“SHE REMEMBERED THAT HE HAD YET TO LEARN TO BE LAUGHT AT”: HUMOR, HUMILITY, AND NATIONAL IDENTITY IN PRIDE AND PREJUDICE

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Introduction: Jane Austen, National Identity, and Humor

Most critics tend to overlook Pride and Prejudice (1813) when discussing Jane Austen’s relationship to Great Britain, its national identity, or its Empire, and instead focus on Mansfield Park because the novel references Antigua and slavery. Although few would deny that Elizabeth Bennet and Fitzwilliam Darcy’s marriage has intriguing implications regarding class and gender, many ignore the national ramifications of their union. However, I will argue that by combining humor and shame throughout their courtship, Austen provides readers with a standard of conduct that helps to define what it means to be British and offers criteria for a responsible use of power.

By investigating how Austen draws on humor and shame to craft a model of Britishness, I am also suggesting that Pride and Prejudice can help us better understand how Austen’s novel participates in early nineteenth-century debates about Britain and its responsibilities. Although she never overtly mentions the Empire in this text, Austen attempts to direct her readers toward a judicious use of their influence and authority over others. While it’s not my intention to demonstrate how this novel contributed directly to the work of imperialism, exploring Austen’s treatment of humor and shame in Pride and Prejudice sheds light on how early nineteenth-century writers tried to establish standards for wielding power even though those standards were grounded in idealized British behavior and fell short of the realities of imperial rule.

Merging humor with didacticism, Austen constructs a paradigm for Britishness that encourages readers to mind the effects of their attitudes and behaviors. While humor highlights ways of acting and thinking that need correction, Austen reveals that humor doesn’t always work. When laughter fails to make people self-aware, shame draws attention to misjudgments. By showing the process by which Darcy and Elizabeth learn from their mistakes and each other, Austen illustrates that developing and maintaining self-awareness requires negotiating humor and shame. For Austen, humility—the necessary consequence of this negotiation—comes when people not only learn from their errors but also learn to laugh at them.

Many nineteenth-century writers sought to explain the increasingly complex relationship between British identity and power, especially imperial power. For example, Austen’s response to questions about national identity isn’t as overt as that of her contemporary Maria Edgeworth. Unlike Edgeworth who tries to define a Britishness that includes the Irish, Austen offers a particularly English definition. Her sense of Britishness seems to privilege maintaining class boundaries, but the criteria she advances about being considerate and taking responsibility for one’s deeds is meant to apply to all. Figuring out the meaning of Britishness became more and more important as the Empire started incorporating ever more diverse peoples. By 1815, Linda Colley explains, the “boundaries of the British empire were so extensive that they included one in every five inhabitants of the globe. The question of how these millions of men and women who were manifestly not British, but who had been brought under British rule by armed force should be treated and regarded thus became inescapable” (1992, 323). Determining what constitutes a proper use of power thus became a crucial concern for British identity.

On the surface, Pride and Prejudice doesn’t seem remotely connected to debates about Britain’s national identity. Despite the presence of soldiers stationed in Hertfordshire, the setting is undeniably provincial. The main action occurs at Longbourn, Netherfield and Merton in Hertfordshire; Hunsford and Rosings in Kent; or

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Humor as a Gentle Corrective: Elizabeth and Darcy at the Beginning

As Elizabeth and Darcy’s acquaintance progresses, the function of humor in their relationship changes. At the outset, laughter primarily exposes impropriety. Elizabeth’s wit merely draws attention to Darcy’s unsuitable conduct; it doesn’t aim to remedy it. Elizabeth’s reaction to Darcy’s insult during their first encounter exemplifies how this function of humor initially shapes their dynamic. After waiting to catch her eye and then turning away, Darcy “coldly” describes Elizabeth as “tolerable; but not handsome enough to tempt me” (Austen 1813, 9). When she overhears him, Elizabeth responds by telling the story “with great spirit among her friends” (9). Her good-humored response exposes the absurdity of his blatant incivility. However, because Darcy isn’t interested in getting to know Elizabeth, he isn’t open to experiencing the power of her wit to mock or to mend. Later, Elizabeth’s wit aims to make Darcy aware of his mistakes so he can fix them. Although Elizabeth blunders herself, her laughter highlights the importance of taking an interest in how others perceive one’s actions. Elizabeth and Darcy both become increasingly receptive to learning from each other as they bother to get to know each other, which better allows humor to operate. Darcy is progressively more engrossed in what Elizabeth says and thinks, while Elizabeth is interested enough in Darcy to point out the absurdity of his behavior to him directly. Just as Elizabeth and Darcy become invested in their relationship, readers become more interested in the characters and amenable to learning from them.

By gradually introducing characters and readers to humor’s capacity to rectify errant behaviors, Austen lays the foundation for modeling how power can be used judiciously. She repeatedly shows that people need to be willing to acknowledge and rectify their mistakes. She also demonstrates that learning how to fix one’s errors is a continuous process. In this way, her novel offers a model of education that stresses the importance of being open to emendation. For instance, as the head of his family and a respected member of the landed gentry, Darcy has power over many: his sister, Georgiana; his friends, such as Bingley; and his staff and tenants at Pemberley. Although his parents taught him how to manage his estates and fulfill his duties as a gentleman, Darcy’s conceit leads him to make mistakes; consequently, he must figure out how to right them. With the help of Elizabeth’s critical laughter, Darcy not only becomes aware of his errors but also discovers the means for correcting them.

