

# Interpretation

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## Reasonable Foundations for Happiness: The Pursuit of Self-Knowledge in Jane Austen's *Pride and Prejudice*

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**Abstract:** In her novel *Pride and Prejudice*, Jane Austen examines our hopes for happiness within the realms of friendship and marriage. Her characters embody an inquiry into the dilemma of self-deception, which is caused by the unexamined opinions that form the basis of our judgments about ourselves and others. Through the struggle of her main characters, Elizabeth Bennet and Fitzwilliam Darcy, to overcome the obscuring effects of such deception and achieve knowledge of themselves and of each other, Austen portrays for readers the task of self-examination as essential to living a virtuous life and as the means to establish reasonable foundations for happiness in marriage. Because the action of the novel is a study of human nature and education in self-reflection, *Pride and Prejudice* dramatizes crucial aspects of the philosophic activity, from the longing for justice as a prompt to examine oneself and the role of anger and love in cultivating virtue, to the prospects for attaining self-knowledge and happiness through the mutual pursuit of companions equal in superiority.

In her novel *Pride and Prejudice* Jane Austen examines the dynamics of the human soul, undertaking an inquiry into our hopes for happiness within the realms of friendship and marriage. Intrigued by the dilemma of seeing ourselves and others with clarity, her examination presents characters struggling with and emerging from the obscuring effects of self-deception, that willful misunderstanding we have of ourselves based on the entrenched or unexamined opinions which we take for granted and which in turn become the root cause of our misperceptions of others. We form judgments of others in order to discern their character and know their worth, as friends and potential spouses. But to do so rightly, the action of the novel argues, we must first examine ourselves; that is, we must be sufficiently attentive to our own character—our virtues and our flaws, our pride and our prejudice. We

must confront our own self-deception to know ourselves and cultivate a proper understanding of others. Self-examination must precede judgment; our longing for justice as well as for happiness cannot be fulfilled without self-knowledge. Through the efforts of Elizabeth Bennet and Mr. Darcy to overcome self-deception, Austen portrays for her readers the task of self-reflection as essential to living a virtuous life, as well as the means to discover a worthy friend and establish reasonable foundations for happiness in marriage.

#### THE PROBLEM OF SELF-DECEPTION

To grasp the argument of the novel's action, Austen's readers must pay attention to the impressions that characters form of one another. "First Impressions" of course is the original title of the novel,<sup>1</sup> and it points to the centrality of discrimination and judgment in its action. Characters often rush to judgment on the basis of first encounters, in speech or in deed, often without adequate reflection. They form judgments without scrutinizing their initial impressions or examining their opinions, and so deceive themselves about who and what others are, or are not. The imperative facing these characters is to discern and then liberate themselves from the shackles of unexamined opinions. This task is always a challenge; few in the novel seek or acquire self-knowledge. Elizabeth Bennet and Mr. Darcy stand apart on account of their desire to know themselves and each other better. By embracing the idea that the unexamined life is not worth living and striving through self-reflection to overcome their own self-deception, Elizabeth and Darcy embody a kind of philosophic turn.<sup>2</sup> The action of the novel, when viewed through the transformation of its main characters, becomes a study of human nature and an education in self-examination. *Pride and Prejudice* thus dramatizes for readers crucial aspects of the philosophic activity itself.<sup>3</sup>

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<sup>1</sup> Austen initially conceived and drafted "First Impressions" in 1796–1797, though it was not accepted for publication; she revised the manuscript in 1811–1812, and it was published as *Pride and Prejudice* in 1813.

<sup>2</sup> On self-examination and philosophy, see Plato, *Apology of Socrates* 28e, 29d, 38a. The Socratic image in speech of the Cave represents both the dilemma of self-deception and the role of self-examination as the essential education that turns the soul toward justice and the good: see Plato, *Republic* 514a–519b.

<sup>3</sup> In the vast secondary literature on this novel, a handful of commentators have taken the philosophic themes in Austen as seriously as she deserves. See, e.g., Leo Strauss, *What Is Political Philosophy? and Other Studies* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1959), 104; Eva Brann, "The Perfections of Jane Austen," *The College* 27, no. 1 (1975): 1–14; George Anastaplo, *The Artist as Thinker: From Shakespeare to Joyce* (Athens, OH: Swallow Press, 1983), 86–99; Allan Bloom, *Love and Friendship* (New York: Simon & Schuster, 1993), 191–208; Anne Ruderman, *The Pleasures of Virtue: Political*

The seriousness of the novel as a work of political philosophy, I argue here, derives not from any explicit consideration of contemporary political events (for example, the aftermath of the French Revolution or the Napoleonic Wars) or of abstract political theories, but rather from its examination of the question of how we ought to live, the philosophical awakening to justice as a prompt to self-examination, the role of anger (*thumos*) and love (*erōs*) in the cultivation of virtue or excellence (*aretē*), and the prospects for happiness (*eudaimonia*) in marriage through the pursuit of self-knowledge.

Austen alludes to the philosophical task of self-examination and the significance of good judgment throughout the action of the novel. On several occasions, the dilemma of self-deception surfaces in the narrative explicitly. One illustrative example is a brief exchange between Elizabeth and her sister Jane, whose judgments are suspect because her amiable character often blinds her to the flaws of others and her own self-reflection is restricted to considerations of modesty. Having been unable to persuade Jane through subtle and playful remarks to acknowledge more than she is willing about herself, Elizabeth remarks: “We all love to instruct, though we can teach only what is not worth knowing” (LIV.230).<sup>4</sup> This statement is paradoxical on its surface. What can Elizabeth mean? Nothing worth knowing can be taught, she seems to be saying, which, if true, would call into question her own effort in the preceding exchange to teach her sister, and the prospect of any education in virtue itself.<sup>5</sup> Why does Austen point here to a distinction between instruction, on one hand, and learning what is worth knowing, or genuine education, on the other?

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*Thought in the Novels of Jane Austen* (Lanham, MD: Rowman & Littlefield, 1995); Eva Brann, “Aristotle from a Woman’s Perspective,” *Review of Politics* 58, no. 4 (1996): 817–19; and Sarah Emsley, *Jane Austen’s Philosophy of the Virtues* (London: Palgrave Macmillan, 2005). Contemporary philosophical influences have been noted in Austen’s novels, even in her own era, suggesting an acquaintance with works by (among others) Locke, Shaftesbury, Hume, and Wollstonecraft, whose writings appear in an 1818 catalogue of the library at Godmersham Park, where Austen visited frequently from 1796 until 1813. See Peter Knox-Shaw, *Jane Austen and the Enlightenment* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2004); “Philosophy,” in *The Cambridge Companion to Pride and Prejudice*, ed. Janet Todd (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2013), 27–41. Ruderman and Emsley argue that Austen in her novels approaches the philosophic question of how one should live life from the perspective of the classical tradition of virtues found in Plato and especially Aristotle.

<sup>4</sup> All quotations are from Jane Austen, *Pride and Prejudice* (New York: Dover, 1995). Citations are to chapter and page in this edition.

<sup>5</sup> The novel examines the question raised by Socrates at the start of Plato’s *Meno*: “Can virtue be taught?” See Emsley, *Philosophy of the Virtues*, 86. A crucial theme of Plato’s *Republic*, whether justice contributes to human happiness, is also examined through the narrative.

Spoken in the wake of the departure of Mr. Bingley and Mr. Darcy from their second visit at Longbourn, Elizabeth's remark reflects on Jane's character. It is the conclusion of her own failed efforts to teach her sister that she must acknowledge the depths of her affection for Bingley and be more forthcoming with encouragement. Jane, for her part, demurs and insists that she will continue to maintain her usual composure. To those who do not know her as intimately as Elizabeth does, however, she runs the risk of seeming disinterested. In rereading the preceding chapter (LIII.222–26), we see how Jane's feelings easily could be misconstrued. She had insisted to Elizabeth that she did not imagine Bingley to still have feelings for her and so had restrained herself during the gentlemen's visit. She did not wish to inflame her vanity and deceive herself about his intentions and thus exhibited even more reserve and spoke even less than usual.

