication, with *Sense and Sensibility* (1811). With her favorite brother Henry now acting as her literary agent, Austen submitted the manuscript to publisher Thomas Egerton, setting aside "a reserve from her very moderate income to meet the expected loss" if the book failed to sell. The first edition of *Sense and Sensibility* was off the shelves in just 20 months, however, and far from depleting her savings, Austen was in receipt of a check for 140 pounds from the publisher.

Buoyed by the success of *Sense and Sensibility*, Austen revised her old manuscript of *First Impressions*, and Egerton offered her an advance of 110 pounds for the novel now called *Pride and Prejudice*. (Given that both novels were modestly attributed to an anonymous "Lady," the parallel titles must have helped guide fans of the first book to purchase the second). *Pride and Prejudice* became Austen's most popular novel, within her own life and through the subsequent years.

As for the plot, "the bare bones of the novel may not promise scintillation," as Natalie Tyler writes in *The Friendly Jane Austen*. "A country family," not particularly wealthy or distinguished, "must find husbands for five daughters." What makes *Pride and Prejudice* remarkable, and remarkably beloved, as Tyler notes, is Austen's gift for creating memorable characters. Her heroine, Elizabeth Bennet, "is arguably the most beloved character in any English novel." Austen herself clearly adored "Lizzy" as much as any of her readers then or since. "I must confess that I think her as delightful a creature as ever appeared in print," she wrote to her sister Cassandra, "and how I shall be able to tolerate those who do not like her at least I do not know."

Fortunately for Austen, almost everyone likes Lizzy. "Her wit and intelligence," Tyler explains, "as well as her ability to admit her mistakes and to stand up to the forces of tyranny, make her irresistible." She is not a perfect paragon of virtue like her older sister, Jane, but rather someone whom every reader can either fall in love with or aspire to be, someone as mischievously funny as she is sharply intelligent, as good-hearted as she is perceptive, as independent as she is fiercely loyal.

Around the bright star of Elizabeth, Austen created a whole galaxy of brilliantly-drawn supporting characters: Mrs. Bennet, pushy,

garrulous and absurd; Mr. Bennet, clever, funny and vaguely ineffectual; Lydia, the wayward flirt; Mr. Collins, the pompous bore; Lady Catherine DeBourgh, the terrifying aristocratic battle-axe; as well as, of course, the object of Elizabeth's affections, the "tall, dark and handsome" Mr. Darcy, who turns out to be his future wife's intellectual equal.

As both "*First Impressions*" and "*Pride and Prejudice*" indicate, it is a novel about one of Austen's most persistent concerns, the difference between how people seem and their true inward character. Among the vast array of characters, Austen rings subtle changes on this theme, so that Lizzy's mother, for example, may seem to be an obnoxious loudmouth in one scene and a touchingly concerned parent in another, just as her father, whose sense of humor gives him a special bond with Lizzy, is also revealed to be irresponsible and even petty in his actions. Although a few characters, like Mr. Collins, may seem merely ridiculous, generally, each judgment that we pass on the characters is refined and conditioned by a subsequent scene in which we see them in a new light.

Just as the author requires us to revise and re-examine our impressions of each of her characters, her central duo, Elizabeth and Darcy, must each learn to enact the same process in their unfolding relationship. To Elizabeth, Darcy initially seems like a heartless, uptight snob, just as she seems irreverent and vulgar to him. Slowly, and sometimes painfully, both realize that they have been mistaken, and both, in Robert Polhemus's metaphor, "come at last to move in complementary harmony and rhythm."

Jane Austen is not often described as a "revolutionary" novelist, but as Natalie Tyler points out, there was a revolutionary quality, at the turn of the 19th century, to depicting love as a match between *minds*. In one of the novel's most moving scenes, after Mr. Darcy has just asked Mr. Bennet for his permission to marry Elizabeth, she and her father have a heart-to-heart conversation. This is, as Tyler says, "perhaps the only time we catch" the happy-go-lucky Mr. Bennet looking "grave and serious," a sign of the scene's unique prominence. In this rare moment of complete candor, his words are telling:

I know your disposition, Lizzy, I know that you could be neither happy nor respectable, unless you truly esteemed you husband... Your lively talents would place you in the gravest danger in an unequal marriage.

