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### The Feminist Bias of *Pride and Prejudice*

In *Language of Fiction*, David Lodge has demonstrated that a close and sensitive scrutiny of the linguistic means by which a novelist creates a fictional likeness of the real world is critically very rewarding. He devotes a chapter to analyzing the exact social and moral values underlying the language of *Mansfield Park* and concludes that Jane Austen "puts every generation of readers to school, and in learning her own subtle and exact vocabulary of discrimination and evaluation, we submit to the authority of her vision."<sup>1</sup> *Pride and Prejudice*, no less than *Mansfield Park*, reveals an "exact vocabulary of discrimination and evaluation"; in this paper I shall focus on that part of her vocabulary which demonstrates her close engagement with the feminist controversy of her day.

Throughout *Pride and Prejudice*, certain key phrases reappear. Take, for instance, the scene in which Mr. Collins proposes to Elizabeth. He refers twice to her "modesty" and tells her: "You can hardly doubt the purport of my discourse, however your natural delicacy may lead you to dissemble".<sup>2</sup> Then he assures her that her refusal has not discouraged him in the least since "you have even now said as much to encourage my suit as would be consistent with the true delicacy of the female character" (108). Later he tells Mrs. Bennet that Elizabeth's refusal "would naturally flow from her bashful modesty and the genuine delicacy of her character" (110). Elizabeth replies:

I do assure you, Sir, that I have no pretension whatever to that kind of elegance which consists in tormenting a respectable man. I would rather be paid the compliment of being believed sincere....Do not consider me now as an elegant female intending to plague you, but as a rational creature speaking the truth from her heart (108-9).

She then decides to ask her father to give Collins a refusal which cannot be mistaken "for the affectation and coquetry of an elegant female" (109).

"Modesty" . . . "delicacy" . . . "elegant female" . . . "rational creature". In Jane Austen's time these highly charged words and phrases carried special connotations not apparent to the modern reader, for they were key words in the debate being waged on the role and education of women. The terms of this debate are to be found in the female courtesy books of the last half of the eighteenth century and in the feminist works of the 1790's. An examination of certain significant words in this contemporary context leads to some interesting conclusions concerning Jane Austen's purpose and method in *Pride and Prejudice*.

Courtesy books were the body of literature which set forth the ideals of education and behaviour to which young persons were expected to conform, and they were required reading for young ladies throughout the eighteenth century and into the nineteenth. Two of the most popular were William Kenrick's *The Whole Duty of Woman* (1753), which had seventeen editions before 1813, the year in which *Pride and Prejudice* was published, and James Fordyce's *Sermons to Young Women* (1766) which ran to fourteen editions before 1813.

On the question of female education, the courtesy-book writers deplore the current mode which stressed manners rather than morals, and superficial accomplishments rather than virtuous behaviour.<sup>3</sup> At the end of the eighteenth century in England, the only career for which girls of the mercantile and gentry classes were educated was marriage, and to graduate *summa cum laude* a young lady had to find a rich husband, preferably titled. Her education was aimed at turning her into an elegant female, and in order to bait the matrimonial trap, she had to learn to play an instrument, sing, dance and master "the whole science of pleasing".<sup>4</sup> Some young ladies were educated at home, with a resident governess and a weekly parade of drawing and dancing masters, but the most efficient method of grooming girls for the marriage bazaar was to send them off to boarding school. The curriculum varied little from school to school. At Belvedere House in Bath in 1797, the morning hours were spent on music, drawing, dancing, French, arithmetic and writing.<sup>5</sup> Since every afternoon was devoted to embroidery, real-life alumnae must have resembled Charlotte Palmer in Jane Austen's *Sense and Sensibility* who has "a landscape in coloured silks . . . in proof of her having spent seven years at a great school in town to some effect".<sup>6</sup>

Elegant females had to learn how to move, and lessons in deportment were an important part of the curriculum. At a boarding school in Queen Square, Bloomsbury, circa 1790,

Every movement of the body in entering and quitting a room, in taking a seat and rising from it, was duly criticised. There was kept, in a back premises, a carriage taken off the wheels . . . for the purpose of enabling the young ladies to practise ascending and descending with calmness and grace, and without any unnecessary display of their ankles.<sup>7</sup>

A graceful carriage was of such importance that young ladies were clapped into "steel collars, braces, back-boards and feet-stocks" (*Reflections*, 24). The girl in one of Maria Edgeworth's novels who "thinks of nothing but how she holds her elbows"<sup>8</sup> may have been only a slight exaggeration, for one real-life young lady spent a whole month learning how to "walk and curtsy".<sup>9</sup>

The courtesy books agree that marriage is the end of female education but differ as to means, rejecting boarding-school manners and accomplishments. In sober and pious tones, they outline their own prescription, based on the Pauline one of the New Testament. Young ladies are cautioned to behave always with due "decorum" or "propriety", these two words being used to encompass all the female virtues of behaviour. Writing in 1766, Rev. James Fordyce stresses the importance of decorum:

If, in the flutter of too public a life, you should, at any time, so far forget yourselves, as to drop that nice decorum of appearance and manner, which is expected from your sex . . . they (men) will be tempted to harbour suspicions which I dare not name (*Sermons*, 68).