Jane wants to convince herself that Bingley is not rekindling his former love of her, so as not to be hurt again by her own hopes for his love and for marriage. She even goes so far as to say to Elizabeth that "he never had any design of engaging" her affection in the past (LIV.230). Her natural complaisance and amiable personality, in themselves virtuous attributes, threaten to veil Jane's actual feelings for her suitor, and her determination to make herself appear "indifferent" toward Bingley makes it even harder for him—and for Darcy—to read her, which is precisely why they have come. Jane's characteristic virtues prevent her from seeing herself or Bingley clearly and thus conceal her from being seen. She is of course deceiving herself about her love for Bingley, and Elizabeth knows it, as do we. Even the ridiculous Mrs. Bennet, who insists on being deceived by her own assumptions whenever it appears to serve her family's interest to do so, can see that Bingley truly does love Jane and will soon propose. Jane alone refuses to believe it, and, try as she might, Elizabeth cannot persuade her otherwise. What she is eager to teach Jane about herself cannot be learned by instruction, it is true; Jane must examine herself. For what is really worth knowing comes only with self-reflection and education, not instruction.

Fortunately, Jane does not suffer as a result of her insufficient self-reflection or Elizabeth's failure to instruct. The previous misperceptions of her character, which had led Darcy to encourage Bingley to break off with Jane (for Bingley's own good, as Darcy earnestly believed based on what he had seen of Jane's affection), are not here repeated. Darcy sees past her modest demeanor and understands Jane for who she really is, advising Bingley to take courage in his suit. Unlike the first impressions that he had formed of

Jane and the quality of her affection for Bingley, this time he is inclined to examine more closely, and he judges rightly. But why? He now views Jane in the light of what he has learned from Elizabeth about her character.

Ironically, it is Elizabeth who does not grasp the wisdom of her own remark about teaching what is worth learning with respect to herself. During their visits, Darcy and Bingley are studying Jane for signs of her affection, but Elizabeth herself fails to see that this is their purpose because she was too “astonished and vexed” by the presence of Darcy. Not only does she pretend to take no special notice of him, despite her undeniable feelings for him; she is “disappointed” by the fact that she believes that Darcy is behaving indifferently toward her—and yet “angry with herself for being so” (LIII.225). Even as she seeks to instruct Jane on how to learn to know herself better, so as not to misjudge others or be misjudged, Elizabeth cannot see that her own impression of Darcy is mistaken and thus deceives herself about both him and his intentions.

Elizabeth’s remark is indeed profound: there is more to learning than merely receiving the instruction from others. What is ultimately worth knowing one must learn for oneself. Those who teach can only assist in self-examination, for learning depends upon a person’s pursuit of self-knowledge. This insight of Elizabeth reveals the wisdom of Austen’s art of writing.<sup>6</sup> Austen does not use her novel to instruct. What Austen has to teach us depends upon our own willingness to learn as we read, to re-examine our own entrenched opinions and prejudices, which are obstacles to learning and the pursuit of self-knowledge. Even the wisest teacher (or author) can accomplish nothing substantial if a student (or reader) is not already inclined to learn, that is, to seek knowledge through self-examination. We look to the struggle of her two main characters to learn what must be done to discern and overcome

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<sup>6</sup> A survey of Austen’s references to instruction and teaching in the novel confirm this distinction between didactic lessons and true education. The first six references to instruction (XIV.47, XXIX.109, XXIX.111, XXIX.113, XXIX.114, XXXI.120) establish the pattern: this kind of teaching is merely training in manners, and Austen associates it with the insufferable pedantry of Collins and haughty arrogance of Lady Catherine. The seventh mention occurs in the passage here (LIV.230); and the eighth and last use is in the final chapter (LXI.261). There, Elizabeth (now Mrs. Darcy) instructs Georgiana about the nature of marriage, and Austen for the first time suggests that such lessons are propaedeutic (“she began to comprehend”). By contrast, the first six references to teaching in the novel (XXXI.119, XLI.156 twice, XLII.162, L.209, LII.218) involve admirable characters, and each conveys a sense of education that goes beyond rules of conduct and aims at the formation of virtuous character; the seventh and last use occurs in the passage here (LIV.230). Teaching, in other words, more so than instruction, aims at self-knowledge. See Proverbs 9:9; Emsley, *Philosophy of the Virtues*, 27.

unexamined judgments. We turn first to Elizabeth, and the two most influential people in her own life and education, her father and Darcy.

#### THE EDUCATION OF ELIZABETH BENNET

Austen suggests that her heroine has had a sort of philosophic education. Her education, such as it was, is briefly but openly the topic of a spirited exchange between Elizabeth and Lady Catherine de Bourgh (XXIX). Under interrogation, Elizabeth admits being educated neither by her mother nor by a governess or teachers from town. She asserts nevertheless that she has indeed been well taught (XXIX.112–13): “Compared with some families, I believe we were [neglected]; but such of us as wished to learn, never wanted the means. We were always encouraged to read, and had all the masters that were necessary.” We are thus made to understand that Mr. Bennet’s library, while rather small by comparison with those of such gentlemen as Darcy or Bingley, was yet sufficient to provide a young woman eager to learn ample opportunity for education.

By showing us the striking difference in character between Elizabeth and Mary, who also has spent much time in her father’s library, Austen makes clear that a ready access to “great books” on its own does not suffice to educate one to virtue. Mary’s erudition gives her “a pedantic air and conceited manner,” not unlike the socially unbearable Mr. Collins, both of whom are unable to see how silly they appear to others—much to Elizabeth’s embarrassment (II.4, IV.16, XVIII.69–70). Elizabeth’s preference for reading over other forms of entertainment during her stay at Netherfield is teased by Miss Bingley, but not by Darcy, who quietly expresses his admiration. Amending her account of what he comprehends in his “idea of an accomplished woman,” Darcy says “to all this she must yet add something more substantial. . .the improvement of her mind by extensive reading” (VIII.26). The spirited Elizabeth, convinced that Darcy is mocking her, refuses to accept or even acknowledge the good-natured compliment in this implicit defense of her reading, for he, too, takes reading seriously. Because of her prejudice against him, she misjudges his intention and character.

Elizabeth’s education in the library, we imagine, must have been encouraged by her father. Austen tells us that Mr. Bennet took great pleasure in reading. His study for more than one reason has been a refuge to him. Having discovered that the woman he married on account of her youth and beauty in fact had a “weak understanding” and “illiberal mind,” Mr. Bennet soon lost all respect or “real affection for her” and retreated to his study. Apart from

his children, he made books his principal enjoyment in life, while occasionally taking amusement in noting his wife's "ignorance and folly" (XLII.159): "But this is not the sort of happiness a man would in general wish to owe to his wife; but where other powers of entertainment are wanting, the true philosopher will derive benefit from such as are given." This judgment in the narrative suggests that philosophy renders pleasant benefits to its adherents and is conducive to happiness even (or especially) in hard circumstances. Austen's choice of words here implies something even more significant: that Mr. Bennet found happiness within the limitations of his misfortune as "the true philosopher" should. This seems to be rare praise, indeed. No other character in all of Jane Austen's novels is described as a philosopher, and the word "philosophy" itself is very infrequently used.<sup>7</sup> But in what sense might we think of Mr. Bennet as being philosophic?