A little later, finally able to speak candidly with one another, Elizabeth asks Darcy to explain why he fell in love with her. After dismissing her beauty and her manners as possible causes, she playfully asks him if he fell in love with her "impertinence." Darcy replies, "For the liveliness of your mind, I did."

While Austen is in some ways very unlike the Romantic novelists who were her contemporaries, she is like them in her fascination with the psychological interior, with the mind that propels her characters through the polite veneers of Georgian society, and particularly her female characters. Ultimately, the lasting greatness and appeal of *Pride and Prejudice* probably derive from the masterful, multi-dimensional depiction of Elizabeth, "an intelligent, lively woman who is loved for her mind." (Tyler, 131).

About the Author: Jane Austen

Born December 16, 1775 in Hampshire, England, Jane Austen was the seventh of eight children of Reverend George Austen and Cassandra Leigh Austen. She seems to have had a relatively happy childhood, surrounded by her six brothers and the numerous boys who lodged with the family while under the tutelage of her father, who ran, in essence, a small private boarding school out of his parsonage. She and her older sister Cassandra were inseparable for almost her entire life.

Though primarily educated at home, Jane received a much broader education from her father than most young women of the period. She and her sister had the run of their father's extensive library, and participated in lively discussions of literature and current events with their parents, their brothers, and the numerous teenage students who were always studying for their Oxford entrance exams with Rev. Austen. As a young woman in the family's country home near the village of Steventon, Jane enjoyed many customs common to rural England in the period, such as long walks, dancing, playing piano, visiting neighbors, planning and attending balls—all of which play significant roles in her novels. To amuse themselves, the children frequently wrote and performed charades and plays at home. Sheridan's *The Rivals* was one of at least seven full-length plays which the Austen siblings staged in their dining room. Many of their other dramatic works were penned by Jane herself.

Both her parents were avid readers, and even at a young age, Jane was encouraged to write. She took advantage of the books in her father's library from which she mined much inspiration for the short satirical sketches she wrote. Though prolific as a young writer, she was also quite shy, and frequently penned her works on small pieces of paper that could be slipped under the desktop blotter if anyone were to enter the room. She wrote her first novel, the hilariously satirical *Love and Friendship*, at fourteen. Around this same time she also penned *A History of England by a partial, prejudiced and ignorant Historian* and several other amusing juvenilia. The beginnings of some of her more popular works can be found in unpublished novels written in her late teens and early twenties; most notably *Elinor and Marianne* (which evolved into *Sense and Sensibility*) and *First Impressions* (now better known as *Pride and Prejudice*). Her father was very supportive of his daughter, buying her writing paper and even attempting to get her a publisher.

Her life took an abrupt change in 1801 with her father's unexpected retirement. The family sold off everything, and Reverend Austen moved his wife and two unmarried daughters to the bustling resort town of Bath. At 25, Jane and Cassandra (then 28), seemed to be confirmed old maids and had no means of support outside of their family. Jane did not enjoy city life and gradually stopped writing. Reverend Austen died four years later, and the women of the family were forced to rely on the Austen sons for charity and shelter. During this period, Jane fell in love, but the young man died shortly after. Later she accepted a proposal of marriage from Harris Bigg-Wither, a wealthy landowner and brother of a close friend. The next morning, however, she changed her mind and rejected the proposal. In 1809, Jane, along with her mother and sister, found a permanent home on the Chawton estate of her brother Edward. Jane was once again in her beloved Hampshire countryside. She never married, but enjoyed an active social life among the middling-rich landed gentry in the community. Nestled

in her comfortable country life, Jane returned to writing.

During the next seven years, she revised *Sense and Sensibility* and *Pride and Prejudice*. They were published in 1811 and 1813 respectively, but authorship was only credited as "By a Lady." They were popular works, and *Pride and Prejudice* received three printings during Austen's lifetime. Her intense productivity continued with *Mansfield Park* (1814), *Emma* (1816), and *Persuasion*, which was published along with *Northanger Abbey* in 1818, a year after her death. She began a work entitled *Sandition* in 1816, but it was never completed.