Darcy’s struggles with self-awareness and governance mirror the struggles of many nineteenth-century Britons,
especially those contributing to the imperialist project. With rapid expansion, representatives of the Empire encountered peoples and cultures completely foreign to anything they had ever known. Inevitably, these Britons erred while figuring out how to live amongst and govern the unfamiliar. Moreover, their political and social position in the colonies operated on an undeniably unequal distribution of power. Although Austen doesn’t challenge this inherent imbalance of power, she does reveal throughout *Pride and Prejudice* that the best strategy for amending these selfsame faults of pride and prejudice is to take responsibility when one errs, which may require a sense of humor and humility. Austen thus illustrates how humor offers a means not only of saving face, but more importantly, of moving toward a less irresponsible use of power.

Elizabeth and Darcy’s conversation about joking illustrates how humor can instruct. Their discussion occurs after Darcy denies Miss Bingley’s request to join her and Elizabeth in a walk around Netherfield’s drawing room. He imagines that they either want to confide in each other or have him admire them. He asserts, “if the first [reason], I should be completely in your way; —and if the second, I can admire you much better as I sit by the fire” (Austen 1813, 49). When Miss Bingley asks Elizabeth how to punish Darcy for such a “shocking” speech (49), Elizabeth suggests they tease and laugh at him because “[i]ntimate as you are, you must know how it is to be done” (49). Miss Bingley refuses on the grounds that Darcy is exempt from looking foolish only makes that person appear more ridiculous. As Bergson attests, the “man who12

Darcy, however, takes himself too seriously and cannot see any benefit to being the butt of a joke. His reply to Elizabeth’s claim that she loves laughing suggests that he perceives critical laughter as contemptuous. Darcy contends, “The wisest and the best of men, nay, the wisest and best of their actions, may be rendered ridiculous by a person whose first object in life is a joke” (Austen 1813, 50). Even after Elizabeth explains that she hopes she “never ridicule[s] what is wise or good” but instead enjoys laughing at “follies and nonsense, whims and inconsistencies”—faults which she ironically supposes he doesn’t possess—Darcy declares, “Per haps [being without fault] is not possible for any one. But it has been the study of my life to avoid these weaknesses which often expose a strong understanding to ridicule” (50). Trying to avoid being an object of ridicule isn’t objectionable, but Darcy’s methods are problematic. Donald A. Bloom writes, “No one would dispute the worthiness of a program of avoiding blamable weaknesses, but Darcy has adopted a rather skewed value system in pursuit of it. Rather than avoiding doing harm to others or to his own moral standing, he merely wishes to avoid ridicule for looking foolish” (2004, 221). Darcy’s desire to avoid ridicule in conjunction with his comment about “the wisest and the best of men” (Austen 50) suggests that he feels a sense of superiority that places him above improvement. Darcy’s inflated sense of self-worth makes him a comic target. As Bergson attests, the “man who withdraws into himself is liable to ridicule, because the comic is largely made up of this very withdrawal” (1911, 68). When Darcy proclaims that he tries to be above ridicule, he reveals the extent of his erroneous attitude. Thus, Darcy appears even more ridiculous. Humor in *Pride and Prejudice* doesn’t simply accentuate the trials and tribulations of courtship; it helps to convey a model of exercising power that encourages amiable cooperation.

The conversation about joking also raises questions about the connection between humility and self-awareness. Darcy refuses to acknowledge how teasing someone can be beneficial because he lacks the humility to realize that being amused at his own mistakes can be advantageous. When people are willing to laugh at and learn from their foibles, they reveal a level of modesty to which others can relate. Therefore, when Darcy admits that he “cannot forget the follies and vices of others” as soon as he ought (Austen 1813, 50), he shows a degree of arrogance that’s alienating. His pride and refusal to forgive errors discourage people from establishing meaningful connections with him. Darcy appears cold, unapproachable, and unsympathetic: qualities that do not contribute to a successful mode of rule (if one seeks willing compliance). Self-awareness also consists of recognizing that looking ridiculous occasionally is unavoidable, so it’s better to simply accept it. To do otherwise, like Darcy, and to think that an individual is exempt from looking foolish only makes that person a fool: “Inattention to self, and consequently to others...
[equates] to… unsociability. The chief cause of rigidity is the neglect to look around—and more specifically within oneself…” (Bergson 1911, 72). Darcy’s lack of humility stems from a lack of self-knowledge. His obliviousness, in turn, reveals that, besides needing to learn to laugh at himself, Darcy must also become mindful of those around him. Elizabeth’s teasing aims to help Darcy become more conscious of himself and others. In illustrating how to negotiate the process that leads to self-awareness, these characters provide readers with a paradigm they can emulate to become better individuals. By learning how to act properly, these individuals will signify what it means to be a good Briton to others within the nation and beyond.

The behavioral models Austen puts forth about how readers should act engage in what Andrew H. Miller calls “moral perfectionism” (2008). As a “particular narrative form (rather than a concept, theory, or disposition),” moral perfectionism depends on the “complex proposition that we turn from our ordinary lives, realize an ideal self, and perfect what is distinctly human in us—and that we do so in response to exemplary others” (Miller 3). The idea that readers look beyond their everyday experiences for ways to improve helps to explain not only how authors can use characters to illuminate what to do but also why readers are open to perceiving these creations as models worth imitating. Moreover, Miller contends that in “describing improvement, perfectionist prose characteristically aims to stimulate it as well, to reproduce in readers the experience it describes” (17). By demonstrating how they learn from and eventually laugh at their mistakes, Darcy and Elizabeth set a precedent: they discover the importance of attending to the appearance and effect of their actions, which teaches readers this lesson, too.11