There are traces of a philosophic disposition in the way the narrative portrays Mr. Bennet. He derives benefit and even pleasure, rather than resentment or anger, from his circumstances and position in life, even when his chances for conjugal happiness are disappointed by his wife's lack of education and his domestic tranquility is sometimes interrupted by her preoccupation with idle gossip and trivial matters, such as formal introductions and balls. His unconcealed indifference to honor, worldly affairs, and the vicissitudes of fortune makes him seem stoic, while his quick wit and penchant for laughing at others (see LVII.245), especially when reflecting on human pettiness and foibles, smacks of epicureanism. He prides himself on being unconcerned with the mundane, or at least appearing so. Austen sketches Mr. Bennet only in outline but with passing resemblance to a philosopher—perhaps most of all when he speaks dismissively of marriage, the education of children, and death.<sup>8</sup> But this portrait of him is also a kind of caricature, and Austen's attribution to him of the epithet "philosopher" seems to be ironic.

<sup>7</sup> To my knowledge, no other attribution like this occurs in Austen's novels. The word "philosophy" occurs five times in *Pride and Prejudice* (see note 9), but only once in *Sense and Sensibility* and *Northanger Abbey*. The word "philosophic" is used twice in *Emma*, and once in *Pride and Prejudice*, *Sense and Sensibility*, *Mansfield Park*, and *Northanger Abbey*. A list of "philosophers" is mentioned in *Mansfield Park*. The ironic portrait of Socrates as a gentleman in Xenophon's writings may suggest by analogy what Austen means in referring to Mr. Bennet as a "true philosopher." See Bloom, *Love and Friendship*, 205; Adam Schulman, "Self-Knowledge and Moral Seriousness in Jane Austen's *Pride and Prejudice*," in *Apples of Gold in Pictures of Silver: Honoring the Work of Leon Kass*, ed. Yuval Levin, Thomas Merrill, and Adam Schulman (Lanham, MD: Lexington Books, 2010), 153–74, 167.

<sup>8</sup> Mr. Bennet jokes about his own death, his wife's premature death, and Jane's possible death from illness. Socrates paid scant attention to familial obligations and both at his trial and on the morning of his execution spoke dismissively of death: see Plato, *Apology* and *Phaedo*; Xenophon, *Apology of Socrates to the Jury*. On the philosophic view of death and Mr. Bennet, see Schulman, "Self-Knowledge

Beyond her reading of books then, Elizabeth also seems to take her father's way of life as a model for education. She shares with Mr. Bennet an appreciation for the library, an ability to bear good and bad fortune with equanimity, a cavalier disregard for fastidious social norms and decorum, and a willingness to laugh at her own flaws and those of others. Both are good-natured and thoughtful, although she is especially lively. She has an inquisitive mind and keen wit, and she has learned to reflect on the human condition with amusement. Insofar as they engage in similar pursuits, Elizabeth and her father seem to share in a philosophic disposition: both pride themselves on their judgment and find pleasure in laughing at the foolishness of others, especially men like Collins or women like Mrs. Bennet. Both also seem content to enjoy a contemplative or intellectual life, rather than an active life in society or politics. Not without good reason then is she her father's favorite.

However, in other crucial respects, Elizabeth does not resemble her father at all. It is clear that she feels with acute displeasure the slights of condescension and cannot bear the arrogance of aristocratic contempt. Her moral indignation and anger are aroused by perceived attacks on her family's honor, and she feels shame and humiliation when her sisters behave badly in public. While he tends to scoff, she judges. When her father returns from his trip to London to handle (or so she believes) the scandal of Lydia's affair, Mr. Bennet "had all the appearance of his usual philosophic composure. He said as little as he had ever been in the habit of saying; made no mention of the business that had taken him away" (XLVIII.200). Because she assumes Mr. Bennet is as distraught as she herself is, Elizabeth "ventured to introduce the subject... expressing her sorrow for what he must have endured." To this solace, he replies with an air of disinterest: "Say nothing of that. Who should suffer but myself?" With a twinge of regret for her earlier censure, she encourages him not to be "too severe" upon himself. His response, with its hint of Solomonic wisdom, further distances them from each another: "You may well warn me against such an evil. Human nature is so prone to fall into it! No . . . let me once in my life feel how much I have been to blame. I am not afraid of being overpowered by the impression. It will pass away soon enough" (XLVIII.200). Regardless of her father's riposte, the humiliation Elizabeth feels at the dishonor that Lydia has wrought upon their reputation, especially when she learns that Darcy is involved, surely will not fade.

Mr. Bennet's "philosophic" jest in response to her sincere consolation over the unresolved tragedy of Lydia's shameless behavior turns their ordeal into the stuff of comedy. While he briefly may be overtaken by anger at Lydia's recklessness, which compels him to abandon his quiet study, his lightheartedness soon returns. For he wanted "as little trouble in the business as possible," and when the dire situation was settled "with so little inconvenience to himself," he "naturally returned to all his former indolence" (L.206–7). Elizabeth, on the other hand, continues to be distressed by the whole ignoble affair. When her younger sister enters the room during his talk with Elizabeth, Mr. Bennet again makes light of the situation: "This is a parade...it gives such an elegance to misfortune!" He even teasingly predicts that Kitty will be next to run away from home, and when she "fretfully" denies it, forbids any soldier to visit their house again, declaring her "absolutely prohibited" from attending balls and confined to home, until she proves she is rational. Taking his threats seriously, she begins to cry, and Mr. Bennet assuages her grief by promising, if she is good, to "review" her case after a decade (XLVIII.200–201). Elizabeth, we suspect, who knows Kitty is likely to follow Lydia's example and is witness to this travesty of parental justice, is not amused.

Elizabeth, then, in this decisive respect, departs from the so-called philosophic disposition of her father. Her judgment, the narrator tells us at one point, even surpasses that of Mr. Bennet, in particular his failure to grasp—or his unwillingness to take seriously—the damage that an unrestrained Lydia (or Kitty) can do to the family's reputation and thus to his other daughters' future prospects for marriage. Her father merely dismisses their descent into disrepute as trivial. Elizabeth, however, is neither as detached nor as sanguine. Although she is often inclined to smile at his witticisms (see XX.77), we are discreetly told by the narrator that Elizabeth "had never been blind to the impropriety of her father's behaviour." She had always "endeavored to forget what she could not overlook, and to banish from her thoughts [his] continual breach of conjugal obligation and decorum" (XLII.160). But on this occasion, she can no longer do so. As we know from her reading of Darcy's letter, to which we now must turn, Elizabeth bears the burden of her family's "unhappy defects" with heavy chagrin and regret, and, notwithstanding her bitter resentment of Darcy for citing their "total want of propriety" and frequent indiscretions, the manifest truth that her father was "contented with laughing at them" always embarrassed her (XXXV.134–35, XXXVII.144). In this respect, she would not completely learn her father's philosophy.<sup>9</sup>

<sup>9</sup> The first and last mentions of "philosophy" in the narrative, which attribute its practice to the most

## THE DESIRE FOR JUSTICE AS A PROMPT TO SELF-EXAMINATION

Elizabeth's quiet indictment of her father's negligence, in refusing to exert himself to restrain the "folly and indecorum" of their family, speaks to her demand for justice. For as we know, she takes offense and holds grudges. At the start of the novel, during the Meryton ball, her vanity is wounded by an overheard remark about her beauty made by Darcy. Her opinion of him thereafter is moved by prejudice, and her pride makes her "determined to hate" him (III.7, XVIII.62, XXXVIII.147; cf. XXXVI.141).<sup>10</sup> Elizabeth, unlike her father, cares deeply about justice. She is thus susceptible to a righteous anger when vexed. The crux of the novel is whether her judgments, which she makes rather swiftly, are right. From the beginning Austen alludes to this question and points us to a study of her heroine's character. The dramatic action of the novel and our understanding of its argument depend upon our examination of Elizabeth—and her own examination of herself.