In *A Father's Legacy to His Daughters* (1774) Dr. Gregory prefers to use "propriety", referring to "a certain propriety of conduct peculiar to your sex. It is this peculiar propriety of female manners of which I intend to give you my sentiments, without touching on those general rules of conduct by which men and women are equally bound".<sup>10</sup> Observing propriety, writes another courtesy-book writer, means that a young lady is "able to form an instantaneous judgment of what is fittest to be said or done, on every occasion as it offers"<sup>11</sup> and another sees it as "the centre in which all the lines of duty and of agreeableness meet".<sup>12</sup>

The courtesy-book writers agree that young ladies of proper decorum must be modest, solemn, meek, and above all, delicate. Modesty en-

compasses "the looks, words, carriage", according to Wetenhall Wilkes; it "moderates the tone, sweetens the accents, and never admits earnest, or loud discourse".<sup>13</sup> William Kenrick's definition of modesty includes diffidence in voicing an opinion and a low, gentle voice.<sup>14</sup> "Reserv'd Behaviour is a female Grace", says Thomas Marriott<sup>15</sup> and Rev. James Fordyce feels that "there is nothing so engaging as a bashful beauty". He speaks of

the dislike we feel to her who has contracted a certain briskness of air, and levity of deportment which . . . can never, I am sure, be pleasing to men of sentiment . . . I had rather a thousand times see a young lady carry her bashfulness too far, than pique herself on the freedom of her manners (*Sermons*, 65).

The courtesy-book writers unanimously agree that no properly modest young lady ever tries to be witty in her conversation. Fordyce puts it bluntly: "Men of the best sense have been usually adverse to the thought of marrying a witty female" and underlines his point with rhyme: "Naked in nothing should a woman be / But veil her very wit with modesty" (*Sermons*, 117). "A young lady conspires against her safety and honour who is . . . fond of being thought witty, in the presence of her admirer" writes Wetenhall Wilkes (*Genteel and Moral Advice*, 177). "Wit", says Dr. Gregory, "is the most dangerous talent you can possess. It must be guarded with great discretion" (*Legacy*, 30). "The attempt at *wit*, or saying *smart* things, is, by no means, to be encouraged", writes John Bennett in *Letters to a Young Lady* and adds that a witty woman "might be *feared*, but you never would be *loved*".<sup>16</sup>

Any kind of impertinence in the presence of men is frowned on. Women are to be properly subservient, meek and docile. "To say the truth", writes Rev. James Fordyce, "there is not, I verily believe, a man living, who, in his sober senses, would not prefer a modest, to an impudent woman" (*Sermons*, 62).

In addition to modesty and meekness, the ideal courtesy-book girl must cultivate delicacy both of body and mind. She should never be in a robust state of health. Dr. Gregory writes that "when a woman speaks of her great strength, her extraordinary appetite, her ability to bear excessive fatigue, we recoil at the description in a way she is little aware of" (*Legacy*, 50-1).

Mental as well as physical delicacy is important, and the courtesy-book writers assume the non-sexual nature of woman's love for man.

They are adamant that no proper young lady acknowledges her affection for a suitor until he has declared himself. "Miserable will be your fate," warns Dr. Gregory, "if you allow an attachment to steal on you before you are sure of a return" (*Legacy*, 104), asserting that "it is even long before a woman of delicacy dares avow to her own heart that she loves" (*Legacy*, 67). "To entertain a *secret* partiality for a man, without knowing it reciprocal, is dreadful indeed", writes John Bennett (*Letters*, II, 172-3).

The conventions of behaviour for both courtesy-book girls and elegant females rouse the wrath of the feminist writers of the 1790's. These few courageous voices, the very first to be raised in Western society on behalf of women's rights, were inspired by the same zeal for equality and liberty which gave rise to the French Revolution of 1789. They were, for the most part, voices crying in the wilderness, for it was to take another hundred years before the women's movement gained significant support. In 1790 in France the first author to broach the subject explicitly was the *philosophe* Condorcet, with his essay on "The Admission of Women to Full Citizenship". In England in the same year Catharine Macaulay Graham (1731-1791) sparked the feminist controversy with her *Letters on Education*. Author of an impressive number of historical works, including an eight-volume *History of England*, she is cited by Mary Wollstonecraft as "an example of intellectual acquirements supposed to be incompatible with the weakness of her sex".<sup>17</sup>

In 1792 Mary Wollstonecraft (1759-1797) brought out her own feminist manifesto, *Vindication of the Rights of Woman* in which she acknowledges her debt to Mrs. Graham, "the woman of the greatest abilities, undoubtedly, that this country has ever produced" (*Rights of Woman*, 235), and enlarges on the latter's radical ideas on how women could develop their full potential.