Although Jane Austen never had children of her own, she was very fond of her numerous nieces and nephews, and they never tired of descending on Chawton to visit their favorite aunt, who retained her family reputation for high spirits and humor. When the nieces and nephews were not at Chawton, they engaged in a lively correspondence with Aunt Jane, sending her poems and stories which she would generously read and critique. When her nephew James Edward was 16, he was "let in on the family secret," that his aunt was the very same "lady" who had written *Sense and Sensibility* and *Pride and Prejudice*. James Edward, who would subsequently become her first biographer, sent her a poem expressing the profound honor he felt at being the nephew of such an ingenious writer.

Many modern physicians and scholars believe that Jane contracted Addison's Disease (a failure of the adrenal glands) in 1815, although others suggest that her symptoms reflect a type of lymphoma, such as Hodgkin's Disease. Whatever the cause, she experienced intermittent but increasing pain and weakness. By the spring of 1817, she and her sister moved to rented rooms in Winchester to be closer to Jane's physician. Jane Austen passed away in her sister's arms in the early hours of July 18, 1817. She was just 41 years old. "I have lost a treasure, such a sister, such a friend as never can have been surpassed," Cassandra wrote to their niece Fanny after the funeral at Winchester Cathedral. "She was the sum of my life, the gilder of every pleasure, the soother of every sorrow... It is as if I have lost a part of myself."



A famous Victorian engraving of Jane Austen based on a pencil sketch portrait by her sister Cassandra.

Austen's Times: A Chronology

- 1775 – Jane Austen born in Steventon, Hampshire, England.
- 1776 – The American Revolution begins.
- 1778 – French author Voltaire dies at the age of 74.
- 1781 – British troops surrender to the Americans at Yorktown.
- 1783 – Austen begins attending boarding school in Oxford with her sister Cassandra, but returns home due to an outbreak of typhus at the school.
- 1786 – Austen and her sister resume formal schooling, this time at the Abbey School, a boarding school in Reading.
- 1787-93 – Austen writes her juvenilia, three notebooks of stories and poems on comic themes.
- 1789 – The French Revolution begins.
- 1791 – Wolfgang Amadeus Mozart dies in Vienna at 35.
- 1793 – Napoleonic France declares war on Britain.
- 1797 – Austen (age 22) finishes a manuscript of *Pride and Prejudice* (then called *First Impressions*).
- 1800 – Parliament passes the Act of Union, uniting the British Isles under the title of "The United Kingdom of Great Britain and Ireland."
- 1801 – The Austens move to the resort town of Bath.
- 1802 – Austen receives a marriage proposal from Harris Bigg-Wither. She initially accepts, but turns him down the following day.
- 1805 – Austen's father, Rev. George Austen, dies at 74.
- 1808 – Austen moves to Southampton with her mother.
- 1811 – The Prince of Wales becomes Regent when his father George III, is incapacitated by mental illness. Austen publishes her first novel, *Sense and Sensibility*.
- 1812 – The War of 1812 begins between Britain and the U.S.
- 1813 – *Pride and Prejudice* is published.
- 1814 – *Mansfield Park* is published.
- 1815 – Napoleon's forces are defeated at Waterloo. The War of 1812 is concluded by the Treaty of Ghent.
- 1816 – *Emma* is published, dedicated to the Prince Regent.
- 1817 – Jane Austen dies (probably from complications of Addison's disease), age 41. She is buried at Winchester Cathedral.
- 1818 – Two of Austen's unpublished novels, *Persuasion* and *Northanger Abbey*, are published posthumously in a joint four-volume edition with a biographical preface by her brother Henry.

Main Characters in this Adaptation

Mr. Bennet: a middle-class gentleman of modest means, living in the Hertfordshire countryside with his wife and five daughters.

Mrs. Bennet: his wife, preoccupied with marrying off her daughters.

Jane Bennet: age 22, their oldest daughter. Jane is regarded as the prettiest and the best-natured. According to Lizzy, she "never sees a fault in anybody."

Elizabeth (Lizzy) Bennet: age 21. Lizzy has a "lively playful disposition" and is her father's favorite. Her intelligence and humor strike some as "conceit and impertinence."

Mary Bennet: age 18-19, the awkward middle sister and "the only plain one in the family."

Catherine (Kitty) Bennet: age 16-17, Lydia's partner in giddiness.

Lydia Bennet: age 15-16. Spoiled by her mother, Lydia is flirty and foolish. Lizzy describes her as "vain, ignorant, idle, and absolutely uncontrolled!"