Darcy and Elizabeth’s developing awareness about how they treat others reflects a challenge Britons faced as their power expanded. To maintain peace, Britons needed to ascertain how to negotiate social relations among the diverse peoples they governed. If they—like Darcy—disregarded cultural practices “trampling on [Hindu and Muslim] religious susceptibilities” (1997, 107). By disregarding cultural practices in addition to demanding higher taxes and more territory (Levine 2007, 77), British administrators created a toxic environment, which led Indian soldiers and subjects to revolt violently against a blatant lack of respect and unfairness. The Morant Bay uprising in Jamaica also exemplifies the dangers of treating those living in the colonies poorly. Although no longer enslaved, the black majority didn’t have any political or legal power. Moreover, they were faced with a governor, Edward Eyre, who believed that their poverty was simply a result of “the idleness, improvisence, and vice of the people” (qtd. in N. Ferguson 2002, 161). When anger over poverty and unemployment resulted in a riot and the deaths of several white officials, Eyre responded brutally by declaring martial law. While Eyre was reprimanded and relieved of his position as a result of outcry over his violent reaction, Parliament responded to both rebellions by increasing their imperial presence instead of acknowledging and eradicating the inequality and disrespect that contributed to colonial resistance in the first place.

In Pride and Prejudice, however, Austen advances an alternative model for British behavior. She encourages readers to imagine a way of interacting with others that stresses having the modesty not only to be considerate but also to be willing to take responsibility for one’s mistakes. While many Britons assumed that ruling others was their right, the novel demonstrates that to govern in a manner befitting a Briton means listening to criticism, considering and respecting other viewpoints, and being amenable to change.

Yet, Austen does not suggest that power should be more evenly distributed. Darcy’s evolution into a leader of the Bennet family as well as his own implies that, for Austen, power should remain with the elite. Although her paradigm accepts an imbalance of power, it resists the idea of blind subjugation. Often in a subordinate position due to her sex and class, Elizabeth uses her critical laughter to check Darcy’s use of power. Through Darcy and Elizabeth’s development, readers discover that humility—especially when combined with laughter, thoughtfulness, and accountability—can work to establish a system of checks and balances.

When Humor Fails: The Proposal, the Letter, and the Road to Self-Awareness

Elizabeth and Darcy’s bantering in the novel’s first half repeatedly demonstrates how humor can expose unsuitable behavior in an effort to rectify it. However, Darcy’s first marriage proposal, in volume two, reflects a shift both in Darcy and Elizabeth’s dynamic as well as in Austen’s narrative strategy. Prior to the proposal, Elizabeth and Darcy’s interactions illustrate the process by which humor can help readers develop humility, but now they expose how humor doesn’t always work. Laughter can effectively correct only when the person needing emendation is open to its capacity to reform. At this stage in their relationship, Darcy is invested in Elizabeth but not enough for her teasing to cause him to change (or even be aware that he should). He lacks the ability (let alone the interest) to look outside himself and consider how others might construe his
behavior. Consequently, Darcy doesn’t realize the extent to which his pride and arrogant actions—such as initially dismissing Elizabeth and pompously pronouncing “where there is a real superiority of mind, pride will be always under good regulation” (Austen 1813, 50)—have alienated Elizabeth. Despite Elizabeth’s efforts to poke fun at his faults, he still takes himself too seriously. Darcy only starts to become aware of how others perceive him when he experiences shame.

Shame, like humor, can transform. It exposes errors and increases self-awareness because it “is an experience of the self by the self” which “turns the attention of the self and others away from other objects to this most visible residence of self, increases its visibility, and thereby generates the torment of self-consciousness” (Tomkins 1995, 136). Shame forces people to pay closer attention to how they appear, for it painfully and inevitably increases self-awareness. This occurs to “the extent to which the individual invests his affect in other human beings, in institutions, and in the world around him” (159). As Darcy grows more invested in Elizabeth, shame succeeds when laughter has failed.

While Austen focuses on how shame touches individuals, her use of shame pertains to the model of power the novel manifests as well, for shame can work on a national level. With an Empire spanning the globe, Britain was invested in how its interactions with others reflected what it meant to be British. Throughout the nineteenth and twentieth centuries, a sense of superiority stemmed from the belief that Britons were more civilized and, thus, treated their subjects better than other nations. Colley explains:

For most Victorians, the massive overseas empire… represented final and conclusive proof of Great Britain’s providential destiny. God had entrusted Britons with empire, they believed, so as to further the worldwide spread of the Gospel…. Well into the twentieth century, contact with and domination over manifestly alien peoples nourished Britons’ sense of superior difference. They could contrast their law, their treatment of women, their wealth, power, political stability and religion with societies they only imperfectly understood, but usually perceived as inferior. (1992, 368-69).

Believing in and acting on a sense of superiority are clearly problematic. When a nation connects its treatment of others with its identity, however, it invites both shame and the potential for improvement, particularly when that nation becomes aware of inconsistencies. Britain’s Reform Act of 1832, which extended the vote to the middle class; the abolition of the slave trade in 1807; and the emancipation of slaves which started in 1833 and ended with total liberation by 1838 exemplify the nation’s capacity to become aware of its failure to meet its own standards, to feel shame, and then to rectify its errors. 13 By showing the process by which shame can generate positive change in individuals, Austen’s novel sets a precedent for how a nation can and should modify its policies and practices in order to improve upon them.