In *Reflections on the Present Condition of the Female Sex* (1798), Priscilla Wakefield (1751-1832) adopts a gentler tone than Mary Wollstonecraft's strident polemic but is just as insistent that female education needs reforming. Without seriously questioning the institution of marriage as later feminists were to do, those of the 1790's deplore the elegant-female method of attaining that goal. Priscilla Wakefield writes:

In the education of females, the same view actuates every rank: an advantageous settlement in marriage is the universal prize....For the promo-

tion of this design, their best years for improvement are sacrificed to the attainment of attractive qualities, shewy superficial accomplishments, polished manners, and, in one word, the whole science of pleasing (*Reflections*, 29-30).

Mary Wollstonecraft deplores the fact that girls "spend many of the first years of their lives in acquiring a smattering of accomplishments" while "strength of body and mind are sacrificed to libertine notions of beauty, to the desire of establishing themselves — the only way women can rise in the world, — by marriage" (*Rights of Woman*, 8-9). Catharine Graham speaks of "the shameful waste of time and money"<sup>18</sup> which women spend on clothes and hairdressers and Mary Wollstonecraft denounces the emphasis on deportment:

With what disgust have I heard sensible women . . . speak of the wearisome confinement, which they endured at school. Not allowed, perhaps, to step out of one broad walk in a superb garden, and obliged to pace with steady deportment stupidly backwards and forwards, holding up their heads and turning out their toes, with shoulders braced back, instead of bounding, as Nature directs to complete her own design, in the various attitudes so conducive to health (*Rights of Woman*, 377-8).

The feminists attack not only elegant females, but courtesy-book girls as well, and for the same reason: both systems of education turn out mechanical dolls who walk and talk according to a set pattern, leaving no room for the free expression of personality. Mary Wollstonecraft writes that "decorum is to supplant nature, and banish all simplicity and variety of character out of the female world" (*Rights of Woman*, 218). She specifically criticizes the courtesy-book emphasis on meekness. Whereas men are free to be themselves, "all women are to be levelled, by meekness and docility, into one character of yielding softness and gentle compliance" (*Rights of Woman*, 212).

The feminists are loud in their denunciation of the courtesy-book stress on delicacy, both physical and mental. Mary Wollstonecraft takes Dr. Gregory to task, and asks: "In the name of truth and common sense, why should not one woman acknowledge that she can take more exercise than another or, in other words, that she has a sound constitution?" (*Rights of Woman*, 54). Priscilla Wakefield writes:

The free use of air and exercise is the common gift of Heaven, from which none should be debarred from motives of small importance; but how often

has an over anxiety for the delicacy of her complexion, or the apprehension of her becoming a romp, restrained a girl from the indulgence of enjoying either, in a degree sufficient to secure her from that feeble, sickly, languid state, which frequently renders her not only capricious, but helpless, through the whole course of her life (*Reflections*, 19-20).

Neither Catharine Graham nor Mary Wollstonecraft are optimistic about the possibility of reform. "My sex will continue to . . . totter in their walk, and to counterfeit more weaknesses and sickness than they really have, in order to attract the notice of the male" sighs Mrs. Graham (*Letters on Education*, 48). Mary Wollstonecraft feels that "it will also require some time to convince women that they act contrary to their real interest on an enlarged scale, when they cherish or affect weakness under the name of delicacy" (*Rights of Woman*, 96). She demolishes the courtesy-book dictum on mental delicacy with the words "as if it were indelicate to have the common appetites of human nature" (*Rights of Woman*, 62).

The feminists wanted women to be freed from false stereotypes in order to develop their full potential, both physically and mentally. "Woman as rational creature" was their rallying cry, based on the radical new notion that woman's innate reasoning abilities were in no way inferior to man's. Courtesy-book writers unanimously view woman as man's intellectual inferior. Rev. James Fordyce writes:

I scruple not to declare my opinion, that Nature appears to have formed the faculties of your sex, for the most part, with less vigour than those of ours; observing the same distinction here, as in the more delicate frame of your bodies (*Sermons*, 161).

The accepted view was that women were more emotional than men, relying on their senses and intuition, whereas men were better able to reason abstractly.<sup>19</sup>

The feminists point out that women led by their feelings rather than their reason inevitably choose a husband for his manners rather than morals, realizing only too soon the folly of their choice. Mary Wollstonecraft refers to women's "habitual slavery to first impressions" (*Rights of Woman*, 262) and writes that "women are captivated by easy manners; a gentleman-like man seldom fails to please them, and their thirsty ears eagerly drink the insinuating nothings of politeness". She asks:

How can they then expect women, who are only taught to observe behaviour, and acquire manners rather than morals, to despise what they have been all their lives labouring to attain? Where are they suddenly to find judgment enough to weigh patiently the sense of an awkward virtuous man, when his manners, of which they are made critical judges, are rebuffing (*Rights of Woman*, 265)?