Rev. William Collins: a distant cousin of the Bennets who stands to inherit their property upon Mr. Bennet's death.

Mr. and Mrs. Gardiner: the brother and sister-in-law of Mrs. Bennet. Mr. Gardiner is a businessman, and therefore they are not quite considered "gentry," but are beloved by their nieces, Jane and Lizzy.

Sir William Lucas and Lady Lucas: neighbors to the Bennets, and the longtime apex of Meryton society.

Charlotte and Maria Lucas: their daughters, friends of Jane and Lizzy. At 27, practical Charlotte is on the edge of spinsterhood.

Mr. Charles Bingley: age 22, a wealthy and easy-going young man who rents an estate near the Bennets.

Mrs. Louisa Hurst (née Bingley): Mr. Bingley's married older sister.

Caroline Bingley: Mr. Bingley's unmarried younger sister who has eyes for Darcy.

Mr. Fitzwilliam Darcy: age 28, Mr. Bingley's aristocratic friend.

Georgiana Darcy: age 16, Mr. Darcy's younger sister, lovely but "exceedingly shy."

Mr. George Wickham: the son of Mr. Darcy's father's steward. Raised by the Darcys, he has since become estranged from them.

Lady Catherine DeBourgh: Mr. Darcy's haughty, aristocratic aunt, who is flattered shamelessly by Mr. Collins.

Anne DeBourgh: Lady Catherine's sickly daughter, whom her mother plans to marry to Darcy.

Colonel Fitzwilliam: Mr. Darcy's cousin, who is also attracted to Lizzy.

Commentary and Criticism

"I have finished the Novel called *Pride and Prejudice*, which I think a very superior work. It depends not on any of the common resources of novel writers, no drownings, no conflagrations, nor runaway horses, nor lap-dogs and parrots, nor chambermaids and milliners, nor rencontres and disguises. I really think it is the most probable I have ever read. It is not a crying book, but the interest is very strong, especially for Mr. Darcy. The characters which are not amiable are diverting, and all of them are consistently supported."

—Annabella Milbanke (later Lady Byron), 1813

"[Austen] has a talent for describing the involvements and feelings and characters of ordinary life which is to me the most wonderful I ever met with... the exquisite touch, which renders ordinary commonplace things and characters interesting."

—Sir Walter Scott

"Shakespeare has had neither equal nor second. But among the writers who, in the point which we have noticed, have approached nearest to the manner of the great master we have no hesitation in placing Jane Austen, a woman of whom England is justly proud. She has given us a multitude of characters, all, in a certain sense, commonplace, all such as we meet every day. Yet they are all as perfectly discriminated from each other as if they were the most eccentric of human beings."

—Thomas Babington Macaulay

"It is true that the events are for the most part those of daily life, and the feelings are those connected with the usual joys and griefs of familiar existence; but these are the very events and feelings upon which the happiness or misery of most of us depends... Miss Austen's personages are always in plain clothes, but no two suits are alike: all are worn with their appropriate differences, and under all human thoughts and feelings are at work."

—W.F. Fraser

"Miss Austen's heroines have a stamp of their own. They have a certain gentle self-respect and humor and hardness of heart in which modern heroines are a little wanting."

—Anne Thackeray Ritchie

"Jane Austen's view of the world is genial, kindly, and, we repeat, free from anything like cynicism. It is that of a clear-sighted and somewhat satirical onlooker, loving what deserves love, and amusing herself with the foibles, the self-deceptions, the affectations of humanity."

—Goldwin Smith

"Here was a woman about the year 1800 writing without hate, without bitterness, without fear, without protest, without preaching. That was how Shakespeare wrote... and when people compare Shakespeare and Jane Austen, they may mean that the minds of both had consumed all impediments."

—Virginia Woolf

"Every time I read *Pride and Prejudice* I want to dig [Jane Austen] up and beat her over the skull with her own shin-bone."

—Mark Twain



Mr. Darcy. Costume sketch by designer Kim Gill for the 2006 Shakespeare Theatre of New Jersey production.