Darcy’s arrogance and lack of awareness blind him to the possibility that his marriage proposal may not be welcome; consequently, Elizabeth’s rejection and her reasons for refusing him produce shame which causes Darcy to reassess his behavior. While Darcy’s interference in Jane and Bingley’s relationship and his supposed ill treatment of Wickham are grounds for Elizabeth’s dislike, these reasons are not her most damning evidence against him nor are they overly vexing when he hears them. Instead, her shaming proves most effective when she lambastes his character as a gentleman. By berating him for not acting “in a more gentleman-like manner” during his “declaration” (Austen 1813, 171), Elizabeth assails what’s most integral to how he defines himself. As Eve Kosofsky Sedgwick explains, “shame attaches to and sharpens the sense of what one is” (2003, 37). Darcy believes he acts like a proper gentleman. Bernard J. Paris points out that Darcy “has prided himself on behaving in an exemplary manner…. He was given high standards by his parents, and he has identified himself with them” (2004, 178). When Elizabeth—the woman he respects and loves despite himself—challenges Darcy’s behavior, he’s astounded because “he has always felt himself to be living up to” those expectations set by his parents and himself (178). Elizabeth’s brutal appraisal of his character makes him vulnerable to shame. Her criticism of Darcy’s behavior as a gentleman threatens the foundation of his identity, and the shame he feels prompts him to reevaluate his character.

Elizabeth’s shaming is effective because, in many respects, Darcy’s proposal represents a model of colonial conquest. For example, after pronouncing that he cannot overcome his feelings for her despite valiant effort, Darcy begins his proposal by laying out objections to their union. As the narrator explains, Darcy’s “sense of [Elizabeth’s] inferiority—of its being a degradation—of the family obstacles which judgment had always opposed to inclination, were dwelt on with a warmth which seemed due to the consequence he was wounding, but was very unlikely to recommend his suit” (Austen 1813, 168). Darcy’s concern with obstacles he has had to overcome with little consideration for what Elizabeth may think or feel is on par with a form of imperialism focused on what the colonizer has to lose (or gain) with no thought as to the potential consequences for those being colonized. The narrator then reveals that Darcy “concluded with representing to [Elizabeth] 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” (168-69). Rather than present Elizabeth with a sincere request, Darcy’s “proposal” exposes his assumption that someone with prestige and power ought and will be rewarded for deigning to love and thus improve someone who doesn’t equal that status.

Darcy’s obvious disdain for everything Elizabeth holds dear, and his presumption that she will leap at the chance to align herself with someone of his class, mirrors a similar belief that countless Britons had about the colonies.
Many Victorians assumed “that subject peoples would speedily appreciate the advantages of British justice and the privilege of being ruled by the most civilized nation of the Western world” (Newsome 1997, 107). Elizabeth’s resistance reveals the lack of cooperation that disrespect combined with arrogance inspires. She doesn’t see Darcy—any more than many colonies viewed Britain—as a benefactor. Elizabeth has the opportunity to refuse, and so she shames Darcy for his presumptions. By demonstrating how individuals can become cognizant of having an obligation to act respectfully towards others, the novel shows how nations can and should learn to act responsibly toward their subjects as well.

The letter Darcy gives to Elizabeth after the proposal represents his first step toward gaining humility. In writing the letter, Darcy demonstrates that now—after encountering shame—he realizes what it means to be held accountable. He responds to Elizabeth’s accusations because he can’t ignore them. His feelings for her and his identity as a gentleman demand that he vindicate himself. He declares that he writes to her “without any intention of offending [her], or humiliating myself” but because his “character required it to be written and read” (Austen 1813, 174). Even though Darcy claims that he isn’t “humbling himself,” giving the letter to Elizabeth signifies that he’s starting to attain some humility: for the first time, he realizes that he needs to justify himself to someone else and that he’s capable of inappropriate behavior.

Throughout the letter, Darcy reveals that he’s becoming more aware of how others perceive his conduct and the effect it produces. Although he doesn’t intend to hurt Elizabeth, he knows his words will upset her. Therefore, before he begins addressing her indictments, Darcy warns Elizabeth: “If, in the explanation of them which is due to myself, I am under the necessity of relating feelings which may be offensive to yours, I can only say that I am sorry” (Austen 1813, 175). Moreover, he foresees that this general apology won’t be sufficient, so he apologizes again after telling her that her family’s “total want of propriety” (176) contributed to his interference in Jane and Bingley’s relationship and yet again after stating that Wickham lacks principles and dissembles his true nature (178). These apologies illustrate that he doesn’t write to be vindictive, but rather that her accusation about him “disdaining the feelings of others” made an impression (172).

In realizing that, as a gentleman, he needs to strive to be fair in his treatment of others, Darcy sees that being just also means taking responsibility for his actions and acknowledging his fallibility. He exemplifies a willingness to change and, more importantly, a flexibility that will enhance his capacity to use his influence respectfully and effectively. In short, Darcy starts to model a mode of administration that cultivates cooperation instead of resistance. For instance, Darcy explains that he decided to disrupt Bingley and Jane’s courtship because he looked for evidence to confirm that both Bingley and Jane had strong feelings for each other but couldn’t detect “any symptom of peculiar regard” in Jane (Austen 1813, 175). However, he quickly concedes, “If you have not been mis-

taken here, I must have been in an error. Your superior knowledge of your sister must make the latter probable. If it be so, if I have been misled by such error, to inflict pain on her, your resentment has not been unreasonable” (175). Each “if” combined with deference to Elizabeth’s superior knowledge of her sister signifies Darcy’s acceptance not only of the likelihood that he erred but also of the responsibility he has for causing Jane pain. For Sarah Emsley, Darcy repeatedly demonstrates his newfound consciousness about what constitutes true gentlemanly behavior because “in addition to explaining his own actions, he is trying to establish what is right… and he is at pains to judge correctly” (2005, 97). Darcy further informs Elizabeth that he “can summon more than one witness of undoubted veracity” (Austen 177) as he begins to comprehend that his class and family background aren’t enough to substantiate his character. Throughout his letter, Darcy demonstrates a growing awareness that his identity as a British gentleman depends on his behavior toward others and not just his status.14

It’s difficult to underestimate the importance of Darcy’s letter.15 It invites Elizabeth to reexamine Darcy’s character in a way that dialogue with him cannot. According to Lloyd W. Brown, “unlike their personal meetings,” Darcy’s letter provides Elizabeth with “the opportunity to reconsider initial responses. She can evaluate her prejudice in the light of Darcy’s statements and attitudes, now that the epistolary form has literally made them accessible for reexamination” (1973, 163). The epistolary form helps readers, too. Many critics point out that Austen encourages readers to identify with Elizabeth through free indirect discourse and thus base their understanding of other characters on her opinions.16 Yet, by presenting Darcy’s letter as a means for Elizabeth to reevaluate her past judgments, Austen provides readers with the same opportunity to more objectively reexamine theirs.

