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Card-playing and the Marriage Gamble in *Pride and Prejudice*

Henry Austen's casual observation that his novelist sister "was fond of dancing, and excelled in it" (*Pride and Prejudice* 308) has in recent years been invested by critics with a far-reaching metaphoric significance. Dancing, the argument goes, both figures the particular charm of Austen's style and provides an elegant symbolic matrix for much of the social interaction around which the novels are structured. A love of dancing was "the sort of thing one might expect," writes Stuart Tave, "that enjoyment and ability in moving with significant grace in good time in a restricted space" (1); and Langdon Elsbree observes that dancing provides a primary source for "action and speech in Jane Austen's fictional world and dramatize[s] the theme of courtship and marriage" (114). Celebrating the sexual passions in a ceremony that hints "at their power while keeping them safely contained in art" (Mansell 9), dancing embodies the tension between the struggle for individuality and polite society's prescribed gender identities and roles. As Henry Tilney tells Catherine Morland in *Northanger Abbey*:

I consider a country-dance as an emblem of marriage. . . . [I]n both, man has the advantage of choice, woman only the power of refusal; that in both, it is an engagement between man and woman, formed for the advantage of each; and that when once entered into, they belong exclusively to each other till the moment of dissolution: that it is their duty, each to endeavour to give the other no cause for wishing that he or she had bestowed themselves elsewhere, and their best interest to keep their own imaginations from wandering towards the perfections of their neighbors, or fancying that they should have been better off with anyone else. (6)

While in most of Austen's six novels dancing serves as an unmatched metaphor for courtship and marriage, its aptness is less evident in *Pride and Prejudice*. Another frequently portrayed leisure activity, no less ubiquitous than dancing, seems better to represent in this novel the combination of behaviors and factors that enter into the complex process of matching nubile men and women with each other. Card-playing, a pastime of which the novelist was, to judge by her letters, at least as fond as she was of dancing, incorporates two important elements of the Austenian portrayal of courtship which dancing is less able to evoke: money and luck. For many women in the world of Austen's novels, marriage was synonymous with economic survival: the narrator of *Pride and Prejudice* concurs with Charlotte Lucas's opinion that marriage "was the only honourable provision for well-educated women of small fortune, and however uncertain of giving happiness, must be their pleasantest preservative from want" (86). *Pride and Prejudice* concerns itself with how at least one well-educated woman of small fortune, Elizabeth Bennet, reconciles the conflicting demands of happiness and love with material subsistence. Card-playing, an activity which boils down to staking money—one kind of fortune—on the skilful manipulation of one's luck—another kind of fortune—incorporates these two indispensable elements of a successful marriage and thus symbolizes better than dancing the full range of factors that enter into marriage and courtship. No less ritualized than dancing, card-playing emphasizes the essential—even simultaneous—parts played by money and luck in Austen's depiction in *Pride and Prejudice* of engendering legitimate relations between the sexes.

If Jane Austen was fond of dancing and excelled at it, she was also fond of card-playing and other games that combined the elements of chance and skill. Letters to her sister Cassandra frequently describe both these games and Austen's chagrin at having been cajoled into playing and losing. Their mother seems to have been fond of the card-game commerce, in which players assume the roles of stock or commodities traders, offering to sell, barter, or trade their cards in order to acquire something like a winning hand in gin rummy. This game, which the Abbé Bellecour, author of a 1754 handbook of card game rules and strategies, calls "a very social Game, for as we have said, a dozen persons may play at the same time, and it is a Game of Commerce, as you win or lose in pro-

portion as you estimate your Counters" (184), was not among Austen's favorites: on 7 October 1808 she wrote to Cassandra that the previous evening's diversion had consisted of "two pools of commerce, but I would not play more than one, for the stake was three shillings, & I cannot afford to lose that, twice in an even^e—" (*Letters* 215). Austen's favorite card game, at least through the autumn of 1808, was speculation: on 24 October she writes to Cassandra that "our evening was equally agreeable in its way: I introduced *speculation*, and it was so much approved that we hardly knew where to leave off" (229). Speculation's popularity with the Austen family seems to have ended with the coming of the new year, when it succumbed to a new game: brag. On 10 January 1809, Austen wrote to Cassandra that

the preference of Brag over Speculation does not greatly surprise me, I believe, because I feel the same myself; but it mortifies me deeply, because Speculation was under my patronage; and, after all, what is there so delightful in a pair royal of Braggers? It is but three nines or three knaves, or a mixture of them. When one comes to reason upon it, it cannot stand its ground against Speculation—of which I hope Edward [Cassandra's son] is now convinced. Give my love to him if he is. (247)