A philosophic disposition might seek alternative explanations to "reason away" a perceived slight, or dismiss an affair of honor, to preserve the soul as free as possible from tumultuous passions and perturbations. Mr. Bennet shows irritation on occasion but his detachment makes him more disinterested than spirited—a fact that also accounts for his indifference to affairs of honor as well as to justice.<sup>11</sup> Elizabeth, by contrast, despite her effort to

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unlikely of candidates ("the neighbourhood" and Wickham), are obviously intended by Austen to be taken as parodic (L.207, LXI.260). The other three uses are by Elizabeth and Darcy (LVIII.248) and spoken during a private, playful, and warm exchange in which the two lovers openly confess their affection for each other. In doing so, they are compelled to explain themselves to one another—each confessing responsibility for their errors in judgment, and each solicitously encouraging the other not to recall having expressed themselves in such harsh but not unjust terms. Here the irony in Elizabeth's proposal that they should forget what is unpleasant is revealing: she encourages Darcy to "learn some of my philosophy" and to "think only of the past as its remembrance gives you pleasure." But he refuses to repel this painful recollection, because her harsh words taught him a lesson that he will never forget. See note 6. On Elizabeth's "philosophy of recollection" here, see Schulman, "Self-Knowledge and Moral Seriousness," 162–63; Emsley, *Philosophy of the Virtues*, 103–4; and Brann, "Perfections of Jane Austen," who says Austen preferred writing of happiness, rather than unhappiness, reminding us of her association with a classical author whose manner of writing was especially reserved (see Xenophon, *Anabasis of Cyrus* V.viii.25–26).

<sup>10</sup> With scholarly precision, Miss Mary Bennet defines these terms—though it is not clear that Austen agrees (V.12–13): "By all that I have read, I am convinced that [pride] is very common indeed, that human nature is particularly prone to it, and that there are few of us who do not cherish a feeling of self-complacency on the score of some quality or other, real or imaginary. Vanity and pride are different things, though the words are often used synonymously. A person may be proud without being vain. Pride relates more to our opinion of ourselves, vanity to what we would have others think of us."

<sup>11</sup> The nervous Mrs. Bennet worries herself that, because of Lydia, poor Mr. Bennet will fight Wickham in a duel and be killed, but of course Elizabeth knows better (XLVII.192, XLVIII.196; cf. XLVII.189).

remain unmoved by the opinions of others, is upset by perceived offenses or injustices to herself, her family, or her friends, and therefore subject to resentment or anger.<sup>12</sup> She thinks the worst of Darcy almost from the start, after he unknowingly piques her vanity and because she believes he has treated Wickham unjustly, though she has no more reason to doubt his character than those who prejudicially censure his aloof demeanor and austere manners as signs of a detestable pride. In the grip of her passion and prejudice, Elizabeth is inclined to perceive injustices where they are not and refuses to recognize just claims of virtue where she ought.<sup>13</sup> But her moral indignation and demands for justice to be rightful must be reasonable.

Elizabeth, moreover, cannot help but make judgments and stick to them (as Charlotte and Jane attest), even though she chastises Darcy for not forgetting offenses or “the vices and folly of others,” and having a “resentful” temper (XI.39). While wanting to appear above the judgment of others, Elizabeth rankles at criticism from any person who (she thinks) believes that he or she is her superior in social rank. Her desire to rise above and remain untouched by what others who are less serious deem important, in other words, her desire for self-sufficiency, has not cured her of being sensitive to slights. Austen’s heroine also takes pride in her free speech and candor, in her quick wit and sharp tongue. So when Lady Catherine comes to her house to impose her opinion on Elizabeth, she stands her ground with audacity, asserting her freedom to think and to act as she deems fit: “Lady Catherine, I have nothing further to say. . . . I am resolved to act in that manner, which will, in my own opinion, constitute my happiness, without reference to you, or any person so wholly unconnected with me” (LVI.241). But her actions, Elizabeth declares, are in accord with considerations of duty, honor, and gratitude, and her resolutions once made cannot be shaken, even by “the indignation of the world” itself.

Elizabeth, in other words, resists the conventionally bound world of the novel itself. She has a free mind and a strikingly independent will, buttressed by an unwillingness to be swayed by considerations of social rank, customs, or conventions. She radiates an unpretentious superiority of character,

<sup>12</sup> Elizabeth, ironically, is more manly than her father. Bloom, *Love and Friendship*, 199: “Elizabeth responds with the angry defense of her own relations in a way characteristic of proud persons. Aristotle says that a gentleman is ironic to inferiors and insolent to superiors. In this respect, Elizabeth is very much a gentleman.”

<sup>13</sup> At times, Elizabeth can be an unreliable narrator, even or especially when she is only speaking to herself. Her judgment is most suspect when objecting to Darcy’s pride on account of her own prejudice. Ruderman, *Pleasures of Virtue*, 100–101.

representing a natural aristocracy of genuine virtue as opposed to the false aristocracy of inherited or acquired wealth. Independence of thought is thus her excellence. But strength of mind is also her weakness. Self-assurance at times blinds her to her own unexamined opinions and mistaken impressions. Superior character must be grounded on reasonable judgments, in order to be right; otherwise, she will be plagued by the prejudice she despises in others. For her to be worthy of admiration, she must know herself. It is in this respect that Elizabeth finds herself unexpectedly prompted to reflection by the letter that she receives from Darcy.

Darcy's letter, written in the wake of his disastrous marriage proposal, compels Elizabeth to re-examine her view of him—and of herself. In doing so, she uncovers and uproots her prejudice, thus establishing a firm footing for her own pursuit of self-knowledge. He writes to her, as he says openly, expecting that she will attend to his words (XXXV.133): "You must...pardon the freedom with which I demand your attention; your feelings, I know, will bestow it unwillingly, but I demand it of your justice." Elizabeth's insistence on justice can be seen in what she says and does, and Darcy's observation of her adherence to this principle warrants both his writing of the letter and his expectation that it will be read. Elizabeth and Darcy both seek to conduct themselves justly, which is to say, they seek to rule others and be ruled themselves in accordance with what is just.<sup>14</sup>

Moved at first by a strong desire to affirm her own sense of justice, Elizabeth learns in her rereading of the letter that her judgments have not been entirely just. She confronts Darcy's letter with a spirit of defiance which soon yields to second thoughts. His letter, like a good book, is the mirror within which she finally begins to see herself. What she thought she knew to be true proves false, and only she herself is to blame: "I have [hitherto] courted prepossession and ignorance, and driven reason away. . . . Till this moment, I never knew myself" (XXXVI.141). Her education, in the pivotal chapters at the heart of the action, advances her well beyond anything she learned from her father. Elizabeth is self-taught in the decisive sense; her self-knowledge arises from her own self-reflection. But it cannot be forgotten that she requires Darcy's letter to prompt her to re-examine what she thinks she knows is true. Her propensity for swift thought, which had led her to

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<sup>14</sup> In this way Austen argues that justice is a virtue pursued and made manifest in both household and *polis*. She thus reveals her affinity for marriage as a kind of republican regime in which lovers are spouses who possess a mutual superiority in cultivating the virtues and are committed to orienting and arranging their common life around the pursuit of justice. See Ruderman, *Pleasures of Virtue*, 50–51; Emsley, *Philosophy of the Virtues*, 83–106.

prejudiced conclusions, now carries her reflections back and forth over his words, more and more deliberately each time. With each rereading, her reflections discover new depths of understanding. The victory Elizabeth achieves is not the one that she expected—over Darcy; she overcomes herself.<sup>15</sup> Caught by her own desire for justice, she compels herself to listen to Darcy’s defense, which reveals flaws in her former impressions—of Wickham, of Darcy, and of herself.