Furthermore, offering Darcy’s letter without mediation from either Elizabeth or the narrator marks a major departure in the novel; Austen removes any narrative apparatus that could influence the reader’s ability to interpret Darcy’s words. For John Wiltshire, the letter “is a formal turning point in Pride and Prejudice, because for the first time [Darcy] comes forward in an independent voice, unconstrained by social occasion, cut free from those responses of Elizabeth that have coloured the reader’s attention to him so far” (2001, 113). Because Darcy’s letter appears first, without being filtered through Elizabeth’s consciousness, readers can not only judge Darcy for themselves but also comprehend the extent of Elizabeth’s misjudgments—and possibly their own. Just as Elizabeth feels ashamed when she sees how prejudice blinded her, the experience of reading Darcy’s letter followed by Elizabeth’s reaction to it aims to produce shame in readers, especially if they allowed Elizabeth or the narrator’s opinions to interfere with their ability to read accurately.

Austen uses the shame that ensues when Elizabeth discovers the extent of her misjudgments to show how prejudices limit a person’s understanding. A rapidly expanding Empire required Britons to rule diverse peoples.
Britons, therefore, needed to discover an effective method for attending to cultural differences because maintaining their power depended on the assistance of those being ruled. Moreover, the method by which they managed their Empire shaped how others—with the Empire and outside it—perceived them and what it meant to be British. By connecting Elizabeth's reading experience with shame, Austen illustrates the importance of discarding prejudices. Through Elizabeth, Austen calls attention to the dangers of allowing prejudice to interfere with how one perceives and interacts with others.

Elizabeth's response to Darcy's letter reveals that Darcy isn't the only one that must become sensible of his fallibility. Elizabeth also needs to work out how to use her influence. For Elizabeth, increasing self-awareness requires deducing how to reevaluate her previous opinions by reading critically. A detailed description of Elizabeth's reading process exemplifies how Austen's audience can learn to be objective, evaluate thoughtfully, and judge fairly. Her reading practice reveals the necessity of being willing to acknowledge and correct one's mistakes; it exposes how prejudices lead to unfair and inaccurate judgments. This process isn't easy. As Miller notes, Austen "goes out of her way to display the difficulties Elizabeth has as a reader: she must form and re-form an intention to read with patient attention" (2008, 79). Austen makes clear that improving one's ability to assess new information and diverse viewpoints properly requires diligence and fortitude.

Each step of Elizabeth's reading process represents her perseverance and illustrates a stage in her development. When she first receives Darcy's letter, she reads it "with an eagerness which hardly left her power of comprehension, and from impatience of knowing what the next sentence might bring, was incapable of attending to the sense of the one before" (Austen 1813, 181). Yet, when she slows down and starts to "read with somewhat clearer attention" (181), a space for improvement emerges. Upon diligently re-examining each line and then stopping to analyze each piece of information, Elizabeth concludes that although she "had believed it impossible that any contrivance could so represent, as to render Mr. Darcy's conduct... less than infamous," every line "was capable of a turn which must make him entirely blameless throughout the whole" (182). Time after time, Elizabeth must read and then stop to think about what she just learned, for that's the only way she can gather the information vital to judging fairly and accurately.

By its very nature, increased globalization creates encounters between dissimilar cultures; therefore, when expansionist ambitions carried Britons across the globe, those Britons needed to negotiate these differences in order to interact effectively with peoples that did not look, sound, or act like them. Despite the fact that imperialism is an inherently flawed system, the British made a number of particularly egregious mistakes in governance because prejudices shaped their actions. By revealing how Elizabeth comes to reevaluate what she knows and to take responsibility for her errors, Austen offers readers a way to amend their mistakes and/or to avoid making similar errors. As Emsley points out, "It is not just the information Darcy provides that makes it possible for [Elizabeth] to reformulate her judgment, but the fact that this information prompts her to think more carefully about other things she already knows" (2005, 100). Austen demonstrates how being receptive to gaining new knowledge enables readers to reassess what they already know about others and themselves. Her text reveals that openness to new information can lead to self-awareness for an individual, and for the nation, a better understanding of what it means to be British.

Darcy's letter causes Elizabeth shame, but this feeling enables her to adapt. Admitting that she had been wrong about Wickham inspires her to reassess Darcy (Austen 1813, 184). As Elizabeth uses her newfound knowledge to compare and contrast the men, she starts coming to terms with her own fallibility, realizing that "she had been blind, partial, prejudiced, absurd" (185). She acknowledges that her humiliation is "just" (185): she realizes that she's not above making mistakes. Her proclamation "'Till this moment, I never knew myself!' (185) serves as another pivotal event in Pride and Prejudice. It signifies that knowing oneself means having the humility to recognize and accept that erring is human. Elizabeth's epiphany also implies that understanding one's identity—as an individual and a citizen—is an ongoing process dependent upon constantly situating the self in relation to others. Thus, experiencing shame starts with admitting that one errs, leads to developing the fortitude to fix those errors, and results in gaining a broader perspective of one's place in the world.