Brag's ascendancy was even more short-lived than speculation's, however; only one week later, Austen again wrote to her sister:

I have just received some verses in an unknown hand, and am desired to forward them to my nephew Edw^d at Godmersham.

"Alas, poor Brag, thou boastful Game!—
 What now avails thy empty name?—
 Where now thy more distinguish'd fame?—
 My day is o'er, and Thine the same.—
 For thou like me art thrown aside,
 At Godmersham, this Christmas Tide;
 And now across the Table wide,
 Each Game save Brag or Spec: is tried."
 "Such is the mild Ejaculation,
 Of tender hearted Speculation.—" (252-3)

Austen displays her wit in her response to this facetious family controversy; but the contest between brag and speculation also orients the

surface moral distinctions implicit in the choice of card games in *Pride and Prejudice*. Though similar, the two games have, from the point of view of the novel, a significant difference, suggested by their names: whereas both are three-card betting games, in speculation, players bet "blindly"—that is, they wager on the face value of cards before they see them. Brag is identical to draw poker, but played with three instead of five cards. The dealer antes an opening blind bet, called the "dealer's edge," and the players bet both against the luck of the draw and each other, with each player knowing the value of the hand he holds. Speculation is thus a game of pure chance, while brag calls on its players to attempt to manipulate or outface their luck with their skill at bluffing—essentially deceiving—their opponents. As Edmund Hoyle put it, the ability to "deceive and distress your Adversaries" is a key to success in most card games, especially in betting and bluffing games like brag (ch. V).

Probably the relative decorousness of the names of the two games is enough to account for Austen's preference for speculation over brag. No doubt she was also less comfortable with brag's potentially more cutthroat tactics and competition. Ironically, however, her favorite novel depicts a world in which a woman's possession of the acumen and nerve of a good brag or poker player is directly proportional to her chances of making a successful marriage. A woman must be able to read faces, communicate her preferences wordlessly, and stimulate a man's interest while adhering to the strictures of decorum and modesty—in short, use everything in her power to influence the otherwise blindly bestowed dictates of accident and luck. Ultimately, the economically and culturally disadvantaged position of women—a position taken as axiomatic by Austen—means that in courtship and marriage they must overcome the "dealer's edge" held by men through the exertion of greater skill at balancing self-disguise with tacit encouragement and persuasion.

Before Austen can chart the difficult process through which the heroine of *Pride and Prejudice* becomes a skilled player of the marriage-gambling game, however, the novelist must establish the association between money and marriage. She accomplishes this throughout the book by mixing the languages of love and economics. The novel's celebrated first sentence presents an example of this type of punning: "It is a truth universally acknowledged, that a single man in possession of a good

fortune, must be in want of a wife" (1). The line's comic effect derives primarily from the incongruity between the lofty diction of the phrase "truth universally acknowledged" and the baldly mercenary sentiment with which the sentence ends. The humorous conflation of philosophic and monetary speculation continues through the first and into the second chapter, as Mr. Bennet misses no opportunity to amuse himself with repeated puns that portray the arrival of the Bingley party at Netherfield as a serendipitous investment opportunity for the families in the village. When, for example, Mr. Bennet tells his wife that he needn't call on Bingley, since their neighbor Mrs. Long has promised to introduce the Bennet girls to the rich young man at an upcoming party, Mrs. Bennet replies that Mrs. Long is a "selfish, hypocritical woman" who will do no such thing since she has "two nieces of her own" (3). In that case, replies Mr. Bennet, Mrs. Bennet herself should introduce the girls, justifying such a breach of decorum on the sound financial principle that he who hesitates is lost: "if *we* do not venture, somebody else will; and after all Mrs. Long and her nieces must stand their chance" (4). All financial ventures, from the stock market to marriage, entail an element of risk that one must expect and for which one must plan.