Elizabeth gradually turns toward the fullness of judgment grounded in careful examinations of her own pride and prejudice. Darcy, it is true, is not free of flaws—but neither is she. She now sees her own self-deceptions for what they are. The letter does not absolve him of his errors, but it does serve to call her attention to hers. In examining the causes within herself of these errors in judgment, she comes to be in proper possession of her thoughts as studied reflections informed by her inquiry into her own flawed nature and thereby into human nature itself. Elizabeth is the author of her own thoughts and virtue, but Darcy set the mirror before her eyes as the occasion for self-reflection. For all her independence of mind, she is not self-sufficient. Elizabeth’s reading and rereading of Darcy’s letter is the climactic turn in the novel, from which point the action leads finally (though not inevitably) to their union. Austen here signals to readers that she holds the concern for justice and self-reflection to be essential to the reasonable foundations for happiness in marriage.

As remarkable as is Elizabeth’s success in attaining self-knowledge on her own in reading and rereading Darcy’s letter, questions still remain: Will she be able to see and judge on her own that her education in self-knowledge continues to be (may always be) incomplete? And if not, will she be willing to submit herself, her thoughts and actions, to the judgment of someone else—if indeed she can find one she deems a worthy judge of her character and conduct? Does she recognize the significance occasioned by the subtle solicitude of a deserved reproach in prompting her to the kind of self-examination that self-knowledge requires? Will her own philosophic disposition thrive only in the presence of a companion who is equal or superior to her in virtue? What are we to think of Darcy, and his capacity for reflection and change?

For his part, Darcy confesses to Elizabeth in the denouement of the novel’s action that her “accusations were ill-founded” because “formed upon

<sup>15</sup> See Ruderman, *Pleasures of Virtue*, 106–7; Emsley, *Philosophy of the Virtues*, 99–102; see also Susan Morgan, “Perception and *Pride and Prejudice*,” in *Pride and Prejudice*, by Jane Austen, ed. Donald Gray, Norton Critical Editions (New York: Norton, 2001), 346.

mistaken premises,” but his own behavior then had nonetheless “merited the severest reproof.” He ought to have behaved, he admits, “in a more gentleman-like manner” when speaking of her family (LVIII.247; see XXXIV.191). The justice of Elizabeth’s words in condemnation of his conduct—in which he takes proper pride—hits the mark, wounding him intensely. Her angry words of censure “tortured” him at the time; only upon further reflection did he become “reasonable enough to allow their justice.” Not until he has come to see himself, and his conduct, through Elizabeth’s “fine eyes” (VI.17) does he fully know himself. Her just reproach compelled him, out of self-respect and respect for her impressive mind (LX.256), to explain himself. But before he could do so, Darcy had to “explain himself to himself,” which is the occasion for *his* education and self-knowledge.<sup>16</sup> He proves “reasonable enough” to accept the justice of her words because he learns to see himself better. The same is true of Elizabeth and her response to his letter. When they see each other again at Pemberley, a radical change has occurred: Darcy’s manner appears noticeably different in Elizabeth’s eyes, and in ours; what has changed about Elizabeth, being less a matter of manner than opinion, we know because of Austen’s narrative but Darcy himself cannot easily see.

Austen conceals from her readers, as well as from Elizabeth, the thoughts and reflections by which Darcy persuaded himself to accept her rebuke and bring his demeanor and conduct into line with his principled view of what is right and just. His education in self-knowledge is not known to us from the time of Elizabeth’s harsh refusal of his proposal, until their unexpected yet fortuitous meeting at his estate; nor are we as readers, or Elizabeth, witness to what he is thinking and doing behind the scenes, from the time of their abrupt parting at Pemberley, until his late reappearance at Longbourn. His self-examination remains hidden, but the fruits of his labors guide the action of the novel’s second half. The actual circumstances that account for his remarkable transformation remain obscured, though the arc of his self-examination and pursuit of self-knowledge is evident. So too, Elizabeth’s path to self-knowledge is basically unknown to Darcy, if not also to the reader; we witness her exceptional deliberations over the letter and the effects of her self-examination on her judgment. Darcy however proceeds in his actions without the benefit of knowing that Elizabeth has drastically altered her judgment of him. The action of the novel will reveal them more fully to each other. What we have seen thus far is that the mutual desire of Elizabeth and Darcy for justice, and their shared inclination to examine themselves, have

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<sup>16</sup> Bloom, *Love and Friendship*, 201.

established a basis not only for friendship in virtue but also for a common life in marriage that will aim at living well and take delight in the respective contributions of each to that end.<sup>17</sup>

#### THE PURSUIT OF SELF-KNOWLEDGE

The philosophic education or self-examination of Elizabeth and Darcy, which for each had begun under the tutelage of a beneficent father with a substantial library, must be attributed to themselves, but also to each other. Darcy will confess that Elizabeth's anger prompted him to see how his own education by his parents had been flawed (see LVIII.248–49). Elizabeth, once liberated from her prejudice by Darcy's letter, comes to the same understanding on her own. Her disappointment in her father distances her from the one person whom she had trusted to advise her, one whose judgment she had respected and whose approbation she had desired. But after watching her father's response to the affair of Lydia, she sees more clearly. For his part, Mr. Bennet concedes that *he* should have followed *her* advice, which showed "some greatness of mind" (XLVIII.200). With this confession, he acknowledges her superiority. It is hard to see how she can trust his judgment hereafter. When, for example, he speaks mockingly of Darcy's affection for her (reported in a letter from Mr. Collins), she forces herself to dissemble and entertain his laughter with a "most reluctant smile," but she silently regrets his utter inability to see either her or Darcy properly: "Elizabeth had never been more at a loss to make her feelings appear what they were not. It was necessary to laugh, when she would rather have cried. Her father had most cruelly mortified her, by what he said of Mr. Darcy's indifference, and she could do nothing but wonder at such a want of penetration, or fear that perhaps, instead of his seeing too little, she might have fancied too much" (LVII.244–45). Given his dismissal of such matters of the heart as ephemeral, and his assumption that his daughter shared his view, Mr. Bennet could not see how his jesting touched a tender spot in her affections. He could not imagine she cared about such matters; which is to say, he does not know her

<sup>17</sup> Elizabeth will remain curious about this transformation and discover what she wants through conversation with Darcy during the subsequent "years of happiness" in their marriage (LIII.226). Unlike her mother who over twenty-three years never understood her father, Elizabeth possesses a mind that is capable of knowing the true character of her husband, and she looks forward to learning more. The lovers as spouses will have much to discuss that brings pleasure (see note 9) because in their remembrance of things past they will recall and deepen their understanding of how they came to love one another and to be together—and thereby also be reminded of who they truly are. See Aristotle, *Nicomachean Ethics* 1162a17–29.

as well as he thought.<sup>18</sup> For her part, Elizabeth laments her father's callous disregard for such matters, but she remains suspicious that her own fancy for Darcy might still deceive her. She has learned to be on guard against vain predilections.

Elizabeth's impression of Darcy's character and worth experiences a profound revolution. How could it not? His reformed conduct at Pemberley is a revelation. Darcy's civil and generous treatment of the Gardiners and his solicitous conduct toward her make him worthy of her respect and esteem. She regrets with a sense of humiliation that she had once thought so poorly of him. Yet, even with new-found respect for his virtue and gratitude for his attention, Elizabeth still fails to understand him sufficiently. Austen makes it perfectly clear, in the second half of the novel, that Elizabeth continues to err in her judgments. She misconstrues what Darcy thinks, especially about her and her family. She does so not because she is blinded by wounded vanity or passionate love, but because she underestimates the strength and goodness of Darcy's character and the steadfast quality of his love for her. She still cannot see herself, and so does not fully see Darcy for who he is and has become.