**Paving the Way for Laughter's Return: Elizabeth, Darcy, and a Successful Proposal**

There is nothing remotely funny about the proposal or Elizabeth's experience reading Darcy's letter. It is shame that promotes mutual recognition between Darcy and Elizabeth, and this mutual recognition is key to the novel's paradigm of power. Just as Darcy and Elizabeth's relationship becomes stronger when they learn from each other and begin to view their differences as assets rather than qualities to assimilate or eradicate, the model Austen's text advocates suggests that Britain can potentially remain strong if it learns from and respects its subjects. Furthermore, as Mary Ann O'Farrell points out, Austen's novel illustrates the "inevitable association of mortification with the narratives that generate knowledge, learning, and education. The moments at which characters experience mortification are moments at which they are forced to recognize themselves in re-tellings of themselves—as merely ‘tolerable,’ as inferiorly connected, as ungenerously, as proud or prejudicial” (1994, 134). These "forced" recognitions prompt Darcy and Elizabeth to pay closer attention to how others regard their actions and attitudes, and thus, to become more self-aware.

Austen's text encourages readers to experience and benefit from characters' humiliation. While taking readers through each step of Elizabeth's reading process and subsequent epiphany, Austen provides an example of
personal development that enables readers to learn from her characters' experiences. Elizabeth's shaming, in particular, functions as an effective method for instruction because shame operates via transmission: “by virtue of the readiness with which one individual responds with shame to the shame of the other, the sources of shame are radically multiplied. The individual can now be shamed by whatever shames another” (Tomkins 1995, 156). Austen invites readers to empathize with Elizabeth because sharing her experiences—rather than simply witnessing them (Castellanos 1994, 120)—makes the lessons she imparts relevant and immediate.

The novel clearly demonstrates that acknowledging one's fallibility is necessary when learning from and righting one's errors; however, the text does more than simply urge readers to realize that making blunders is inevitable. In showing the process by which Elizabeth and Darcy take responsibility for their misjudgments, learn from them, and correct them, Austen establishes a standard for wielding power. As Elizabeth and Darcy discover, their lack of self-awareness regarding their capacity to make mistakes when assessing others leads them to misuse the power they have over others. Yet, as soon as Darcy and Elizabeth realize their errors, they take steps to rectify them and continue to do so during the remainder of the novel. Hence, the model of Britishness emerging within the text suggests that a crucial step toward becoming more responsible and self-aware involves accepting one's own fallibility.

In the third volume, readers see how the ramifications of humiliation shape Darcy and Elizabeth's relationships. Darcy intervenes with Lydia and Wickham not only to please Elizabeth, but because he comes to recognize such intervention as his responsibility. According to the letter from Elizabeth's aunt, Darcy “generously imputed the whole to his mistaken pride, and confessed that he had before thought it beneath him, to lay his private actions open to the world. His character was to speak for itself. He called it, therefore, his duty to step forward, and endeavour to remedy an evil, which had been brought on by himself” (Austen 1813, 284). Readers see the effect shame has on Darcy: it inspires him to transform, to take responsibility for his mistakes, and to do what he can to redress them. In arranging Lydia and Wickham's marriage and, thereby, saving the remaining unmarried Bennet daughters from scandal, Darcy uses his power to help keep the peace within the Bennet family and in their larger social group. Darcy's encounter with shame helps him become a more productive member of society. He learns to use his influence to help others beyond his immediate circle. He realizes that he has an obligation to act fairly towards all—not just a select few.

After Darcy's successful second marriage proposal, Darcy and Elizabeth engage in a critical reading of their relationship, which exemplifies that both continue to learn from their experiences and each other. As Darcy informs Elizabeth, “Your reproof, so well applied, I shall never forget: ‘had you behaved in a more gentleman-like manner.’ Those were your words. You know not, you can scarcely conceive, how they have tortured me” (Austen 1813, 326). In quoting Elizabeth's words back to her and vowing to never forget them, Darcy divulges how much her rebuke affected him and how much he has changed because of it. For Sarah S.G. Frantz, Darcy's “direct quotation of Elizabeth's words… stresses his recognition of the validity of her reproach and reveals… how important it was to his progress away from his pride” (2002, 173). His acceptance of the “justice” of her “reproof” (Austen 326) signifies his increased sense of humility.

While their process of reassessing each other is similar to Elizabeth's reading and rereading of Darcy's letter, this time neither ends up humiliated. Both recognize and accept the soundness of each other's critiques. Explaining what motivated them to change produces joy and laughter rather than shame. Elizabeth can laugh at Darcy's assessment of her character because she knows that he's not completely wrong. She admits that her past behavior of “abusing [him] so abominably to [his] face” justifies his appraisal of her as frank (Austen 1813, 326). She realizes that Darcy doesn't fault her behavior because he deems it improper for her as a woman to speak her mind. Instead, he helps her to see that her words might be hurtful. As R.E. Ewin notes, “Elizabeth, as a result of her experience with Darcy, has learned not to let her feelings”—and, I will add, her words—“flow unfettered, but to think about them and their justifiability” (1990, 153). Although the tone of her acquiescence is self-deprecating (which leads some to question the extent of her agreement), Elizabeth reveals that she now has the humility to understand how her bluntness may have appeared and to accept that it may not always be welcome.