Elizabeth Bennet becomes aware of the social manifestation of this sound financial principle only after her disastrous first meeting with Darcy at Bingley's ball at Netherfield. At that same dance Jane Bennet meets and falls in love with Bingley; and, fittingly, the novel's first reference to card-playing arises in the post-mortem of the event conducted by Elizabeth and Charlotte Lucas. Convinced both of her sister's love for Bingley and his requiting Jane's affection, Elizabeth is thankful that their natural reserve has precluded any unseemly public display of passion:

It was generally evident whenever they met, that he *did* admire her; and to *her* it was equally evident that Jane was yielding to the preference which she had begun to entertain for him from the first, and was in a way to be very much in love; but she considered with pleasure that it was not likely to be discovered by the world in general, since Jane united with great strength of feeling, a composure of temper and a uniform cheerfulness of manner, which would guard her from the suspicions of the impatient. She mentioned this to her friend Miss Lucas.

"It may perhaps be pleasant," replied Charlotte, "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; and it will then be but poor consolation to believe the world equally in the dark. There is so much of gratitude or vanity in almost every attachment, that it is not safe to leave any to itself. We can all *begin* freely—a slight preference is natural enough; but there are very few of us who have heart enough to be really in love without encouragement. 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. (13-14)

Charlotte's no-nonsense, statistical approach to courtship alarms Elizabeth, who finds herself forced to admit that though Jane and Bingley had spent four evenings together they knew little more about each other than "that they both like Vingt-un better than Commerce" (14). This exchange illustrates card-playing's primary level of signification in *Pride and Prejudice*. On the surface, taste in card games sounds the keynote of personality. Thus the stuffy and aristocratic Lady Catherine de Bourgh plays the skill-intensive and slow-moving game of quadrille, while the boisterous Lydia Bennet prefers lottery tickets, which the Abbé Bellecour calls "highly diverting," since "even those Players, whose vivacity prevents them from giving the least attention to their Game, may here play without any disadvantage, as it is altogether a Game of chance" (189). The motif also, however, serves, as Alistair M. Duckworth writes, "to expose elements of social conformity and individual freedom and to define a normative marriage of the moral self to a worthy society" (283). Lady Catherine's devotion to the old-fashioned game of quadrille foreshadows her reactionary opposition to the engagement of Darcy and Elizabeth. And Lydia's preference for games of blind chance both stems from her "always unguarded and often uncivil" (89) nature and portends the thoughtless elopement with Wickham that nearly ruins her family. Similarly, Jane's and Bingley's preference of vingt-un—in which chance predominates over skill—to commerce—which tests a player's skill at a relatively higher level—reflects the timidity that keeps her from making her feelings known and allows him to be swayed easily by his sisters and Darcy. Because both are relatively unskilled in manipulating the dealings of chance, they prefer merely to succumb to its dictates. As Mr. Bennet tells them upon the occasion of their engagement, "You are both of you

so complying, that nothing will ever be resolved on; so easy, that every servant will cheat you; and so generous, that you will always exceed your income" (239).

Though more sophisticated than her elder sister, Elizabeth Bennet at the beginning of the novel is also a relatively unskilled player of the social card game: just as Bingley misreads Jane, Elizabeth misreads Darcy's countenance and demeanor so utterly that his first proposal astonishes her "beyond expression" (130). As her accurate prediction of Jane's problems with Bingley demonstrates, Charlotte Lucas, at least at the beginning of the story, is the novel's canniest analyst of the courtship game. Charlotte is also, however, a skilled player, despite her disingenuous claim that "[h]appiness in marriage is entirely a matter of chance" (14). Her betrothal to the egregious Mr. Collins serves as more, however, than merely an illustration of marriage's unfortunate economic component or a primer for Elizabeth's initiation into the subtleties of the courtship game. Ultimately, the Charlotte-Mr. Collins subplot delineates the essential gender difference that underpins the rules of the marriage gamble.