When reflecting on Darcy's reaction to the appalling news of Lydia's disappearance with Wickham, for example, Elizabeth completely misinterprets his silence as implicit contemplation of the event as further proof of her family's disgraceful weaknesses (XLVI.185). Much later, as news has spread of Lydia's marriage to the very man Darcy justly scorned, Elizabeth insists that his learning about this shameful familial connection could only widen the "impassable gulf" she imagined separated the two of them. Above all, she thought he must take pleasure not only in her family's shame, but also in the thought of her own humiliation and regret in having rejected his proposal of marriage: "What a triumph for him, as she often thought, could he know that the proposals which she had proudly spurned...would now have been most gladly and gratefully received" (L.208). Her uncharitable view of Darcy here is still tinged with prejudice.

Elizabeth's opinion in this respect could not be farther from the truth; she misses the mark entirely. In her view of human nature, she believes

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<sup>18</sup> When she finally does reveal her true feelings for Darcy to her father, after he and she have had occasion to inform her father of their intention to marry and ask his blessing, Elizabeth regrets that her former opinions of Darcy had not been more reasonable and her expressions of dislike for him more moderate, so as to have spared her father the painful misperception of the truth that she knew he must now have. Still, even after he learns the truth, Mr. Bennet continues to laugh at her affection—if not her good fortune (LIX.253–54). He will miss her "exceedingly" once she is married and living at Pemberley (LXI.259).

self-love cannot be overcome. No man would be able to resist feeling some vindication at knowing that the woman who had spurned his proposal now desperately regrets doing so. But she is wrong. Elizabeth has overcome both her vanity and pride, and her prejudice no longer blinds her to Darcy's manifest virtues. She admires his character and sees him now as a man worth marrying (L.209):

She began now to comprehend that he was exactly the man who, in disposition and talents, would most suit her. His understanding and temper, though unlike her own, would have answered all her wishes. It was an union that must have been to the advantage of both; by her ease and liveliness, his mind might have been softened, his manners improved; and from his judgement, information, and knowledge of the world, she must have received benefit of greater importance. But no such happy marriage could now teach the admiring multitude what connubial felicity really was.

Elizabeth's judgment of Darcy's character has indeed changed radically, and long before she learns from Lydia and Mrs. Gardiner about the astonishing role he had played in mitigating her family's shame. And yet, she still thinks less of him (and of herself) than he (and she) deserves.

Mrs. Gardiner in her letter confesses that she always thought Mr. Darcy to be a good and honorable man, and hints that Elizabeth is wrong not to acknowledge the attention he paid her at Pemberley (LII.218): "Will you be very angry with me, my dear Lizzy, if I take this opportunity of saying...how much I like him. His behaviour to us has, in every respect, been as pleasing as when we were in Derbyshire. His understanding and opinions all please me; he wants nothing but a little more liveliness, and that, if he marry prudently, his wife may teach him." Even the prudent counsel of Mrs. Gardiner, which resembles her own earlier advice to Jane, cannot bring Elizabeth to see the truth. Only the shock of Darcy's covert exertions to repair her familial honor in the Lydia and Wickham scandal, revealed to her in this letter, prompts her to reflect upon his worth in new terms. Pride and prejudice blinded her to his admirable qualities before, but now she discovers to her surprise that Darcy for her sake is able to set aside his utter aversion to be tainted by association with such misconduct in order to negotiate with the corrupt Wickham and, to the degree possible, redeem the reckless Lydia. Why? Elizabeth cannot bring herself to see, even if she may hope, that it is because he (still) loves her.

Austen shows us that Elizabeth's change of heart about Darcy's character has aroused in her a longing or hope for happiness that she herself doubts as

unreasonable under the circumstances, and that she is at pains to convince herself not to be deceived otherwise. No rational expectation can lead her to believe that Darcy, or for that matter any man of truly noble character, could overcome his justified dissatisfaction at forming a connection with a family as disgraceful as hers has proved to be (and now includes Wickham)—and she cannot fault him for it. Having corrected her own errors of judgment, which had been distorted by unexamined vanity, pride, and prejudices, Elizabeth still struggles to understand what she can reasonably expect from Darcy now. Extremely aware of the causes of her previous misjudgments, Elizabeth wants to avoid deceiving herself again; and yet, she does. A final reckoning with her own self-deception is yet to come.

In thinking of what is possible Elizabeth goes to great lengths to avoid the opposite extreme of believing the improbable to be possible. Her judgment, she thinks, is grounded in a proper estimate of human nature and what one can reasonably expect of others. Now, instead of deceiving herself about why Darcy should be disliked and hated, she is wary not to allow her swelling affection for him to sway her judgment regarding what might be hoped for in the future. Surely, she keeps telling herself, he will continue to be ruled in his own actions by the high moral standard that he has always held for himself and others, a standard that she herself now recognizes in him, and has come to respect and admire. She is proud of Darcy for being able to take (what she thinks he must rightly feel is) partial responsibility for the Lydia affair, and to set aside her offense against him in order to do what is right. But she harbors no illusions—or so she tells herself—that he will let his pride condescend to revive his affection for and pursuit of her.

Near the end of the novel, the reversal of fortune that Jane enjoys (and Elizabeth expects), when Bingley returns and proposes, Elizabeth does not reasonably hope for herself.<sup>19</sup> She is torn between her unreasonable hope for harmonious union with the one man she deems worthy of her, and her reasonable expectation that the prospect of such a union with him is now more than ever hopeless. Her very spirited encounter with Lady Catherine at Longbourn only reinforces her doubts about Darcy. She imagines Her Ladyship will address Darcy on his “weakest side,” enumerating the misery of her low and mean state, the scandalous and infelicitous circumstances of her

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<sup>19</sup> Jane imagines her happiness to be a matter of good fortune, rather than a consequence of the virtue of her sister and Darcy, and wishes the same good luck for Elizabeth: “I am certainly the most fortunate creature that ever existed!” cried Jane. “Oh! Lizzy, why am I thus singled from my family, and blessed above them all! If I could but see you as happy! If there were but such another man for you!” (LV.235).

family, and her own flaws, and that he, in turn, with “his notions of dignity,” will see “much good sense and solid reasoning” in her objections (LVII.242). In her brutally honest assessment of the strikes against herself as a potential spouse, Elizabeth never wonders, despite all her family has done or how adamantly his imposing aunt might protest, if Darcy persists in loving her. She cannot fathom the possibility that his love of her exceeds his love of family, which it rightly had been his duty thus far to be ashamed to dishonor. Her self-examination and assessment of her own situation are harsh, yet candid; she has improved her conduct in light of what she has learned about herself. But she still does not yet grasp his character sufficiently; she does not imagine that, far from viewing marriage with her as dishonorable, Darcy sees himself as having to redeem his honor in her eyes in order to be worthy of her love. Her understanding of his love is in need of improvement. To know fully her worth and his, Elizabeth will learn from his example, as he himself has, the ennobling power of shame in the eyes of a beloved as an inspiration to virtue.

#### THUMOS AND ERŌS IN THE EDUCATION TO VIRTUE

Before turning to the extraordinary marriage of Elizabeth and Darcy that ends the novel and is the basis for a critique of the other marriages discussed in the final chapter (LXI), we must remind ourselves of a few complexities regarding their paths to this end. Elizabeth initially makes no effort whatsoever to appear desirable in the eyes of a man like Darcy in whom she has no special interest and of whom she has declared her displeasure. Darcy, on the other hand, while initially neglecting her charm, is soon smitten with Elizabeth, despite himself. Almost from the moment he begins to notice her (see VII.22), he conceals his affection beneath a veneer of proper conduct and austerity, struggling desperately to resist a natural inclination to love her. When he finally confesses his love, against all convention in his marriage proposal, he reveals his feelings so suddenly, and with such precision regarding his inner struggle, that Elizabeth, in the heat of the moment, is too blinded by indignation and anger to see him, and his offer, with clarity. She rejects him absolutely and in the harshest terms. Why? What is it about her natural disposition, or about human nature in general, that has incited her to anger? How do her anger and his love improve their conduct?