Even though Elizabeth may be ready to laugh and remember only that which gives pleasure (Austen 1813, 327), Darcy feels a need to account for his actions. In sharing how his upbringing contributed to his arrogance, Darcy shows that he recognizes the detrimental effects of his pride, for Elizabeth has opened his eyes: “You taught me a lesson, hard indeed at first, but most advantageous. By you, I was properly humbled” (328). Darcy changes because the shame he suffers as a result of Elizabeth's rejection forces him to reexamine his attitudes and behaviors. He now knows exactly what produced his arrogant manner and why his actions were harmful:

As a child I was taught what was right, but I was not taught to correct my temper. I was given good principles, but left to follow them in pride and conceit…. I was spoilt by my parents, who though good themselves… allowed, encouraged, almost taught me to be selfish and overbearing, to care for none beyond my own family circle, to think meanly of their sense and worth compared with my own. (328)

Darcy's comments pinpoint qualities—selfishness, self-importance, willful isolation—most detrimental not only to his relationship with Elizabeth but to the world. As a representative of the British elite, Darcy now recognizes that he cannot contribute productively to a society that
continues to diversify if he remains cocooned within his own social circle. Austen repeatedly emphasizes that her characters need to act justly and considerately toward all.

Although Elizabeth and Darcy have discovered much about each other, themselves, and humility, Austen suggests that their education will continue as they incorporate laughter into their wedded lives. Indeed, the fact that their relationship culminates in a marriage (instead of friendship) shows that establishing an effective union is a process and, ideally, will improve both participants. For instance, while Elizabeth plans to teach Darcy to laugh at himself, she needs to decipher the most effective means for doing so. When she checks her laughter because she realizes that Darcy “had yet to learn to be laught at” (Austen 1813, 330), Elizabeth demonstrates how she’s beginning to understand that laughter has a time and place. The rest of the sentence—“and it was rather too early to begin” (330)—denotes Elizabeth’s resolve to work out how best to teach Darcy to laugh at himself. The glimpse Austen provides into their married life indicates that Elizabeth succeeds: “Georgiana… at first… often listened with an astonishment bordering on alarm, at [Elizabeth’s] lively, sportive, manner of talking to her brother. He, who had always inspired in herself a respect which almost overcame her affection, she now saw the object of open pleasantry” (345). This momentary look reveals, “Learning to accept the discipline of laughter is a process” that “occurs within marriage” (Fergus 2002, 109). A successful union, then, permits each person to become stronger, together.

Conclusion: Union, Humor, and the Future

Marriage’s capacity to offer endless chances for both partners to learn about each other, themselves, and the world mirrors a larger imperialist undertaking. Katie Trumpener contends that what early nineteenth-century authors attempt when they rewrite political union as a national marriage “is not only the cultural rapprochement of a colonizing nation and a colonized one, separated by a huge power differential and a bloody history, but also, more paradoxically, [a] reconciliation…” (1997, 137). Marriage between English and Irish or Scottish characters became an opportunity for the cultures to learn about each other. This knowledge enabled both to benefit from what the other offered. Revealing what reconciliation looks like can lead to recognition of mutual sovereignty because these marriages “imagine a union able to widen the worldview and the historical understanding of both partners equally” (137). While Darcy and Elizabeth’s marriage does not cross national boundaries, their union provides a behavioral model with national implications. By combining critical laughter, affection, and humility, their relationship illustrates how developing greater respect for and better understanding of others requires a continual willingness to learn about and from those belonging to a different class, gender, or culture.22

In coming to understand itself in the nineteenth century, Britain needed to deduce not only how to acknowledge and respect diversity, but more importantly, how to act justly toward its subjects. On a small scale, Darcy and Elizabeth’s relationship demonstrates how this can be achieved. Their marriage comes about when they heed how their actions and attitudes appear to and affect each other; consequently, they discard prejudices that caused them to misjudge. Austen incorporates humor and shame into Pride and Prejudice to expose the harmful effects of allowing prejudice and a sense of superiority to influence one’s behavior, and this exposure encourages positive change. When she combines these two elements to unmask the process by which Darcy and Elizabeth learn to be more self-aware, Austen creates an effective model for helping readers become more self-aware too.

Austen’s use of humor and shame to negotiate power in Pride and Prejudice lays the groundwork for how writers grappled with the nation and imperialism as the century progressed. According to Tom Fulford, Pride and Prejudice and Persuasion “[anticipate] the imperialist novel of the later nineteenth century” (2002, 178). As the Empire became increasingly diverse, writers such as Austen provided a clear, if idealized, standard of behavior that could be emulated. This standard helped to define Britishness when understanding what it meant to be British was anything but clear. Her ideas regarding not only proper British behavior but more significantly, the power of humor and shame to influence that behavior presages novelists such as Walter Scott and William M. Thackeray who continued to use similar techniques when engaging in debates about national identity, imperialism, and responsibilities that come with great power.
END NOTES


2. Many critics focus on how literature did the work of imperialism throughout the nineteenth century. Novels proved particularly effective since they provided opportunities for writers to experiment with form as well as to engage with and possibly shape contemporary debates about nation and identity. For discussion regarding connections between the development of the novel and the modern state, see Moretti (1998, 17); Parrinder (2006, 14-15); and Trumpener (1997, 164). Examining how the institutionalization of novels such as Pride and Prejudice in the colonial education system affected colonialism and transmission of national identity also provides insight into the role literature played in maintaining the Empire. For discussion about this topic, see Lowe (1996, 98-99); Rajan (2000, 12); and Viswanathan (1989, 20).

3. Emsley (2005) also analyzes humility in Pride and Prejudice (84); however, she focuses on the Christian implications of humility, while I attend to its nationalist ramifications.

4. Critics have compared Edgeworth and Austen since the early nineteenth century. Both were relatively successful women writers (although Edgeworth achieved more financial success) using similar techniques (e.g., incorporating humor to help instruct and correct readers) and writing about similar issues (e.g., contemporary society). For early nineteenth-century comments about both authors, see Mary Russell Mitford’s 20 December 1814 letter to Sir William Elford quoted in B.C. Southam (1968, 54); Walter Scott’s unsigned review of Emma dated October 1815, issued in the Quarterly Review quoted in Southam (1968, 63-64); and Richard Whatley’s unsigned review of Northanger Abbey and Persuasion, issued January 1821 in the Quarterly Review quoted in Southam (1968, 93-94). For nineteenth-century comments, see M. Butler (1972, 328, 329, 335, and 347-348); Fergus (1983, 61); and Gilbert and Gubar (2000, 146-154).