Kipling on Austen

Jane? Why she was a little old maid 'oo'd written 'alf a dozen books about a hundred years ago. 'Twasn't as if there was anythin' to em either. I know. I had to read 'em. They weren't adventurous, nor smutty, nor what you'd call even interestin'— all about girls o' seventeen (they begun young then, I tell you), not certain 'oom they'd like to marry; an' their dances an' card-parties an' picnics, and their young blokes goin' off to London on 'orseback for 'air-cuts an' shaves.... What beat me was there was nothing to 'em nor in 'em. Nothin' at all, believe me... I mean that 'er characters was no use! They was only just like people you run across any day.

—from the short story "The Janeites," by Rudyard Kipling

The Conduct of Women

A popular form of "self-help" literature in Jane Austen's day was the "conduct book" for middle-class young women. These guides, mainly written by men, were intended to provide guidance to young women on their education, manners and behavior, "the ultimate goal being to attract, marry and please men," according to Veronica Webb Leahy. Generally, these writers agreed that women should be "meek, submissive, grateful, gentle, delicate, modest, feminine, ignorant (of anything important) and virtuous," as Bertha McKenzie writes.

In *Pride and Prejudice*, Jane Austen has the pompous and foolish Mr. Collins quote from one of the major works of conduct literature, Rev. James Fordyce's *Sermons for Young Women* (1760). Among Fordyce's broad generalizations about women, one is informed that "Nature appears to have formed the [intellectual] faculties of your sex... with less vigour than ours." Leahy identifies this as "one of the underlying assumptions in most of the conduct literature.. that women are naturally intellectually inferior to men and that their educations should therefore be limited" and strictly guided (and restricted) by men.

This is in stark contrast to Austen's own life and to the behavior of her heroines, who, as Leahy notes, "learn from direct experience and... demonstrate that they are rational beings." We know that the young Austen generally had free reign in her father's library,

and that he was quite supportive of his daughter's intellectual development and accomplishments.

By making the clownish Mr. Collins the novel's only mouthpiece for conduct literature, Austen's own views on Fordyce and his ilk become fairly clear. Leahy notes that "critical reevaluation has found similarities in her views about women and those of early feminists like [Mary] Wollstonecraft" who argued passionately for equal education for men and women.

More Fordyce:

I am astonished at the folly of many women who are still reproaching their husbands for leaving them alone, for preferring this or that company to theirs, when, to speak the truth, they have themselves in great measure to blame... Had you behaved to them with more respectful observance studying their humours, overlooking their mistakes, submitting to their opinions in matters indifferent, giving soft answers to hasty words, complaining as little as possible, your house might be the abode of domestic bliss.

Fordyce himself did not marry until 11 years after the publication of this statement in the *Sermons for Young Women*.

Marriage and Money in Austen's Society

As Natalie Tyler notes in *The Friendly Jane Austen*, the first sentence of *Pride and Prejudice* is "among the best-known openings in all literature":

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

From the first sentence, we are informed that this will be a story about both money and marriage, but in a novel entitled *Pride and Prejudice* (originally *First Impressions*), Austen probably intends that we exercise great caution in accepting statements of "truth universally acknowledged" at face value. In fact, as we read on, we realize that this opening sentence expresses primarily Mrs. Bennet's views on marriage, not necessarily the author's.

The actual relationship between marriage and money in Austen's England was varied and complex, and the novel is equally nuanced in its exploration of the topic. Austen's England was also poised on the cusp of a great change in the way marriage was perceived, and the uncertainty of this transition makes itself felt in her writings.

For those whose families were, or aspired to be, "genteel," marriage had long been primarily a practical decision relating to property and finances. The most important qualifier for gentility was the ownership of enough land to support one's family without having to have a job in the modern sense. Therefore, it was of paramount importance that property be kept in the family from generation to generation, if not increased.

Marriage was viewed as an "alliance" between families, and each party was expected to bring a comparatively equal amount of property to the altar. Although women could not exactly own property in their own right, since they could not enter into legal

contracts, a father was expected to settle a certain amount of cash, if not land, on his daughter.

Generally speaking, this property became the husband's to use as he pleased, except in the case of pre-nuptial "settlements" which tied a portion of a woman's dowry to her and her children. She still did not have legal control over this property, but her husband could not sell it or give it away either.