For the feminists, reason is to reign supreme, and the word "rational" applied to women runs like a refrain through all their writings. "There is but one rule of right for the conduct of all rational beings", writes Catharine Macaulay Graham in 1790:

As I intend to breed my pupils up to act a rational part in the world, and not to fill up a niche in the seraglio of a sultan, I shall certainly give them leave to use their reason in all matters which concern their duty and happiness, and shall spare no pains in the cultivation of this only sure guide to virtue.<sup>20</sup>

Two years later, Mary Wollstonecraft takes up the gauntlet:

My own sex, I hope, will excuse me, if I treat them like rational creatures, instead of flattering their *fascinating* graces, and viewing them as if they were in a state of perpetual childhood, unable to stand alone (*Rights of Woman*, 6).

On the question of women's mental inferiority, she writes:

I shall only insist that men have increased that inferiority till women are almost sunk below the standard of rational creatures. Let their faculties have room to unfold, and their virtues to gain strength, and then determine where the whole sex must stand in the intellectual scale (*Rights of Woman*, 69).

"Let the ambition of women be directed to assert their claim to the characteristic mark of rational beings", writes Priscilla Wakefield in 1798, "let them strengthen . . . their minds by cultivation, till they acquire the full use of those powers, which have been bestowed upon them by a beneficent Creator" (*Reflections*, 79-80).

When we turn from the feminist writers of the 1790's to *Pride and Prejudice*, we see how closely it reflects their point of view. Although *Pride and Prejudice* did not appear until 1813, the first draft was written in 1796 and 1797, when the feminist controversy in England was at its height. *Pride and Prejudice* is Jane Austen's own feminist manifesto.



Like other feminists, she rejects the elegant-female stereotype. Four years before she began *Pride and Prejudice*, Jane Austen had already incisively sketched an elegant female in the juvenile work "Catharine":

Miss Stanley had been attended by the most capital Masters from the time of her being six years old to the last Spring, which comprehending a period of twelve Years had been dedicated to the acquirement of Accomplishments which were now to be displayed and in a few Years entirely neglected. She was not inelegant in her appearance, rather handsome, and naturally not deficient in Abilities; but those Years which ought to have been spent in the attainment of useful Knowledge and Mental Improvement, had been all bestowed in learning Drawing, Italian and Music, more especially the latter, and she now united to these accomplishments, an Understanding unimproved by reading and a Mind totally devoid either of Taste or Judgment.<sup>21</sup>

In *Pride and Prejudice* it is the Bingley sisters who have been turned out in the mould of the elegant female. They have been educated in one of the "first private seminaries in town" (15), no doubt similar to the one in *Emma* where "young ladies for enormous pay might be screwed out of health and into vanity".<sup>22</sup> There is fine irony in Jane Austen's initial description of Miss Bingley and Mrs. Hurst:

They were in fact very fine ladies; not deficient in good humour when they were pleased, nor in the power of being agreeable where they chose it; but proud and conceited. They were rather handsome . . . had a fortune of twenty thousand pounds, were in the habit of spending more than they ought, and of associating with people of rank; and were therefore in every respect entitled to think well of themselves, and meanly of others (15).

They are "fine women, with an air of decided fashion" (10) and Mrs. Bennet comments that "I never in my life saw any thing more elegant than their dresses" (13). They dress well and walk well; Caroline, who has yet to snare a husband, is intent on showing off her boarding-school deportment to Darcy, whom she would very much like to marry, by parading about the drawing-room at Netherfield. "Her figure was elegant, and she walked well" (56), but Darcy does not rise to the bait of an elegant female, for he has his own ideas on female education. In a conversation on the subject of the accomplished woman, Miss Bingley's definition is the conventional one of her society:

A woman must have a thorough knowledge of music, singing, drawing, dancing, and the modern languages, to deserve the word; and besides all this, she must possess a certain something in her air and manner of walking, the tone of her voice, her address and expressions (39).

Darcy replies that the truly accomplished woman "must yet add something more substantial, in the improvement of her mind by extensive reading; (39). It is Elizabeth Bennet's mind and the "uncommonly intelligent" expression of her face rather than its beauty which attract Darcy initially (23). Her manners are "not those of the fashionable world" but he is caught by their "easy playfulness" (23). Darcy is drawn to Elizabeth precisely because she is not a carbon-copy elegant female, but an original, with a mind and manner all her own.

Like Jane Austen herself, Elizabeth has been educated at home, not at a fashionable boarding-school. The Bennet sisters did not even have a governess, a fact which astonishes the disapproving Lady Catherine De Bourgh. Lady Catherine is aghast at their general lack of accomplishments: only two of them can sing and none of them can draw (164). Elizabeth tells her that "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" (165). In contrast to Elizabeth's genuine love of reading, Caroline Bingley chooses a book only because it is the second volume of the one Darcy is reading, declares that "there is no enjoyment like reading! How much sooner one tires of any thing than of a book!" yawns, throws her book aside and casts "her eyes round the room in quest of some amusement" (55). Caroline Bingley may be an elegant female, but her education is shown to be sadly deficient, for in addition to being empty-headed she is also vain, selfish and hypocritical.