Anger, understood in the classical sense of *thumos*, when aroused in the form of righteous or proud indignation, may be said to be the palpable manifestation of insulted self-love. Properly understood, *thumos* serves justice. Righteous anger is fitting when good judgment rightly discerns violations of

principle; such offenses, when deliberate or inadvertent, must be called out as wrong, with civility and firmness, precisely in order to set things right—that is, to insist on an effort to establish justice. But the provocation of anger aroused by a sense of having suffered injustice is also a threat to justice, for *thumos* tends to obviate an openness to deliberation and calm inquiry, conditions necessary for right judgment. Anger can obstruct learning or education because it tends to preclude listening. We often cannot hear reasons or the account given by others of themselves, when we are angry; it especially stops our ears to hearing the truth insofar as what is true conflicts with our conception of ourselves and our worth. Thumotic anger can oppose reason and diminish our capacity for judgment by impeding or preventing entirely a reasonable examination both of the world and ourselves.

Although felt and expressed in different ways, Elizabeth and Darcy both know anger. For Elizabeth, because she is as lively as she is swift in judgment, even slight provocations can arouse spirited resistance, obscuring details from her perception that ought to be noticed, if her thumotic response is also to be just. Her happiness, then, depends on her capacity for self-reflection, which moderates her inclination to judge too soon or too harshly. (In the case of Lady Catherine and her father Elizabeth's anger is warranted, but not entirely so with Darcy.) Darcy, on the other hand, is slower to judgment, less prone to take offense, but definitive in his judgments once made; he has less occasion to feel slighted, given his elevated rank, but he also works at being noble and good, restraining his temper and leaning toward moderation. (In the case of Wickham's misconduct his anger is warranted, perhaps also with respect to Elizabeth's unjust accusations when they quarrel, as she herself intimates, but even then only slightly so; he quickly controls it.) Because he lacks the liveliness to be bold and playful, however, his greater flaw is in running the risk of being too constrained by conventional decorum and unable to embrace his prospects for happiness. Both need to be sure that their *thumos*, when piqued, is just—that it is aroused and expressed at the right time, for the right reasons, towards the right persons, and for the sake of the right ends.<sup>20</sup>

In the action of the novel's second half, Darcy, after due self-examination, devotes himself to correcting his flaws and, with much exertion and at great expense, pursuing Elizabeth's good. We are not witness to his reflections, only his conclusions, but it is clear from his actions and later his words that

<sup>20</sup> On the relation of anger to judgment and justice, see Aristotle, *Nicomachean Ethics* 1125b27–1126b10; *Rhetoric* 1377b30–1378a6, 1378a31–1380a4. See also Emsley, *Philosophy of the Virtues*, 88–98.

he has undergone a profound change. And he does this without making that change explicitly known to Elizabeth; he goes to great lengths to ensure that his intervention and actions will be concealed from her. He acts out of genuine affection and a concern for her good, without expecting to be loved in return. Love, in the classical sense of *erōs*, inspires Darcy to improve his own conduct in order to be worthy of his beloved. Elizabeth, for her part, comes to love Darcy, learning how much good (at first unbeknownst to her) he has accomplished for her and her family. She also knows that he cannot expect any good at all, at least in a conventional sense, to accrue to him from loving and marrying her. On the contrary, for such an honorable man, a connection with her family could only be a cause of perpetual shame and discomfort, from which (once married) she will endeavor to “shield him” as much as possible (LX.259).<sup>21</sup> Inspired by his devotion to her good, Elizabeth sees Darcy in a new light and endeavors to be worthy of his virtue.

Elizabeth and Darcy eventually reveal their profound affection for one another and their desire to marry, but only after they have traveled on separate paths of self-examination. He cannot help falling in love and overcomes at several points his own better judgment in order to devote himself to her good as his beloved; she, on the other hand, arrives at love, not by falling into it, but only after gradual and deliberate reflection. That Elizabeth can acknowledge her “uncivil manners” and articulate upon reflection what is “noble and just” with respect to Darcy is a mark of her excellence; and that he dismisses her self-deprecating reference to “impertinence,” declaring that he admires her for “the liveliness of [her] mind,” is a sign of his (LX.256).<sup>22</sup> What is striking is that Darcy *falls* in love with Elizabeth against his will and on account of her virtue, and then works to improve his manner in light of her just judgment of him, thereby showing how capable he is—prompted by her reproach—of engaging in the kind of self-reflection that reasonably moderates his love. Elizabeth, however, never falls in love with Darcy but

<sup>21</sup> Plato has Phaedrus make the case for the power of shame before the eyes of a beloved to inspire the lover to virtue in his *Symposium* (178a–180b). In the same dialogue, Socrates, or rather Diotima, argues that *erōs* for the beautiful inspires in the lover a longing for virtue, for what is “noble and good” (*kalon kai agathon*), and ultimately for philosophy itself—all ends shared with the beloved (201d–212b). See Bloom, *Love and Friendship*, 203–8; Emsley, *Philosophy of the Virtues*, 22–23, 96–97, 102–3. On *erōs* and the philosophic turn, see also Mark Lutz, *Socrates’ Education to Virtue* (New York: State University of New York Press, 1998), 6–9, 83–109.

<sup>22</sup> See note 17, and Elizabeth’s insight at LX.256: “In spite of the pains you took to disguise yourself, your feelings were always noble and just; and in your heart, you thoroughly despised the persons who so assiduously courted you. There—I have saved you the trouble of accounting for it; and really, all things considered, I begin to think it perfectly reasonable. To be sure, you knew no actual good of me—but nobody thinks of that when they fall in love.”

chooses to love him, once she recognizes her own self-deception and learns to see, respect, and admire his character, thereby laying reasonable foundations for her love and their happiness in marriage. By the end of the novel, through continual self-examination and the pursuit of self-knowledge, if along separate paths, Elizabeth and Darcy construct the noble architecture of a good friendship and marriage.<sup>23</sup>

In representing this model of marriage as she does, Austen encourages our reasonable hopes for wedding passion and reason, binding erotic love with dutiful affection, and achieving happiness in marriage through a lasting and harmonious union of equals who admire each other.<sup>24</sup> But given how extraordinary Elizabeth and Darcy are, their excellence seems to put their marriage, uniting affection with true companionship, beyond the reach of most other ordinary human beings. For we cannot all be like Elizabeth and Darcy. Some of us, by natural temperament or disposition, are Janes and Bingleys, Lydias and Wickhams, or Charlottes and Collinses. While the novel takes care to show other marriages for our consideration, marriage at its best is exemplified by Elizabeth and Darcy; it is the high standard by which to judge the institution of marriage itself. For theirs is a union of equals founded on the ability of partners superior in virtue to engage in self-examination and conversation, with gratitude and compassion, as well as a sense of justice in pursuit of self-knowledge, the indispensable condition in friendship and marriage for establishing the reasonable foundations for happiness.

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<sup>23</sup> Austen uses the language of founding throughout *Pride and Prejudice*, showing that flawed foundations cannot sustain a work of human construction, especially those subject to the stress and sway of the passions. A firm groundwork must be laid down, particularly in matters of love and marriage: "gratitude and esteem are good foundations of affection," whereas first impressions (the original title for the novel), which perhaps give rise accidentally to just opinions, must nonetheless be subjected to scrutiny—a "less interesting mode of attachment" that is nonetheless more secure (XLVI.186). By the end of the novel, the various marriages can be assessed in terms of the strengths or weaknesses of the foundations upon which the union of spouses is established. On the architectural metaphor here, and the importance of uncovering and clearing away unseen obstacles beneath the surface before laying foundations, the process of self-examination in pursuit of self-knowledge, see Marcia Folsom, "Knowing and Feeling in *Pride and Prejudice*," in *Approaches to Teaching Austen's "Pride and Prejudice*," ed. Marcia McClintock Folsom (New York: Modern Language Association, 1993), 100–114.