Women whose families could not afford much of a dowry often had to wait years, as Austen's sister Cassandra did, for the fiancé of their choice to be financially able to marry them. Meanwhile, they continued to be supported by their fathers, since there were almost no means for a woman to earn money in a way that society deemed appropriate. The only job considered really appropriate for an unmarried "gentlewoman" was to be a governess, a live-in nanny and tutor in a wealthy household, a position marked by poor pay and often bitter loneliness. Jane Austen herself was extremely fortunate to live and work in relative comfort throughout her life thanks to the financial support of her several brothers.

The pressure on young women of the gentility to marry quickly and to marry "well" was often intense. However, society also strongly condemned even the perception that a young woman was "husband-hunting." For this reason, and because women were generally thought incapable of sound decision-making, fathers (and to some extent, mothers) were expected to negotiate and oversee their daughters' betrothals.

At the same time, young gentlemen also found their options restricted by economic pressures. Under the system of primogeniture, all real property (land, livestock, furniture and so on) owned by the family would be inherited by the oldest surviving

son. In this way, landed estates were shielded from being carved up into smaller and smaller portions by each succeeding generation. Younger sons might inherit some money (if the father had been, unlike Mr. Bennet, a saver), but generally had to find a profession in order to earn a living and someday have a house of their own. This is why we see the profusion of military officers and clergymen in novels of the 18th and 19th centuries, since these were considered the only respectable jobs for gentlemen.

Landed families might legally ensure the preservation of their estate through the generations by "entailing" it. An entailed estate, as Natalie Tyler, explains was one legally "tied up so that its inhabitants, such as the Bennets at Longbourn, would not have rights to sell, mortgage or dispose of it any other way than the entailment dictated." Thus although Mr. Bennet technically owns his house, he is legally prevented from selling it or passing it on to his daughters. Longbourn is subject to the most common kind of entailment, an entailment "in the line male," meaning that the estate must pass intact to the nearest male heir upon the owner's death, in this case the loathed Mr. Collins.

Despite the fun that Jane Austen has with Mrs. Bennet's almost desperate materialism, the future for the Bennet girls is actually quite bleak at the beginning of the story. Because Mr. Bennet has failed to save any money, she and the girls will be left homeless and with almost no source of income upon his death. Without brothers to rely upon, as Austen did, the Bennets must either marry or fall into certain poverty. As we can see from the example of Charlotte Lucas, Austen is "sympathetic," if not entirely complimentary, "to women whose only hope for economic security is marriage," in the words of Ohio State professor Marlene Longnecker. As the actor Jeremy Northam observed about the characters in *Emma*, "these people... are not free to make any choices at all. Their lives are all circumscribed by duty and responsibility."

Despite these economic pressures, the view of marriage as a family financial decision had long been in competition with a view of marriage as a spiritual and/or romantic union of individuals. Although only the most radical thinkers, even in Austen's day, would have characterized marriage as an *equal* partnership, there was a well-established tradition that marriage should be based on some type of affection or at least compatibility between the partners.

Jane Austen's youth and adulthood was also a time of a vast movement in European and American thought, which was later broadly labeled "Romanticism." In its most general sense, the effect of the Romantic movement was to elevate the individual and his (or her) own thoughts and emotions. The contemporary Western view of marriage as a "love match" is due almost entirely to this 19th-century sea change.

Austen's own views on marriage, as expressed in *Pride and Prejudice*, seem to chart a careful course between extremes, and yet to take a final stance which was progressive, even radical, for her time. On the one hand, Lizzy rejects her mother's outrageous materialism; on the other, she deplores her father's carelessness about their financial future. She recognizes that indulging in a momentary passion could leave her sister Lydia to a future of poverty and shame. She understands why her friend Charlotte is prepared to bind herself to lifetime of loveless marriage with Mr. Collins, even as she herself is unable to make such a trade-off.

As Tyler notes, "Austen understood how serious marriage was to women's lives, and she demonstrated how much the idea of

women as property (or, conversely, as economic liability) was ingrained in society." Longnecker outlines Austen's criticism of "the marriage market, in which women were reduced largely to objects of exchange between men" and of "mothers and fathers who attempt to marry their daughters off to the highest bidder."

Instead, as Longnecker explains, Austen depicts in Darcy and Elizabeth's relationship her own firm belief in "what was called rational marriage— marriage based on friendship and on quality and equality of mind, not on mere passion or 'sensibility'." This was the same position held by the most noted feminist of Austen's time and a confirmed political radical, Mary Wollstonecraft. In a society where the idea of women as property was indeed still deeply ingrained, Austen takes the radical position that, to quote Elizabeth Bennet, her heroines are "rational creatures" who can negotiate the economic and emotional pitfalls of courtship for themselves, and who can justly command the respect of the men they ultimately choose to marry.