Jane Austen demolishes the courtesy-book concept of education just as decisively as the elegant-female one. In *Pride and Prejudice* the maxims of the courtesy books issue from the mouths of fools. It is no accident that the Reverend Mr. Collins, one of the prime targets of Jane Austen's ridicule, reads aloud to the Bennet girls with "monotonous solemnity" (68) from Fordyce's *Sermons to Young Women*. The Reverend James Fordyce had already been singled out for some of Mary Wollstonecraft's strongest invective in *Vindication of the Rights of Woman*. She objects to his particularly pompous and patronizing tone, his "declamatory periods" and "sentimental rant":

Dr. Fordyce's sermons have long made a part of a young woman's library . . . but I should instantly dismiss them from my pupil's if I wished to strengthen her understanding. . . . Dr. Fordyce may have had a very laudable end in view; but these discourses are written in such an affected style, that were it only on that account, and had I nothing to object against his *mellifluous* precepts, I should not allow girls to peruse them (*Rights of Woman*, 206).

In *Pride and Prejudice*, Mr. Collins is Fordyce writ large: the same pompous and pious tone, the same patronizing air when addressing women, even, occasionally, the same phrases.<sup>23</sup> From the heights of male superiority, Fordyce speaks to his female readers of "your tender reliance on man, your helpless condition in yourselves" and of "frequent application for his aid in so many winning ways" (*Sermons*, 225). Mr. Collins adopts exactly the same tone. When Elizabeth suggests that it would be improper for him to introduce himself to Darcy at the Netherfield ball, he tells her:

My dear Miss Elizabeth, I have the highest opinion in the world of your excellent judgment in all matters within the scope of your understanding. . . . In the case before us I consider myself more fitted by education and habitual study to decide on what is right than a young lady like yourself (97).

Fordyce speaks of women's "situation in life" and "softness of frame" as fitting them "for a thousand little soothing offices" (*Sermons*, 293) and Collins tells Mr. Bennet: "You may imagine that I am happy on every occasion to offer those little delicate compliments which are always acceptable to ladies" (67).

Mr. Collins' written as well as spoken word echoes Fordyce. Commenting on the former's first letter to her father, Mary Bennet points out that "the idea of the olive branch perhaps is not wholly new", recalling the passage in Fordyce's *Sermons* in which he tells young ladies that their best emblem is "the smiling form of peace, robed in white, and bearing a branch of olive" (308).

Like Collins, the pedantic Mary Bennet speaks with courtesy-book sententiousness. When she declares that "loss of virtue in a female is irretrievable . . . her reputation is no less brittle than it is beautiful" (289), she echoes William Kenrick in *The Whole Duty of Woman*, who writes: "Art thou chaste, boast not therefore; the security of thy possession is as brittle glass, that may by accident fall and be broken" (29). We must

remember that the precepts of these popular courtesy books were household words to Jane Austen's readers, and these sly allusions would not be lost on them.

Another supremely comic creation, Lady Catharine De Bourgh, also sounds like a courtesy-book moralist. She tells Elizabeth:

I cannot bear the idea of two young women travelling post by themselves. It is highly improper. . . . Young women should always be properly guarded and attended. . . . I am excessively attentive to all those things (211-12).

When she visits Elizabeth in an effort to prevent the latter's marriage to Darcy, Lady Catherine appeals to two favourite courtesy-book ideals and asks Elizabeth: "Are you lost to every feeling of propriety and delicacy?" (355)

In her rendering of Mr. Collins, Mary Bennet and Lady Catherine De Bourgh, Jane Austen parodies the stilted style of the courtesy-book writers; she criticizes their content in the creation of her heroine, Elizabeth Bennet. "It is time", cries Mary Wollstonecraft, "to effect a revolution in female manners" (*Rights of Woman*, 92), and Elizabeth Bennet is clearly a heroine of that revolution. She is a completely new kind of fictional heroine, whom Jane Austen calls "as delightful a creature as ever appeared in print"<sup>24</sup>, and certainly she must have delighted the feminists of the day. Other novelists of the time, both major and minor, seem content with the conventional courtesy-book heroine first introduced by Samuel Richardson in *Pamela* (1740) and endorsed by Fanny Burney, Charlotte Smith, Mary Brunton and many others.<sup>25</sup> Although we have no direct evidence on how much of the first manuscript of *Pride and Prejudice* survived in the final version,<sup>26</sup> it is probable that the character of Elizabeth Bennet was fully conceived by Jane Austen in 1796 and 1797, at the height of the feminist controversy, rather than in 1812, when the final draft of *Pride and Prejudice* was written. By the time the novel appeared in 1813, the first wave of the feminist movement had subsided, and courtesy-book girls again reigned supreme. Fanny Price, the heroine of Jane Austen's *Mansfield Park* (1814), is an exemplary courtesy-book heroine with none of Elizabeth's appealing wit and vivacity and independence.<sup>27</sup>