Charlotte's engagement illustrates the extent to which accident and chance play vital roles in a great deal more than just the love affairs in *Pride and Prejudice*. Chance is in fact the tacit agent of most important plot events in the novel, as the history of Mr. Collins demonstrates. Despite his insufferable officiousness, this distant cousin of Mr. Bennet is the novel's luckiest character: the failure of Mr. and Mrs. Bennet to produce male offspring means that Longbourn, the Bennet estate, will upon the "melancholy event" of Mr. Bennet's demise pass to Collins. Mrs. Bennet observes to him that this will be "a grievous affair to my poor girls, you must confess. Not that I mean to find fault with *you*, for such things I know are all chance in this world. There is no knowing how estates will go when they come to be entailed" (45). The relatively modest income and home meantime enjoyed by Collins had arisen from the "fortunate chance" of his having been recommended to Lady Catherine de Bourgh "when the living at Hunsford was vacant" (48). Though unlucky at cards—he loses five shillings playing whist on his first night at Longbourn—Collins is lucky in love, securing Charlotte's hand only two days after Elizabeth's refusal of his ludicrous marriage proposal. But if Collins appears lucky in making the sensible Charlotte his wife, it is only because of the pains she takes to create such an impression. What appears

as his luck may be at least equally attributed to her skill in manipulating what chance throws her way. The gender-based behavioral conventions of the world of *Pride and Prejudice* demand that women conceal even the relatively weak powers they possess to play the courtship game and influence its outcome. An artful or canny woman in the world of *Pride and Prejudice*—as elsewhere in Austen's novels—is an object of at best fun and at worst execration (think of *Emma's* Mrs. Elton). Society demands that women who win in the marriage-game be thought of as the beneficiaries of accident or "beginner's luck." Elizabeth's refusal of Collins and the simultaneous departure of Bingley from Netherfield strikes Mrs. Bennet as an "exceedingly unlucky" (84) succession of events; but ill fortune for the Bennets means good fortune—in both senses of that word—for the Lucases. Sneaking away from the Bennet household before breakfast, Collins deals a hand which Charlotte has been preparing herself to play: "Miss Lucas perceived him from an upper window as he walked towards the house, and instantly set out to meet him *accidentally* in the lane. But little had she dared to hope that so much love and eloquence awaited her there" (85) (*italics mine*).

The engagement is a godsend for the Lucas family: they consider it "most eligible for their daughter, to whom they could give little fortune; and [Mr. Collins's] prospects of future wealth were exceedingly fair" (85-86). The sober Charlotte is "tolerably composed" by the event: "she had gained her point," we are told, and, being twenty-seven and "without ever having been handsome," she feels "all the good luck of it" (86). Elizabeth is stunned by her friend's acceptance of the buffoonish Mr. Collins as a life companion; but Charlotte explains her decision philosophically, and with a characteristic calculation of odds:

"I am not romantic you know. I never was. I ask only a comfortable home; and considering Mr. Collins's character, connections, and situation in life, I am convinced that my chance of happiness with him is as fair, as most people can boast on entering the marriage state." (88)

Luckily, Elizabeth is spared by her relative attractiveness and youth from adopting wholesale Charlotte's harsh philosophy. As difficult as the marriage is for Elizabeth to accept—she "could not have supposed it possible" that Charlotte could sacrifice "every better feeling to worldly advantage" (88)—the significance of the episode is not lost on her. If

Charlotte is the novel's most skilled and daring player in the marriage gamble and Jane the least, Elizabeth is, initially, the most reluctant. When Collins attempts to explain away her refusal of his proposal by declaring "it is usual with young ladies to reject the addresses they secretly mean to accept," Elizabeth replies that she is "not one of those young ladies (if such young ladies there are) who are so daring as to risk their happiness on the chance of being asked a second time" (75). Like Elizabeth, Darcy is reluctant to play the game; ironically, this shared trait results in both the attraction between them and the bluntness which inflames the pride and prejudices to which both are particularly susceptible. In a telling exchange at Lady Catherine's garishly decorated home, Elizabeth jokingly proclaims herself "particularly unlucky" in having met Darcy, since he was able to "expose my real character, in a part of the world, where I had hoped to pass myself off with some degree of credit" (120-1). Darcy too finds himself singularly lacking what the novel's world exalts as the most valuable of social graces: "I have not the talent," he says, "of conversing easily with those I have never seen before. I cannot catch their tone of conversation, or appear interested in their concerns, as I often see done" (121).