Kitty and Lydia Bennet. Costume sketch by designer Kim Gill for the 2006 Shakespeare Theatre of New Jersey production.

The Real Jane Austen: Rebel or Reactionary?

In *The Friendly Jane Austen*, Natalie Tyler begins by defining, somewhat playfully, "four essential types of passionate reader" of Jane Austen: the "Jane-ites," the "Gentle Jane" school, the "Ironic Jane" school, and the "Subversive Jane" school. Tyler's account makes clear that, for a woman who lived a relatively uneventful life in rural England, producing six novels and no significant work of political or literary theory, "the real" Jane Austen has become the subject of intense scholarly and popular debate, perhaps, like Shakespeare, because we *know* so little about what she "really" believed and because (in Tyler's words):

Like Shakespeare and Dickens, Austen offers a world of possibilities for every kind of reader. She is both deep and accessible and appeals to "highbrow" and "middle-brow" readers. The worlds she created in her six finished novels are alluring to traditionalists, to radicals, and to those who like to stay in the middle of the literary road.

Nevertheless, it is interesting and instructive to consider at least some of the critical arguments around Jane Austen, and in some cases, more recent scholarship has reversed some early but persistent misperceptions about her work.

To summarize the four schools, as Tyler does, the Janeites regard Austen as literary "comfort food," a collection of skillful romantic fairy tales for grown-ups set in an idealized English countryside. The novels are to be appreciated for their craftsmanship, and the pleasure they bring, but are not particularly "deep."

The "Gentle Jane" faction tends to be politically and socially conservative, and to admire Austen for what they see as her devotion to civility and Christian moral values; for, as C.S. Lewis writes "unblushingly and uncompromisingly" describing the world in moral terms. To these writers, Jane Austen is a traditionalist and a profound critic of modernity in literature and life.

In the 20th century, pictures of "Ironic Jane" and "Subversive Jane" began to appear, in part as scholars gained more access to her youthful writings (the *Juvenilia*) which were first published over the years between 1922 and 1951. Austen's talent for irony is clear from the novels alone. Subtle, sharp, and piercingly accurate, the voice of "Ironic Jane" is perhaps softened in the novels for public consumption, but her own family knew well how biting and funny "Aunt Jane" could be. To the writers who espouse "Ironic Jane," this is her key quality, with which she sets out to skewer social posturing and expose most people's foolishness.

Particularly as women gained access to higher academics, the view of "Subversive Jane" came to the forefront. According to this school, Jane Austen worked, under the strictures of her society, to load her novels with hidden commentary on the lot of women, "very real transgressive and subversive messages." The "comfort food" quality that the Janeites so admire is, for the Subversives, the clever sugar-coating of a very bitter pill.

There is, as Tyler implies, a degree of truth and a certain limitation to all of these views. If Austen seems like comfort food, it is perhaps because, after all, she began writing to amuse herself and her brothers and sister, and only became a published author by the way, much later in life. It is also clear that she is, indeed, exceedingly subtle, and without a fairly extensive knowledge of the

language and customs of Georgian England, we may miss a good deal of her humor and her sharper social commentary.

The most contentious question is undoubtedly that of Jane Austen's "traditionalism," as a writer and as a human being. For many years, Anthony Trollope's assessment of Austen was typical:

What she did, she did perfectly. Her work, as far as it goes, is faultless. She wrote of the times in which she lived, of the class of people with which she associated, and in the language which was usual to her as an educated lady.... Throughout all her works, and they are not many, a sweet lesson of homely household womanly virtue is ever being taught.

Even passing over the cloying final sentence, there is an air of condescension throughout Trollope's supposed praise: "*what she did... as far as it goes... usual to her as an educated lady.*" In a milder version of the same key, Tennyson's friend Arthur Henry Hallam described Austen as "an inimitable painter of quiet life... common, workday life." In this regard, some corrective criticism from the Ironic and Subversive schools is clearly needed. The portrait of Jane Austen thus produced would delight her Mr. Collins, but seems hard to reconcile with the woman who created Mr. Collins. The demure "authoress," the paragon of "sweet homely womanly virtue," is entirely reductive and entirely insufficient.