Elizabeth cares not a wit for the courtesy-book kind of "propriety". In order to be with her sister Jane who has fallen ill at Netherfield,

Elizabeth does not hesitate to walk several miles alone, "crossing field after field at a quick pace, jumping over stiles and springing over puddles with impatient activity" (32) so that she arrives at Netherfield with "a face glowing with the warmth of exercise". The face of a courtesy-book girl never glowed with anything but modest blushes, and she was physically much too delicate to walk such a distance as well as too conscious of propriety to do so alone. The Bingley sisters strongly disapprove of Elizabeth's severe lapse from propriety: "That she would have walked three miles so early in the day, in such dirty weather, and by herself, was almost incredible to Mrs. Hurst and Miss Bingley" (32). Since they have been raised as "elegant females", preoccupied with externals, it is Elizabeth's disarray which distresses them most. Miss Bingley is appalled by Elizabeth's "hair so untidy, so blowsy" (36) and Mrs. Hurst by her petticoat "six inches deep in mud" (36). When Bingley points out to them that Elizabeth's action "shews an affection for her sister that is very pleasing" (36), he expresses the attitude to decorum which underlies all Elizabeth's actions, namely that behaviour should be based on real feeling rather than empty form. This is the position taken by the feminist writers; Mary Wollstonecraft argues that "a cultivated understanding, and an affectionate heart, will never want starchy rules of decorum" (*Rights of Woman*, 217).

We have seen that according to the courtesy books' "starchy rules of decorum" a young lady should be modest and meek in the company of men, speaking but seldom in a low voice and never attempting wit. This is the sort of young lady, advise the courtesy books, who will readily find a husband. Elizabeth Bennet, on the other hand, is witty and impertinent, yet Jane Austen rewards her with a spectacular marriage far beyond her just claims to it socially and financially. While still accepting the conventional view of her day that marriage is the career of choice, Jane Austen points out to her young readers that a girl need not follow the confining courtesy-book pattern to achieve her goal. She can, like Elizabeth Bennet, be herself: candid, unaffected and utterly charming. It is Elizabeth's very qualities of wit and impertinence — the antithesis of courtesy-book ideals — which Darcy finds so bewitching.

Elizabeth's wit is indeed one of her chief charms. Her father is proud of the fact that "Lizzy has something more of quickness than her sisters" (5). She has "a lively, playful disposition, which delighted in any thing ridiculous" (12), and she tells Darcy that "follies and nonsense, whims and inconsistencies do divert me, I own, and I laugh at them whenever I can" (57). Her conversations with Darcy are full of her witty

and impertinent sallies. Miss Bingley pronounces her manners to be very bad indeed "a mixture of pride and impertinence" (35) and later tells Darcy that he must "endeavour to check that little something, bordering on conceit and impertinence, which your lady possesses" (52). Elizabeth's impertinence is a defence against Darcy's arrogant and superior manner, for she tells Charlotte Lucas that if she does not begin by "being impertinent", she shall soon grow afraid of him (24). Elizabeth refuses to be cowed by a male, however rich and well-connected, and never, on any occasion, adopts the reserved and docile air advocated by courtesy-book writers for single young ladies in the presence of gentlemen. When Elizabeth asks Darcy after their betrothal whether or not he admired her for her impertinence, he replies that he admired her for the liveliness of her mind (380). Elizabeth then replies:

You may as well call it impertinence at once. . . . The fact is, that you were sick of civility, of deference, of officious attention. You were disgusted with the women who were always speaking and looking, and thinking for *your* approbation alone. I roused, and interested you, because I was so unlike *them* (380).

The reader here supplies a mental picture of the fawning Caroline Bingley, schooled in the "whole science of pleasing" and eager for a rich husband, who found to her chagrin that her science was mere alchemy which could not gain its end.

Like the other feminists, Jane Austen deplores not only courtesy-book "decorum" but "delicacy" as well. Elizabeth's lack of physical delicacy is demonstrated in her three-mile walk to Netherfield. In contrast to her robust health and energy, we have the "pale and sickly" Miss De Bourgh, who "spoke very little, except in a low voice" (162). She is physically delicate enough to win Dr. Gregory's approval, and modest enough for even the Reverend James Fordyce's exacting standards. For Jane Austen she is an object of ridicule, a hypochondriac who is hopelessly dull and inert. Her most energetic move in the whole course of the novel is to curtsy and hold out her hand when Elizabeth is leaving Hunsford (214).

In *Pride and Prejudice*, mental delicacy as well as physical comes under attack. When Collins proposes to Elizabeth, he uses the word "delicacy" twice, referring first to her "natural delicacy" (105), then to "the true delicacy of the female character" (108); later he tells Mrs. Bennet that Elizabeth's refusal flows from "the genuine delicacy of her character" (110). "Natural delicacy", "true delicacy", "genuine

delicacy": Jane Austen uses these adjectives ironically and puts them into the mouth of one of her greatest fools to show her contempt for the hypocritical kind of delicacy advocated by the courtesy books.