<sup>24</sup> On this model of marriage, see Ruderman, *Pleasures of Virtue*, 121: "The happiness of Austen's couples comes from their being able to find true companionship with each other, friendship that includes both good talk and the doing of favors for each other." See also Bloom, *Love and Friendship*, 200: "Elizabeth would never marry a man whom she considered her inferior, while she hates a man who considers himself her superior. Equality of partners would seem to be the answer, and it is. But the establishment of equality between two strong-willed individuals is not such an easy thing and probably requires each to think the other is superior."

EQUALITY IN SUPERIORITY: REASONABLE  
FOUNDATIONS FOR HAPPINESS

As Mr. Bennet astutely points out, when yielding to their request for his blessing of their marriage, Elizabeth could not be happy with a husband who is her inferior, or even her equal: “I know your disposition. . . you could be neither happy nor respectable, unless you truly esteemed your husband; unless you looked up to him as a superior. Your lively talents would place you in the greatest danger in an unequal marriage. You could scarcely escape discredit and misery. My child, let me not have the grief of seeing you unable to respect your partner in life” (LIX.254). Elizabeth, earnest and solemn in her reply, repeats her assurance that Darcy really is the husband of her choice, explaining that her estimation of him has greatly changed, and that in her judgment he is indeed worthy of her. But we also know that Elizabeth chafes under the auspices of a superior. How then to reconcile these apparently opposing views, namely, that Elizabeth must have an equal in marriage if she is to be happy instead of miserable, and that the only husband who is worthy of her esteem would have to be superior in some crucial respect?

Superiority itself is a natural basis for ruling over others, but it is not an entitlement to do so without their consent. Elizabeth and Darcy both rightly take pride in their own surpassing virtues and understanding. We have seen that their excellence rests on an examination of their passions and the opinions and attachments formed on the basis of those passions; their capacity to reflect upon the world around them and themselves; and the reasonableness of their judgments in light of and apart from their passions. In this regard, they achieve a kind of virtue that is a peak or pinnacle rather than a mean between extremes. So, although not identical in every respect, they are equals in a respective superiority. As long as each sees the other as superior, their marriage will be buoyed by a willingness to learn from the other as well as to be chastened at times, as when the two warmly exchange their observations and reproaches, being both playful and serious at once. And yielding to the superiority of the other in their case would be viewed by each not as a dreary necessity or mere conjugal duty, but as a delightful opportunity to further their own virtue in conversation. There is an equality between Elizabeth and Darcy, then, with respect to virtue, which they recognize in each other, and in so doing what they perceive as virtuous in one another may be understood by each, in a crucial sense, as the superiority of the other. This recognition preserves in each of them the salutary esteem that derives from each seeing the other as equal and truly worthy and as someone from whom,

as a superior, the other can learn. Thus, because each embraces by reciprocal consent the recognition of equal superiority, such a marriage would be constituted by a mutual share in the activity of ruling, helping to guide one another toward a deepening of virtue and contributing to the happiness of their common way of life.

To judge from the characters of Elizabeth and Darcy in *Pride and Prejudice*, our prospects for happiness are to be found within the bounds of a friendship and marriage between equals of superior worth, sharing a common way of life lived in accordance with virtue and refined by the desire for justice and self-reflection. It is true that our highest hope for being happy ultimately may depend upon the blessings of divine providence, chance, or the beneficence of nature with respect to those external goods or necessities that lie beyond what virtue can achieve.<sup>25</sup> But with regard to that part of happiness that can be attained through deliberation and choice, the action of the novel argues that the turn away from self-deception toward self-knowledge through self-examination is an essential condition for pursuing virtue. This turn, moreover, demands reflection upon our own pride and prejudice as obstacles to our awareness of errors in judgment, and such reflection may rely upon and be improved by the presence of others who help us to see ourselves. The philosophy of marriage intimated by the action of the novel thus may be described as Aristotelian in nature, insofar as it is based upon the equality as well as superiority in character of spouses, whose actions accord with virtue and pursue justice, and who affectionately share both in educating and in leading one another, ruling and being ruled in turn—a model of excellence that establishes reasonable foundations for happiness in marriage, as well as in other forms of human association.<sup>26</sup>

Jane Austen thus depicts for us, through the action of this resplendent novel,<sup>27</sup> a reasonable portrait of an unreasonable hope fortuitously fulfilled:

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<sup>25</sup> On the role of providence or chance in human happiness, see Robert Bartlett, "Aristotle's Introduction to the Problem of Happiness: Book I of *Nicomachean Ethics*," *American Journal of Political Science* 52, no. 3 (2008): 686.

<sup>26</sup> I do not here intend to imply that Austen would agree with Aristotle's treatment of marriage, but that her presentation of a model of marriage in the union of Elizabeth and Darcy resembles Aristotle's accounts of the focus upon virtue in the best regime and the centrality of justice to the pursuit of happiness in common. See Aristotle, *Nicomachean Ethics* 1131a10–b24, 1132b33–34, 1160b32–35, 1161a22–25, 1162a22–24; *Politics* 1259a38–1259b6, 1261a29–b3, 1279a8–10, 1280a9–24, 1280b29–1281a10, 1282b14–1283a23, 1284a1–15, 1287a17–19, 1323b40–1324a2, 1332a28–38, 1332b11–26.

<sup>27</sup> The novel has an enchanting quality, especially its concluding in the marriage of Elizabeth and Darcy—an ending that may be likened here to the magical powers of Shakespeare's Prospero: see Colleen Sheehan, "To Govern the Winds," *Persuasions On-Line* 25, no. 1 (2004), conclusion.

the unreasonable hope is the expectation that mutual love, between equally worthy lovers, forms the foundations of a marriage upon which those lovers build a common life in virtue as perpetual beloveds in genuine affection; their love, refined through mutual self-reflection, would be unfiltered by illusions or self-deceptions, and as much as possible uncorrupted by falsehoods or misleading impressions because open to merited reproaches inspired not only by a desire for justice but also the good of the other. Such a marriage, between such beloveds, would issue naturally in the coincidence of mutual arousal and good sense, the assent of their minds as well as passions, and the harmonious union of erotic desire with love of virtue. Admiration for each other's virtuous qualities would make each lover *as lover* a worthy judge and witness, and each lover *as beloved* truly admirable. In each other, Elizabeth and Darcy come to see and admire those virtues and that self-knowledge which together warrant their esteem for one another as friends, and as the only worthy judges of one another. Near the end of the novel, Elizabeth confesses (in a letter to the most suitable of her companions other than her husband) that she attained such a blessed happiness, which others must either celebrate or envy, if not emulate:<sup>28</sup> "I am the happiest creature in the world. Perhaps other people have said so before, but no one with such justice" (LX.258). Jane Austen's *Pride and Prejudice* examines and articulates the reasonable foundations for happiness for a marriage of equals in superiority—that is, a marriage of true minds, founded upon mutual respect and admiration, cultivating genuine virtue through philosophic self-reflection, united by cherished bonds elegantly forged from the noblest sentiments of the heart, and graced with love.<sup>29</sup>

<sup>28</sup> And so, "perfect happiness [is] the just reward of their virtues." See Austen, "Evelyn," Third Volume, from her *Minor Works*, cited at Emsley, *Philosophy of the Virtues*, 82.

<sup>29</sup> An expression of my gratitude is due to friends and colleagues who have read and commented on this article: Phil Chandler, Scott Crider, B. J. Dobski, Ted Estess, Lawrence Greene, Terry Hallmark, and David Mikics. My deepest appreciation belongs to Maren Vandercook, whose conversation and companionship has brought the argument here to life for me and whose insights, as well as merited reproaches, have helped me better understand Austen's novel.