6. Undeniably, Austen’s novels are about the middle- and upper-middle class and were aimed at that readership; however, accurately ascertaining the makeup of Austen’s early audience is difficult. Southam explains: “sales figures on their own are not a sure guide to the size of Jane Austen’s audience, for many of the copies went to circulating libraries which supplied town and country subscribers” (1968, 5). While some may see Austen’s focus on this class as exclusionary, one cannot deny the influence it had on national identity formation. Kelly claims, “it was people like [Austen] in the broad sense who, beginning in the decades after her death and continuing to our present, founded modern states in Britain, Europe, and beyond” (2002, 123).


8. Ruderman sees Darcy’s slight as a sign of his disregard for social opinion: “This indifference to social opinion exposes him to ridicule. Elizabeth, although hardly endeared to Mr. Darcy by his refusal to dance with her, can find his action ‘ridiculous’ instead of upsetting… for it indicates that he does not know (or care) what social rules require. Even his friends laugh at his aloofness” (1995, 102).

9. When discussing this passage, some argue that Elizabeth’s efforts to use humor to correct Darcy fail because she’s attracted to him. Kay Young sees Elizabeth’s response as primarily a competitive reaction to Miss Bingley and contends that Elizabeth’s stance on joking signifies desire (2002, 66-67). Heydt-Stevenson also focuses on the sexual dimension of Elizabeth’s response (2005, 81).

10. While recent critics point out that Darcy needs to become more socially conscious, especially regarding lower classes, earlier critics often perceived Darcy as representing traditional society. Those who see him as a beacon of social order argue that it’s Elizabeth who must learn to engage with society and to conform to social expectations. For discussion of Darcy’s role as a representative of social order and Elizabeth’s need to conform, see Duckworth (1971, 115-143); Litz (1969, 65); Mudrick (1968, 109); and Poovey (1984, 201). For comments about how Darcy must become more engaged socially, see Castellanos (1994, 139 and 155-156); Edgeworth (1990, 150); Johnson (1988, 81); Paris (2004, 176); and Sherry (1979).

11. Readers’ capacity to learn from characters echoes Nancy Armstrong’s claim that domestic fiction provides opportunities to imagine alternative ways of acting and thinking without suffering consequences directly (1987, 29).


14. For Marilyn Butler, Darcy must learn that “we have no innate worth, either of social status or abilities. We have to earn our right to consideration by respect for others, and continuous watchfulness of ourselves” (1975, 206). M. Kram (2007) also discusses Darcy’s function as a gentleman extensively.

15. Several critics see Darcy’s letter as a turning point for Darcy, Elizabeth, and readers. Fraim claims that it reveals a pivotal change in Darcy’s role (1993, 79). Woloch comments on its effect on Elizabeth (2003, 101). Sherry focuses on the impact it has on readers by arguing that it signifies a shift both in tone and in how readers interpret the novel (1979, 616-617).

16. Critics often claim that similarities between Elizabeth’s voice and the narrator’s make distinguishing the two difficult. Readers thus tend to assume that Elizabeth’s perspective and the narrator’s are identical, which leads many to mistakenly treat Elizabeth as a reliable judge. See Castellanos (1994, 148); Morini (2007, 423-424); Moses (2003, 155, 156, and 159); and Willshire (2001, 110).

17. Watt proposes a similar reading (2002, 163).

18. For an exploration of how Austen encourages readers to identify with Elizabeth, see Bonaparte (2005, 159); Brownstein (1994, xxii and 122); Butler (1976, 216); Castellanos (1994, 155); Davidson (2008, 239); Fergus (1983, 8-9, 93 and 119); and Searle (2006, 23-24).
19. For Frantz, "Darcy has come to appreciate Lizzy’s lively nature and cutting wit as much as the reader has, an appreciation that is a vital ingredient to their happy marriage" (2002, 172).

20. Deresiewicz maintains that while Elizabeth “may not believe quite all her self-mockery,” her comment “accomplishes several important things: she gives Darcy the rhetorical and emotional space he needs to criticize her himself, she enables herself to receive his criticism without humiliation, and she enables Darcy to continue listening when he does again become the target of her mockery” (1997, 528).

21. Spacks (1988, 74) and J. Brown (1979, 75) both discuss how as Darcy learns to laugh at himself Elizabeth must learn to control her laughter.

22. Most critics agree that their marriage signifies a union between the middle class and landed gentry. However, some contend that the marriage merely maintains traditional social conventions. They argue that Elizabeth accepts being subjugated to Darcy’s authority as both a man and a member of the upper class. These critics contend that while Austen ultimately upholds traditional social conventions, she still critiques those conventions by exposing them: Gilbert and Gubar (2000, 161-163); Johnson (1988, 75); McMaster (1970, 730); and Parrinder (2006, 193). Others see their marriage as an attempt to balance sex and class. They assert that Darcy grows to appreciate Elizabeth’s judgment and the middle class. For discussion of how the marriage represents union between classes, see I. Armstrong (1998, viii); Butler (1975, 202-203); Duckworth (1971, 117 and 132); Ewin (1990, 152); Fraiman (1993, 75); Poovey (1984, 201); and Thompson (1988, 110). Brownstein (1994, 118) and Emsley (2005, 102) examine how the marriage embodies balance between sexes.

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