There is no false delicacy in Elizabeth's relationship to Darcy. She tells him that "disguise of every sort is my abhorrence" (192), and at every stage of their courtship she is as honest with him as she is with Collins; she tells him exactly how she feels, with no bashful dissembling. When Darcy proposes for the first time she is brutally frank, telling him that he is "the last man in the world whom I could ever be prevailed on to marry" (193). At the time of his second proposal, she is just as quick to acknowledge that her feelings have changed and "gave him to understand, that her sentiments had undergone so material a change . . . as to make her receive with gratitude and pleasure, his present assurance" (366).

It is Elizabeth's friend Charlotte Lucas who voices her disapproval of the courtesy-book dictum that no delicate young lady shows her love for a suitor until he has declared himself. On the subject of Jane keeping her love for Bingley a secret from the world, Charlotte says:

It may perhaps be pleasant . . . to be able to impose on the public in such a case; but it is sometimes a disadvantage to be so very guarded. If a woman conceals her affection with the same skill from the object of it, she may lose the opportunity of fixing him. . . . There is so much of gratitude or vanity in almost every attachment, that it is not safe to leave any to itself . . . . In nine cases out of ten, a woman had better shew *more* affection than she feels. Bingley likes your sister undoubtedly; but he may never do more than like her, if she does not help him on (212).

The subsequent events of *Pride and Prejudice* illustrate the truth of Charlotte's observation, for Jane is so reserved with Bingley that he is easily persuaded by Darcy that she does not love him. Had Jane rejected this part of the delicacy code, she would have been spared much heartache.

In making Elizabeth the heroine of *Pride and Prejudice* and characters such as Miss Bingley and Miss De Bourgh the objects of her satire, Jane Austen clearly rejects the norms of her society for elegant females and courtesy-book girls, and posits the same exciting new ideal offered by the feminists: "woman as rational creature". We have already noted that when Elizabeth rejects the hand of Mr. Collins, she asks to be considered not as an "elegant female intending to plague you" but as "a rational creature speaking the truth from her heart"(109).

Elizabeth does not always behave as a rational creature, however. Mary Wollstonecraft's prediction that women who rely on their emotions at the expense of reason will choose the wrong mate is born out by the plot of *Pride and Prejudice* and her reference to women's "habitual slavery to first impressions" recalls the novel's original title, for in a letter to her sister Cassandra in 1799, Jane Austen refers to *Pride and Prejudice* by its earlier name, *First Impressions* (*Jane Austen's Letters*, 67). It is on the basis of first impressions that Elizabeth is attracted to Wickham, whose "appearance was greatly in his favour; he had all the best part of beauty, a fine countenance, a good figure, and a very pleasing address"(72). At Mrs. Phillips' supper party "his manners recommended him to every body. Whatever he said, was said well; and whatever he did, done gracefully. Elizabeth went away with her head full of him"(84). She assumes the role of elegant female in order to win him, for when she goes to the Netherfield ball "she had dressed with more than usual care, and prepared in the highest spirits for the conquest of all that remained unsubdued of his heart"(89). It is only when Elizabeth receives Darcy's letter of explanation after his first proposal revealing Wickham's true character that she learns how unreliable sense impressions unsupported by reason can be.

In contrast to the attractive person and manners of Wickham, Darcy has a "forbidding, disagreeable countenance"(10) and "his manners, though well bred, were not inviting"(16). First impressions lead Elizabeth to feel for Darcy a dislike as strong as her attraction to Wickham.

The climax of *Pride and Prejudice* comes with Darcy's long letter of explanation after Elizabeth has refused his hand at Hunsford. Up to this point Elizabeth follows the conventional pattern perceived by Mary Wollstonecraft: towards the man of "easy manners" and away from the "awkward virtuous man" whose manners are "rebuffing". With the reading of Darcy's letter, however, Elizabeth begins to think as a rational creature. She arrives at a cool, reasoned appraisal of both Darcy and Wickham. Her new view of Darcy is "a more reasonable interpretation: a reasoned judgement of character reached through long experience and slow weighing of probabilities. The certainty is an achieved certainty".<sup>28</sup> She sees now that appearances deceive, that Wickham's moral character is as wicked as Darcy's is good. She realizes that she has not been acting as a rational creature: "I have courted prepossession and ignorance, and driven reason away, where either were concerned.



Till this moment, I never knew myself" (208). She begins to see that Darcy is exactly the man who will bring her happiness and self-fulfillment. It will be a union not of superior and inferior, but of two rational creatures mutually improving each other:

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 a 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 judgment, information, and knowledge of the world, she must have received benefit of greater importance (312).

With the marriage of Darcy and Elizabeth, Jane Austen's comedy of manners comes to a happy ending. At the back of the stage as the curtain prepares to fall strut the pompous courtiesty-book ranters: the Reverend Mr. Collins, Mary Bennet and Lady Catherine De Bourgh. Off to one side pose those elegant females Miss Bingley and Mrs. Hurst, and on the other languishes the delicate courtesy-book girl, Miss De Bourgh. All of them have been the victims of Jane Austen's keen irony and parody. Down stage in the centre spotlight, glowing with health and high spirits, stands her fondest creation: Elizabeth Bennet, liberated from the female stereotypes of her society to be herself, a truly delightful model for all feminists, both then and now.