Darcy's first unsuccessful proposal depicts how his "abhorrence of disguise of every sort" (133) initially matches and therefore clashes with Elizabeth's frankness and unwillingness to perceive non-verbal communications.

More than once did Elizabeth in her ramble within the Park, unexpectedly meet Mr. Darcy.—She felt all the perverseness of the mischance that should bring him where no one else was brought; and to prevent its ever happening again, took care to inform him at first, that it was a favorite haunt of hers—. (125)

Elizabeth refuses Darcy's subsequent proposal because she thinks she perceives a contradiction between his words and demeanor:

He concluded with representing to her the strength of that attachment which, in spite of all his endeavours, he had found impossible to conquer; and with expressing his hope that it would now be rewarded by her acceptance of his hand. As he said this, she could easily see that he had no doubt of a favourable answer. He *spoke* of apprehension and anxiety, but his countenance expressed real security. (131)

However accurate these observations appear, we cannot forget that they are filtered through Elizabeth's consciousness; and up to this point events have far more frequently surprised her than conformed to her expectations. Elizabeth has previously shown herself a rather poor reader of other people's looks. In spite of Elizabeth's conviction that the love between Jane and Bingley was written on their faces, what had once seemed to all concerned an imminent engagement had never materialized. And it is only Elizabeth's inability to find an ulterior motive for Darcy's account of Wickham that finally dispels her conviction that the latter's "countenance, voice, and manner . . . established him at once in the possession of every virtue" (142). Darcy's letter has an apocalyptic effect on Elizabeth, opening her eyes to the duplicity into which her pride and prejudice had unwittingly led her:

"How despicably I have acted!" she cried.—"I, who have prided myself on my discernment!—I, who have valued myself on my abilities! who have often disdained the generous candour of my sister, and gratified my vanity, in useless or blameable distrust.—How humiliating is this discovery!—Yet, how just a humiliation!—Had I been in love, I could not have been more wretchedly blind. But vanity, not love, has been my folly.—Pleased with the preference of one, and offended by the neglect of the other, on the very beginning of our acquaintance, I have courted prepossession and ignorance, and driven reason away, where either were concerned. Till this moment, I never knew myself." (143-4)

It is telling that Elizabeth avoids card-playing throughout the novel; while she has, says Duckworth, "no Puritanical objection to cards" (284), she presumably intuits that she lacks the discernment that stamps a winning card-player. The revelation afforded her by Darcy's letter, however, grants Elizabeth that most valuable of the card-player's skills: the ability to read faces. Austen exhibits Elizabeth's new-found skill primarily in two subsequent scenes. The first occurs during her tour of Pemberley, Darcy's estate. In the family gallery, Elizabeth embarks on a "quest" for "the only face whose features would be known to her" (170). "Arrested" by Darcy's portrait, Elizabeth for the first time looks her future husband directly in the eyes, and is surprised to notice a "warmth" in his gaze that "softened its impropriety of expression" (171). The second scene is a great deal more dramatic, and occurs after Darcy has tacitly resolved the family crisis brought on by Lydia's elopement with