It is telling that the moralizing minister in *Pride and Prejudice* is without a doubt the character who comes in for the most authorial scorn, being mercilessly exposed as a fool, a bore, and a singularly insensitive heel. Here Jane Austen displays, though "restrained and well-nuanced," what George Saintsbury describes as her "insatiable and ruthless delight in roasting and cutting up a fool." This delight is on display, with much less restraint, in Austen's often hilarious teenage stories of "theft, deformity, drunkenness and bastardy," which would seem to undermine much of the cult of "Gentle Jane."

As a writer, because of her expressed admiration for an older, neo-classical generation of English authors, such as Johnson and Cowper, Jane Austen is often separated from her contemporaries in the Romantic movement. As David G. Riede of Ohio State notes, "it is safe to say that Austen was not a Romantic writer, that in fact, her emphasis on reason, propriety and decorum makes her closer in spirit to the late-eighteenth-century Age of Reason." Yet to define Austen as a staunch defender of pre-modern traditions is to miss or suppress key facts about the novels. Her last completed novel, *Persuasion*, is more melancholy and more deeply psychological than any of the previous books, and contains a thoughtful discussion of Byron and the Romantic poets. In creating an entirely new narrative style that permitted the author to seamlessly integrate omniscient narration with her characters' most inward consciousness (especially that of women), Austen in fact went far beyond her contemporary novelists in "modernizing" the English novel.

Subversive or not, Austen's invention of female protagonists who are rational decision-makers, and who drive the action of their stories, rather than merely bearing trials and fending off unwanted attentions, was a watershed moment for English literature, assuring her high place in the literary pantheon.

A Designer's Perspective

Michael Schweikardt, scenic designer for *Pride and Prejudice*, is in his eighth season with The Shakespeare Theatre, where he has also designed scenery for *Rosencrantz and Guildenstern Are Dead*, *As You Like It*, *Illyria*, *Macbeth*, *Othello*, and *The Illusion*, among many others.

One of the biggest challenges in designing this play must have been the number of different locations called for in the script. How did you address this challenge?

[The script had] 19 locations in 44 scenes (and an epilogue)! But those numbers are a testament to Bonnie's commitment to tell the story on stage without watering down the source material, and you have to respect that goal. We are telling the story on the stage. This is not the novel and it is not a movie, but a play. Embracing that notion allowed us to free ourselves to be a bit abstract with the design of the set.

Two curved walls with windows, a giant landscape painting, and a system of curtains and furniture in different configurations allows us to move quickly and fluidly from place to place. Rearranging the elements to make a different stage picture creates a new scene. We found elegance in its simplicity. It would have been a shame if the design had made the play heavy with architecture. This production has light and air and movement... and I hope it's pretty to look at.

What role does color play in your design for this show?

Bonnie suggested a sepia-toned design. It's light and warm and gentle. I find that a very tight color palette helps to keep the world of the play focused, and, given the number of locations, focus is good.

Visually, everything hangs together as a whole, like a painting. Also, introducing any colorful element into that palette then makes that element very important. A red dress on a sepia set says "pay attention to me." This becomes a very useful tool in helping to direct the audience's attention to where you want it. But I think the choice of color palette really came out of looking at research. Each time we would look at a sepia-toned image we'd all agree that it seemed to "feel right for the play" and you have to listen to those kinds of instincts.

Are there particular themes or motifs in the show which are reflected in your scenic design?

The overall shape of the space is circular. I think this is a reflection of the story, of literally coming full circle. It's artsy talk but it does feel right. It also suggests the right kind of movement for this world, long arcs... and it's good for dancing. There is also something about the blending of nature and architecture. A landscape painting in a frame serves a backdrop for both interior

scenes and exterior scenes. All of the motifs in the medallion on the floor are inspired by nature. I cannot quite articulate it, but a world where manners collide with emotions seems to be reflected in a world where architecture overlaps with nature.

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On the Cover:

"The examination of all the letters which Jane had written to her (*Pride and Prejudice*)" illustration by Isabel Bishop, c. 1945. Ink & inkwash on paper, size and collection unknown. Image courtesy DC Moore Gallery, New York City.

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