#### NOTES

1. New York, 1967, 113.
2. Citations from *Pride and Prejudice* in my text are based on *Pride and Prejudice*, ed. R.W. Chapman, 3rd ed. (London, 1932).
3. See, for instance, Rev. James Fordyce, *Sermons to Young Women* (Philadelphia, 1787), 25, John Bennet, *Strictures on Female Education* (Dublin, 1798), 44-5 and Lady Mary Walker, *Letters from the Duchess de Crui and Others*, 2nd ed. (London, 1777), I, 79. Wherever possible, I have used editions of works which Jane Austen might have seen, rather than editions which appeared after her death.
4. Priscilla Wakefield, *Reflections on the Present Condition of the Female Sex* (London, 1798) 30.
5. *The Memoir of Susan Sibbald 1783-1812*, ed. F.P. Hett (London, 1926) 44-5.
6. Ed. R.W. Chapman, 3rd ed. (London, 1933) 160.
7. *Life of Frances Power Cobbe, by Herself* (Boston, 1894), 1, 51.
8. *Vivian*, in *Tales of Fashionable Life* (London, 1809-12), IV, 343.
9. *The Autobiography and Correspondence of Mary Granville, Mrs. Delany*, ed. Lady Llanover (London, 1861) second series, II, 409.
10. London, 1775, 7.
11. Hester Chapone, *Letters on the Improvement of the Mind Addressed to a Young Lady* (London, 1800) 137.
12. Hannah More, *Strictures on the Modern System of Female Education*, 11th ed. (London, 1811) I, 6.

13. *A Letter of Genteel and Moral Advice to a Young Lady*, 8th ed., (London, 1766), 119.
14. *The Whole Duty of Women* (Philadelphia, 1788) 27-8.
15. *Female Conduct: Being an Essay on the Art of Pleasing. To Be Practised by the Fair Sex. Before, and After Marriage* (London, 1759) 22.
16. *Letters to a Young Lady . . . Calculated to Improve the Heart, to Form the Manners, and Enlighten the Understanding* (Warrington, 1789) II, 23.
17. *Vindication of the Rights of Woman*, 2nd ed. (London, 1792) 235.
18. *Letters on Education, with Observations on Religious and Metaphysical Subjects* (London, 1790) 299.
19. This view is upheld by William Alexander in *History of Women From Earliest Antiquity to the Present time* (London, 1779) I, 332, by John Bennett in *Strictures on Female Education*, 107, 112, by Thomas Gisborne in *An Enquiry into the Duties of the Female Sex*, 4th ed. (London, 1799) 21-2 and 33-4 and by William Duff in *Letters on the Intellectual and Moral Character of Women* (Aberdeen, 1807) 29.
20. *Letters on Education*, 220. It was Rousseau who had condemned women to "fill up a niche in the seraglio of a sultan" and the feminists wrote in conscious opposition to his ideas. In *Emile* (1762) Rousseau denies women intellectual rights and sees her in a purely domestic context, pleasing and serving man. See J.H. Broome, *Rousseau. A Study of His Thought* (London, 1963), 98-102.
21. *Minor Works*, ed. R.W. Chapman (London, 1954) 197-8.
22. *Jane Austen, Emma* ed. R.W. Chapman, 3rd ed. (London, 1933) 21.
23. The resemblance between Mr. Collins' phraseology and Dr. Fordyce's has been pointed out briefly by E.E. Phare in "Lydia Languish, Lydia Bennet and Dr. Fordyce's *Sermons*". *Notes and Queries*, CCIX (1964) 182-3. No attempt has been made prior to this paper to see *Pride and Prejudice* in the context of courtesy-book literature as a whole.
24. *Jane Austen's Letters to Her Sister Cassandra and Others*, ed. R.W. Chapman, 2nd ed. (London, 1952) 297.
25. Typical courtesy-book girls include Harriet Byron in Richardson's *Sir Charles Grandison* (1753-4), Celestina de Mornay in Charlotte Smith's *Celestina* (1791), Laura Montreville in Mary Brunton's *Self-Control* (1810), Adela Cleveland in Sarah Burney's *Traits of Nature* (1813) and Juliet Granville in Fanny Burney's *The Wanderer* (1814).
26. "We have no direct evidence on the question of revision". R.W. Chapman, *Jane Austen: Facts and Problems*, 3rd ed. (London, 1950) 77.
27. See Marian E. Fowler, "The Courtesy-Book Heroine of *Mansfield Park*". *University of Toronto Quarterly* XLIV (1974) 31-46.
28. Reuben A. Brower, "Light and Bright and Sparkling" in *Jane Austen: A Collection of Critical Essays*, ed. Ian Watt (New Jersey, 1963), 70.