Wickham. Aghast at rumors of an impending engagement between Darcy and Elizabeth, Lady Catherine rushes to Longbourn to "insist upon having such a report universally contradicted" (243). Elizabeth's demeanor toward her ladyship is perhaps best described as poker-faced: she both refuses to be intimidated by Lady Catherine's haughtiness and repeatedly insists on her right to conceal her thoughts and feelings. When, for example, Lady Catherine demands that Elizabeth admit there is no foundation for the rumors, she replies, "I do not pretend to possess equal frankness with your ladyship. *You* may ask questions, which *I* shall not choose to answer" (244). To Lady Catherine's declaration that she is "entitled to know" all of Darcy's "dearest concerns," Elizabeth responds, "But you are not entitled to know *mine*; nor will such behaviour as this, ever induce me to be explicit" (244). And when Lady Catherine demands that she promise "never to enter into such an engagement," Elizabeth answers with a sober and mature reminder that such a promise would have little effect in this world, ruled as it is by chance, accident, and the sometimes unfortunate tendency of people to do what they want:

"I am not to be intimidated into anything so wholly unreasonable. Your ladyship wants Mr. Darcy to marry your daughter; but would my giving you the wished-for promise, make *their* marriage at all more probable? Supposing him to be attached to me, would *my* refusing to accept his hand, make him wish to bestow it on his cousin?" (246)

Elizabeth's deftness in handling Lady Catherine, a skilled but ultimately ineffectual player of the complicated game quadrille, demonstrates the extent to which her eye-opening experiences with Darcy end up, ironically, persuading her of the frequent necessity of concealing or disguising one's true feelings in order best to manage the decrees of luck and chance in social relations. With Lady Catherine, Elizabeth not only plays her cards close to her vest, she also refuses to be bluffed, to show her hand before the appropriate moment of the game. Unhampered by the impolitic frankness that had previously signalled her inexpertness at the social game, Elizabeth is finally ready to be united with Darcy. And after a brief penance during which she is repeatedly called on to bite her tongue while her unwitting family persists in abusing their savior, Elizabeth's happiness is completed by her engagement to Darcy. That her

punishment is no more severe than this may perhaps be attributed to Austen's own tender feelings toward her favorite heroine.

If, as Richard Handler and Daniel Segal have observed, "each of Austen's novels concerns a young lady's movement from her natal family to the family created by her marriage" (1), *Pride and Prejudice* depicts the vital role played by chance and luck in that deceptively simple movement. That marriage in the world of Austen's novels is intimately connected with money offers further justification for the aptness of card-playing as a metaphor for the courtship, as this activity particularly requires its female participants to stake both their happiness and survival on both their ability to discern men's feelings from their looks and the willingness of men fully to disclose their character and "prospects." Of course, this is of particular importance to Elizabeth, seemingly the only member of her family to understand the tragedy of her parents' marriage and the destructive effects of the irony with which her father consequently approaches the world. His only sincere moment in the novel follows Elizabeth's announcement of her engagement to Darcy: Mr. Bennet pleads with his favorite child to "let me not have the grief of seeing *you* unable to respect your partner in life" (260).

It is the seriousness of this potential risk that prevents the card-playing metaphor from trivializing its referent. Mr. Bennet's plea to Elizabeth also highlights an aspect of marriage in *Pride and Prejudice* that the dancing metaphor tends to elide. This, of course, is the sometimes unlucky truth implicit in the state of affairs by which marriage affords many women their only respectable means of economic survival. As an image of the ideal marriage, replete with harmony and temperamental concord, dancing can hardly be improved upon. But even in the happy comic world of Austen's novels, few marriages live up to this ideal; of this sad fact the union of Mr. and Mrs. Bennet stands as an unmistakable reminder:

Had Elizabeth's opinion been all drawn from her own family, she could not have formed a very pleasing picture of conjugal felicity or domestic comfort. Her father captivated by youth and beauty, and that appearance of good humour, which youth and beauty generally give, had married a woman whose weak understanding and illiberal mind, had very early in their marriage put an end to all real affection for her. Respect, esteem, and confidence, had vanished for ever; and all his views of domestic happiness were overthrown. (162)

By marrying Darcy, Elizabeth escapes her parents' fate. She does so only after recognizing, however, the degree to which the skills of the winning card-player correspond to the social skills needed to thrive in a society in which young women and men effectively compete for wealth and happiness. It is toward this somewhat grim truth that card-playing in *Pride and Prejudice* finally points, while illustrating for us at the same time the extent to which women in Austen's age were faced with staking their very existence on the skilful performance of ultimately competitive social rituals.

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